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At Maison Premiere, more than oysters. BY LIGAYA MISHAN

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## Revel in the Roar of the Crowd

Maison Premiere graduates from absinthe and oysters.

THE TIGHT ROOM is astonishingly loud, verging on raucous, but still the waiters murmur, hands behind their backs.

They are better dressed than the diners, in black vests and narrow ties, and never break character. A porcelain cloche is lifted, a sauce poured from a tiny jug, cloche after cloche, jug after jug. At first this prim choreography seems tongue-in-cheek, then earnest, and finally almost silly — and all the more charming for it, like much of the orchestrated seduction that is a night at Maison Premiere.

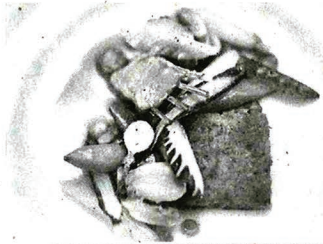
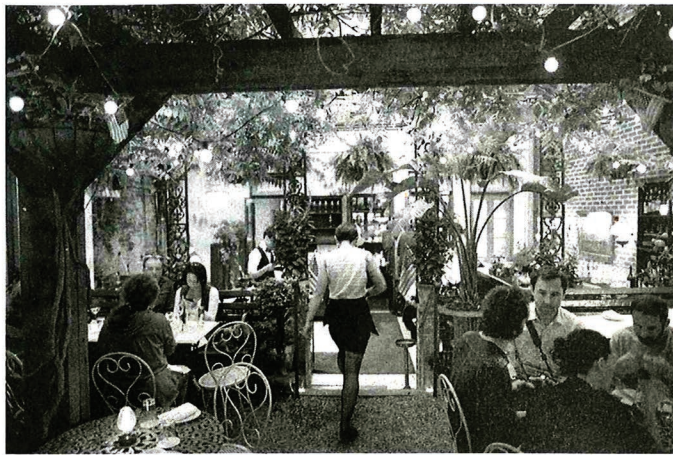
When it opened in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, two and a half years ago, Maison Premiere was an exercise in mood (*louche*) and epoch (French Quarter circa the 1890s). Primarily a bar, it served little more than absinthe and oysters. This was enough. Everyone wanted in.

Apparently, the owners, Joshua Boissy and Krystof Zizka, were not content with the neighborhood's nightly adulation. Perhaps they want to be loved for more than good looks. Last summer they built a kitchen in the basement and hired Jared Stafford-Hill, formerly at Adour Alain Ducasse, to introduce more elaborate but still seafood-focused small plates. Since his departure in April, his sous-chef, Lisa Giffen (another Adour alum), has further refined and expanded the menu.

The food is impressionistic, best appreciated as a series of lovely, fleeting moments rather than the sustained arc that typically constitutes a meal. From the raw bar come thin slices of sea scallop with rosy pickled rhubarb and a drift of shaved horseradish ice, hot and cold at once. Razor clam, sweet and almost squidlike in texture, is punctuated by crisp, clean radish. A spoonful of lobster dressed with mayonnaise, celery and tarragon, anchoring a cracked tail shell, suggests a stolen bite from a New England lobster roll, with buttered bread crumbs in lieu of the roll.

Nothing is minutiae here. An exacting microdiced of pickled beets, alongside shavings of cured egg yolk, smoked caviar and dots of *crème fraîche*, turns Arctic char into an almost Russian geometry of creaminess and saltiness. Spanish mackerel is charred before being steeped in an *escabeche* of grapefruit, orange and orange zest. Buttery *daurade* gets sharp diacritics of pickled gooseberries and tarragon.

At times effort outstrips effect: peekytoe crab is overburdened by saffron *rouille* and olive *tapenade*; sea scallops grow soupy in a lethargic *Grenobloise* of browned butter and capers. Louisiana-style crayfish on a toasted baguette is appropriately equipped with horseradish *rémoulade* and a long-simmered red roux,



PHOTOGRAPHS BY BRIAN HARKIN FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES  
From top, outdoor seating; Lucienne Spoja, a hostess, waits for guests; a rabbit entree.

but it lacks gusto and heft.

The large plates still bear the marks of a miniaturist. Impeccably round potato orbs, carved out with a melon baller, are loaded into a chowder poured tableside over turbot and clams basted in seaweed butter. Black cod is half-roasted, half-steamed in foil, scattered with pliant, raw green almonds and finished with a grassy nage made with Dolin's dry vermouth. Rabbit is a progression from hind leg (braised and breaded) to loin and tenderloin (torqued around a liver farce, or stuffing) to a rack

### MAISON PREMIERE

298 BEDFORD AVENUE (GRAND STREET),  
WILLIAMSBURG, BROOKLYN; (347) 335-0446;  
MAISONPREMIERE.COM.

**Recommended** Sea scallop with pickled rhubarb and horseradish ice; Spanish mackerel *escabeche*; *daurade* with tarragon and pickled gooseberries; mussels with saffron potato *velouté*; turbot; black cod; *cannelés* and *madeleines*.

**Prices** \$11 to \$26; tasting menu, \$95.

**Open** Nightly for dinner; Saturday and Sunday for brunch.

**Reservations** Accepted for tasting menu only.

**Wheelchair Access** Dining room a step up from the sidewalk; restrooms do not have handrail.

of ribs so tiny and doll-like it may give you pause. (It is the best part.)

A few practical notes: Do not attempt to enter Maison Premiere from 4 to 7 p.m., when many of the immaculate oysters are \$1 each and the crowd is restless. Later you will still wait, but at least with hope. Better yet, make a reservation for the \$95 tasting menu, which for a party of two begins with a daunting two-tiered tower of oysters and crustaceans and ends with a silver tray of five desserts, four of which I would have happily traded for more of the perfect *cannelés*, with custard hearts and chewy exteriors just shy of burned.

If you are offered a table in the garden, the angels are at your side. White pebbles catch underfoot. Above, a trellis is strung with globe lights that hint at rather than provide illumination. Vines creep. From inside comes the occasional clash and roar, but no one pays any mind. Let the world continue without us.