

The new Time Warner building's NY restaurants

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The five long heralded restaurants opening in the Time Warner building at Columbus Circle, New York have sharply divided the city's other restaurateurs and not just for the most obvious reason that they do not appear to have been invited to the party.

One camp is vociferously shouting foul, claiming that the obvious financial inducements that have persuaded Thomas Keller and Masa Takayama from California, Charlie Trotter from Chicago and the seemingly ubiquitous Jean- Georges Vongerichten and Gray Kunz into the fourth floor above the shops give them an unfair advantage as they themselves grapple with ever more rapacious landlords and increasingly fickle New Yorkers.

The quieter camp wishes them well. They take the view that what is happening today is only a repeat, albeit on a much larger scale, of what happened in 1960 when The Four Seasons opened its restaurant at the seemingly incredible cost then of US \$ 5 million. Their more charitable line is that there is room for everyone.

Having spent two nights on the 48th floor of the building, in the not-to-be-missed new Mandarin Hotel, I find it hard not to come to the conclusion that reality is, as ever, more complicated than either camp envisages. And, as a result, trading may be more difficult than the chosen chefs and landlords imagined.

This is only partly to do with the delays which have affected Café Gray, Vongerichten's steak house (which a quick glimpse of the interior suggests closely resembles a bordello) and Trotter's restaurant. Keller's Per Se most unfortunately suffered a kitchen fire shortly after opening and is now closed until the end of April while Masa's usp, of charging US \$300 per head for dinner of fish specially flown in from Japan, left me cold on two counts - principle, first and foremost, and, more prosaically, the restraint of FT budgets.

But a pretty non-descript sushi and noodle lunch at Bar Masa, Matayama's cheaper restaurant on the other side of the escalators, taken while the manager finished her book, highlighted one aspect of the internal competition these five restaurateurs will face and was certainly not in the centre's original business plan. Why would anyone pay US \$25 for an indifferent sushi lunch here when you can have one for half the price from the sushi counter in the mouth watering Whole Foods emporium in the basement?

Whole Foods and the Borders outlet on the third floor with one of Dean & DeLuca excellent cafes are the retail stars as nothing in between seems that exceptional. But the Whole Foods store with its various hot food counters and Jambla Juice counter where the lunchtime queue was four deep is providing the quick and inexpensive options that many nearby obviously want.

And what is happening on the 35th floor may also create more competition than these exalted chefs may have expected.

Here on a magnificent corner site looking straight down 59th Street and on to Central Park (the views are exceptional because the building is, most unusually, not built on the grid) the Mandarin has opened Asiate (pronounced Eh-sea-ate) and cleverly stolen a march on its seemingly more renowned competition.

The hotel has achieved this not just by opening on time and offering an unparalleled view at extremely reasonable prices (US \$35 for lunch, US \$65 for dinner for three courses) but by giving a golden opportunity to Noriyuki Sugie, at 30, a hugely talented but hitherto unknown chef.

And by making the place fun. The staff have been imbued with a conspicuous desire to please, undoubtedly enhanced by the restaurant's aspect as well as by the walls of wine which contain 1,300 bottles, the booths along both side walls and the glass sculpture along the ceiling. This is a room which works just as effectively at night as during the day and my breakfast meeting here was far more enjoyable and productive than a subsequent day's gloomy affair across the park at The Pierre.

Sugie, who was born in Japan but has cooked in France, Sydney and Chicago before settling here, seems to have captured this opportunity with both hands. His dishes reveal the Japanese flavours currently so popular in New York, immediately obvious in the nori flavoured gougere served as you sit down, as well as the odd nod to pure experimentation, best exemplified in his signature dish of Caesar salad soup, a thick green soup of lettuce, Parmesan and chicken stock with cous cous at the bottom and bacon foam at the top.

The menu follows the now common practice of listing the main ingredient, crab, scallop or foie gras amongst the starters, in bold and then their accompaniments in smaller letters. My starter of clams sautéed with tiny diced vegetables that were then partially submerged in a coconut and lemongrass broth poured by the waitress was a really lively start and an excellent counterpoint to the heartier main courses. One was a very clever play on suckling pig which incorporated a delicious medley of flavours, from the crunchy rectangles of pressed pig's trotter to a much softer ball of pig's cheek confit. Another was a thick confit of duck with daikon, Japanese radish, in Peking duck broth. And Sugie's take on chocolate fondant is memorably served in a covered wooden tumbler.

