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Dovetail

This Dove Flies

Dovetail is chef John Fraser's breakout restaurant and a rare Upper West Side find. BY ADAM PLATT

WITH ITS SLIGHTLY awkward, preciously ambitious name, its modest size, and its bland, modishly stark interior, Dovetail could be any one of the numberless dining establishments that open every year, then quietly close, on that vast restaurant killing ground, the Upper West Side. At least that was the early consensus among the neighborhood gastronomes assembled at my table on a recent evening. But when the pre-meal *amuses* arrived, their chatter momentarily ceased. There were ravioli made with shaved beets arrayed on the plate, and servings of a melting gelée touched, the waiter said, with fried capers and vodka. Peering at these novelties, the local gastronomes looked, for a brief, startling moment, like those shaggy, uncomprehending apes in the opening scene of Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*. They ate, put down their spoons, then looked around the room in a kind of stunned, slightly suspicious silence. "This

feels all wrong," one of them said. "We're way too close to our apartments to be eating at this kind of restaurant."

The author of this unexpected little miracle is a chef named John Fraser, who has worked in this neighborhood before. Fraser is a veteran of some of the world's great kitchens, including the French Laundry, in Napa Valley, and Taillevent, in Paris. In this city, he has run a very good Greek restaurant, called Snack Taverna, and a not very good one, on West 70th, called Compass. Dovetail is seven blocks north of Compass, just off Columbus Avenue. The

Museum of Natural History is a block away; across the street is a foreboding, windswept expanse of asphalt. A tall glass door leads to a midget-size bar area, which leads to the dining room (which fans out from the front, like a dovetail). It's not much as upscale restaurant dining rooms go (the tables have no tablecloths, the brick walls are fixed with panels of wood, like in a spartan recording studio), but for an ac-

★★★
Dovetail
103 W. 77th St.,
nr. Columbus Ave.
212-362-3800

complished culinary *ronin* like Fraser, it represents a major step. He is the restaurant's executive chef and proprietor, and this is the first place he can call his own.

Comfort is an elusive quality in such a rough-and-tumble profession, even for the most promising cooks. Fraser's last restaurant, Compass, was (and is) famous for giving chefs the ax. Not surprisingly, his cooking there was disorganized and over-ambitious; he seemed bent (as I wrote at the time) on packing as much of his impressive culinary repertoire into the menu as he possibly could before, inevitably, moving on. But in this smaller, more placid space, there's an edited, unhurried quality to the cooking, and the pride of ownership is apparent in almost every dish. After the *amuses*, our table was treated to a salad of big green Brussels-sprout leaves, balanced with salty serrano ham and slivers of sweet Bartlett pear, all bound with a thin layer of cauliflower purée. Then came an interesting composition of breaded lamb's tongue, fried to an almost tempurallike crunchiness, followed by braised pork belly, which the chef cuts in little squares, sweetens with sherry-cooked shallots, and blends with kale, frizzled maitake mushrooms, and a single, barely poached egg.

Careful readers will note that this is the kind of prim, overstudied Greenmarket cooking that I spend a good deal of time ridiculing in this column. But like all high-quality chefs, Fraser has a knack for shuffling traditional, populist flavors together in ingenious ways and making them his own. At Dovetail, the potato gnocchi aren't served with the usual gouts of butter and cheese, but sunk in an opulent veal short-rib ragù spiked with foie gras butter and a hint of prunes. Blue Point oysters are shucked, flavored with pineapple and buttons of sea urchin, then served in a bowl so you can eat them with a spoon. Other potentially tired seafood entrées are given a similar twist. Fraser sears his cod in the usual way but serves it over a subtle, gumbolike mixture of saffron, cacao beans, and shreds of crab. Maine scallops are paired with a hollandaise sauce elegantly cut with fennel and beads of grapefruit, and the delicious striped bass is stacked over creamy polenta, then garnished with sweet cipollini onions, smoky bacon, and a splash of lime.

As our meal progressed, the neighborhood gastronomes offered up the occasional complaint. It's well known, among restaurant professionals, that one of the reasons ambitious, highbrow restaura-

★★★★★ ETHEREAL

★★★★ EXCEPTIONAL

★★★ EXCELLENT

★★ VERY GOOD

★ GOOD

NO STARS NOT RECOMMENDED