

VOGUE

JUL

BODY POLITICS
ON THE FRONT LINES WITH
PLANNED PARENTHOOD
CECILE RICHARDS

GAM CHANGING
THE SECRET TO SEXY
SUMMER LEGS

OFF THE WALL
WEARABLE ART FOR
A CAUSE

Setting the Mood

I'M TIRED OF NEW RESTAURANTS. You know the type: Cerebral chef, serious ingredients, loud room, young staff. One opens with a tissue-paper fire of activity on social media, and suddenly it's as if the acrobatics of that particular kitchen will forever change how we think of food. I understand the ambition and the energy, but all that drive can take a toll. You can feel the effort. It's hard to enjoy a meal when you're made aware of how much work goes into it.

To use a line I found handy in the past, it's not them, it's me. These thinky restaurants are popular throughout the country and will continue to find a like-minded audience of serious eaters. I wish them all the best. As for me, I'm drawn to a different kind of place, one that offers a sense of occasion, even fantasy. Here in New York, a small clique of polished and sybaritic restaurants are doing exactly that and upending old notions of fine dining by rediscovering the power of make-believe. I call them fairy-tale restaurants—Le Turtle, Le Coucou, La Sirena, Sauvage, The Pool and The Grill in the old Four Seasons—all as fantastical as they are sophisticated. At each the experience is the point: the lighting, the service, the sensation of stepping through the door and feeling like your feet never quite touch the ground.

Start with Le Turtle, a strange and captivating restaurant that seems to have escaped the gravitational pull of New York's dining scene to spin in its own orbit. It feels intimate and futuristic and makes you think you just stumbled onto something that's been there for years—as if the European Federation had launched a spaceship in the mid-1980s, and the disco deck was salvaged and rebuilt inside a tenement on a neglected edge of SoHo.

It stands out at a time when many restaurants seem intent on one-upping buzzy regional styles (Los Angeles, Copenhagen, Brooklyn). Le Turtle ignores all of that. Instead, it's a work of fiction. "I wanted to create a place that represented my ideals about the downtown scene," says the restaurateur Taavo Somer, who opened Le Turtle with Carlos Quirarte. "A little bit of danger, a little bit of theater." Somer has altered the course of the city's dining scene before. In 2004 he opened Freemans at the end of a nearby alley, and stepping inside felt like being let in on a secret. Le Turtle performs

Since when did fine dining get so serious?

The best new restaurants in New York, writes Oliver Strand, are showstopping, playful, transporting—and fun. The food is (nearly) beside the point. Photographed by Grant Cornett.

the same trick. The bar is trimmed with blackened steel; the stemware is thin and elegant. There are reflective surfaces everywhere—one mirror is a metal disc lacquered with high-gloss auto paint; another is a two-way mirror that lets you spy on the dining room. Staggered stairs lead up to a semiprivate dining nook decorated with mirrors and a terrarium and plywood with pencil cut marks. The space feels like more of a dreamscape than a restaurant.

None of this would mean much if the food weren't up to the setting. It is. The radicchio salad is sweet and briny and crunchy, a collision of pretty flavors (mandarin, fennel vinaigrette, fermented radish) that you want to eat with your fingers; gnocchi are sautéed with duck confit and mint and garlic. The whole chicken has become the signature dish, and with good

reason. Brined, then steamed, then roasted, it's presented on a platter piled with smoldering hay. There are flames and smoke, and for a few moments the dining room smells like a leaf fire as designed by a perfumer; then the chicken is carried away to be carved and laid out on a platter. It's dramatic and delicious and easily one of the tastiest roast chickens you will ever eat.

A little bit of danger, a little bit of theater: If only all meals out could be so seductive.

Actually they can, I thought over a long afternoon-killing lunch at Le Coucou, the busy room conversing at a low murmur, the view of Lafayette Street filtered through the lush planters outside, a vaguely eighteenth-century landscape decorating the walls of the bar. This is as gracious a restaurant as any in New York. Designed by the firm Roman and Williams, it doesn't feel like a period piece, nor is it like other similarly pedigreed New York establishments that try to manufacture a sense of urgency. Instead, it strikes a balance between friendly and formal, a dressed-up place where you can relax.