What is proving to be an equally important factor in Asiate's popularity, helped by gentle mark-ups on the wine and a knowledgeable female sommelier, is that it has almost immediately established a role for itself. With dinner for two totalling US \$211 including a US \$50 bottle of wine but excluding service, Asiate will prove as useful on a regular basis for wealthy Upper West siders as it will excite for less frequent visitors from further afield.

While waiting for their restaurants to open in this location, Gray Kunz and Jean- Georges Vongerichten have been cleverly collaborating on Spice Market which opened two months ago in the Meatpacking district on the Lower West side, three blocks from the subway at W14th.

This area is not as outlandish as many New Yorkers would have you believe and has a very distinctive feel of its own, more West Coast in fact than East. The buildings are much lower and with ample light falling across former meat warehouses now selling fashion and porcelain pigs there is a definitely something of the Bay area here.

Amongst the buildings offering Lamb Unlimited, Dave's Quality Veal and along the street from the Hogs and Heifers Saloon is a large corner site that is now Spice Market. Judging by the extreme difficulty with which I finally managed to secure a table at 18.30 it will happily remain there for some time.

The interior is very special. A great deal of wood has been imported to give the illusion of a restaurant in the Orient with only, alas, the warm sea breezes and the sound of crashing waves missing. Instead there is, immediately on the left, a busy bar beyond which is one major dining area with a wide open kitchen beyond separated only by an equally wide counter which cleverly allows diners to eat facing the kitchen and at various points opposite one another. To the right a wide staircase leads down to another more spacious bar with alcoves for small groups.

Even sober I found Spice Market an exciting space but a ginger martini quickly made it look even more enticing (and was far better than the red apple martini at the Mandarin's bar which looked, tasted and smelt just like Benylin, the cough medicine). This feeling was quickly enhanced by the menu which incorporates most of the cooking styles of Asia.

The dishes are not, however, just a whimsical collection but rather the results of Kunz and Vongerichten's travels and experience. Kunz was born in Singapore, cooked for five years in Hong Kong then under the illustrious Freddy Girardet in Switzerland before moving to the US while French born Vongerichten was circumnavigating the world in the opposite direction initially in Thailand before opening branches of the highly successful Vong. Head chef Stanley Wong clearly runs a highly energetic brigade of diverse origins.

Starters and salads traverse Asia: Vietnamese spring rolls; hot and sour Thai chicken wings where the emphasis is firmly if not overly on the hot; a cooler green papaya salad with crystallized ginger and tamarind; and a crunchy squid salad with cashew nuts. The main courses require you to pick a country: an Indian pork vindaloo; cod with Malaysian chili sauce; Vietnamese chicken curry; Thai red curried duck and, presumably as tribute to its location, a prime piece of New York steak grilled with garlic, coriander and chili. Dinner for two including a US \$38 half bottle of Oregon Pinot Noir came to US \$183 and could only have been bettered by more suitable wine glasses.

Asiate and Spice Market are both great fun and belie the many sceptics who try to label 'fusion' as confusion. Both restaurants serve food that has evolved from their chefs' travels, experiences and tastes. That so many have chosen to settle in the ever-changing social maelstrom that has for so long been New York is an added bonus for those who live, work and visit this continually stimulating city.

Asiate, Mandarin Oriental, Time Warner, 80 Columbus Circle at 60th Street, 212-805 8881, www.mandarinoriental.com. Open all week.

Spice Market, 403 W 13th Street @ 9th Avenue, 212.675 2322. Open lunch and dinner.

Sugie's nori gougere recipe

Ingredients:

170 grams hard flour,
100 grams butter,
125 ml water,
125 ml milk,
4 eggs

Add 1 pinch nutmeg,
1 pinch cayenne,
1/2 tablespoon salt,
1/2 tablespoon sugar
100 grams gruyere.

1 mix makes 40 pieces.

Method:

- boil milk, water, spices and butter,
- gradually mix in flour, stirring constantly over high- medium heat,
- pour mix into mixer with paddle attachment, cooling slightly
- add eggs, mix,
- add cheese, mix
- pipe out with pastry bag, sprinkle nori and kosher (sea) salt on top,
- bake at 190 degrees C for 6 minutes, rotate, then bake 6 more minutes,
- serve warm.