I ordered the pike quenelle—a traditional preparation from Lyon, a gentle orb of pike mousse that is poached and served with lobster and deeply flavored shellfish broth. I don't have much of a history with the dish, but what I was tasting was so delicate and rich and elegant, it felt like something from my past, a flavor I knew even if I hadn't actually experienced it.

Such reveries are the intent of **CONTINUED ON PAGE 130**

FEAST FOR THE SENSES

Why dine out if it's not to get carried away? At New York's dreamlike new restaurants—places like Le Coucou, Le Turtle, and Sauvage—the atmosphere is everything.

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SETTING THE MOOD

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Le Coucou's chef, Daniel Rose, who is an American but made his reputation as one of the most celebrated chefs in Paris thanks to a tiny Right Bank bistro called Spring. I started going to Spring in 2008, when it was a lean operation and felt more like a dinner party than a restaurant. By comparison Le Coucou is elegant, a little bit theatrical—and decidedly *not* Paris transplanted in New York. Instead, it conjures midtown temples to French dining from the last century (Lutèce, Le Pavillon) without ever feeling like a straightforward homage. "I never got to eat in those places," says Rose. "So this is the *idea* of a French restaurant in New York—it's the imaginary version of the French restaurant that I never knew."

This is why his recipe for pike quenelle hews closely to the classic composition. It's not reimagined or deconstructed or updated. "I just take the recipe and execute it. I'm not interested in putting my own twist on it. I'm interested in making the version that made people think, Wow. My feeling is you can put the quenelle in front of New York City in 2017, you can put it in front of someone at La Pyramide in 1955, and it should provoke the same response. That is the force of French cooking."

Around the city there are more new restaurants that know how to put on a show. At **The Grill** and **The Pool**, the adjoining new restaurants in the Seagram Building that will forever be known for replacing the Four Seasons, the food speaks to the setting's mid-century past: At The Grill, waiters are in tuxedos; prime rib is delivered on a trolley. The room was designed by Philip Johnson, the building by Mies van der Rohe, and both are landmarked. It's as if chefs Mario Carbone and Rich Torrisi decided the food was similarly protected, that the menu should be in a dialogue with the experience of standing in those rooms, Park Avenue visible through the shimmering windows. And so The Grill's Pheasant Claiborne, an homage to legendary *New York Times* food editor Craig Claiborne, flavored with black truffle and Madeira, isn't just a nifty historical dish, it completes the scene.

Meanwhile, at **La Sirena** in Chelsea, the entire restaurant seems designed to make the night sparkle—all creamy marble and glittering mosaic tiles and a mile-long bar with unusually comfortable stools that make it easy to linger. Get the bartender's attention and order a Sirena Spritz (blood-orange Amara, lemon soda, Prosecco). On the edge of Greenpoint in Brooklyn there's **Sauvage**, which is a brasserie and unapologetically French but also feels languid and warm, full of overgrown plants and honeyed wood—a place you might go with a friend in the late afternoon and get a glass of something, then find yourself ordering a bottle.

Sauvage is the second restaurant from Joshua Boissy and Krystof Zizka, the team behind Maison Premiere, another fantastical restaurant—step inside and you could be in a French Quarter oyster bar in the 1880s. Sauvage has its own narrative: It is conceived as the café on the ground floor of a faded but well-kept hotel on the French Riviera. The elevators are small, but the croissants are perfect. "You're leaving the beach, and it's hot, and you're looking for a bite and a drink," Boissy says. "You're walking across the sand, and there's a cool, tropical café." Get Sauvage's plate of seared octopus with chickpeas and kumquats or the roast duck with smoked dates, and the overgrown greenery of McCarren Park across the street could almost be the scrubby brush of the Mediterranean coast.

Sauvage doesn't create this feeling with a hard sell. Instead, there's an agonizing attention to detail that you might not notice right away. The waiters are uniformed in acid-washed jeans and red Vans, as they actually might be in France; the brasswork is stamped with a delicate and small wheel pattern, a nod to the brass fixtures in the Dakota on Central Park West. (The brass craftsman for Sauvage also works for the Dakota.) If you want, you can fixate on the design. Or you can let your vision blur, and simply enjoy the overall mood. Sometimes, paying less attention is the greatest luxury of all.

"It's our own world," Boissy says. "It's our own fantasy. It doesn't really exist." Only it does. It's on Lorimer Street, in Greenpoint, and I can escape into that fantasy whenever I wish. □