

Recessionary eating in NYC

12 Dec 2008 by Nick Lander/FT

The blackboard outside Eisenberg's Sandwich Shop, which has been in business on Fifth Avenue just south of Madison Square since 1929, displayed a clear message in four different coloured chalks. 'In this economy,' it proclaimed, 'New Yorkers are dining down'.

They are not alone. For anyone who planned a family trip to this city, or anywhere in the US, when the dollar seemed permanently weak, the current exchange rate will have a significant effect on restaurant choices and the subsequent credit card statement. Fortunately, there is some solace and not just from our experiences eating out as a family of five.

In the first two instances it comes from New York chefs and restaurateurs themselves. Talking to several of them in the midst of financial gloom and widespread lay-offs, it was impossible to escape the fact that they now see themselves back in the role that was forced upon them directly after 9/11, of being beacons of good cheer at a time when their customers really need an injection of comfort, consolation and bonhomie. Restaurateurs now believe that they are, more than any other professionals in the city, the most immediate providers of these essential ingredients.

This means that there will be no cutting back on the portion sizes, something that still comes as a shock to even the most frequent visitor from outside the US. Chefs will have to worry about their margins. Staff and profits may well be sacrificed but the consensus seems to be that this was one area that would not be tinkered with, at least not in the short term. The size of portions, and any subsequent doggy bags, is too important to tinker with, meaning two vast breakfasts in a diner will invariably feed at least three.

There is no questioning the generosity of the portion sizes on offer at **Porchetta**, which Sara Jenkins has just opened on the Lower East Side now that she 'has run out of other chefs to work for' as she put it, nor the single mindedness of her operation.

There is barely enough room behind the marble counter for Jenkins, an assistant and the ovens which roast the Heritage pork to a combination of succulence on the inside and crispness on the outside. This delicious meat is then served in a roll or on a plate with three different greens as possible side dishes, along with some tooth-crunching roast potatoes intermingled with burnt ends of the pork. In front of the counter there is just room for six stools.

And although there is invariably a queue as the prices are fair (US\$9 for a more than filling sandwich), it is well worth while exploring this area with a porchetta sandwich in hand. This particular part of town is one of the few where rents are still low enough to allow nascent businesses to flourish. One that fits almost hand in glove with Porchetta is **Abraço Espresso** just a block away. The same postage-stamp size as Porchetta, but here serving stunningly powerful coffee, sublime chocolate and a selection of biscotti, although you may have to consume them outside.

While Porchetta and Abraço owe their inspiration to Europe, four other, very different, excellent-value places I discovered have been strongly influenced by Asia.

The most fun was undoubtedly **Ippudo**, located where Fourth Avenue meets East 10th Street. Because it specialises in big, filling, bright red bowls of ramen noodles with different toppings, Ippudo describes itself somewhat incongruously as a 'noodle brasserie'. But Ippudo distinguishes itself from the competition not just by its attractive, modern and unusually comfortable interior – particularly the row of very stylish booths along one wall – but also by the quality of the cooking. Other than the noodles, appetisers of the steamed buns stuffed with chicken, and kakuni, a dish of belly pork braised in soy sauce with bok choy, were excellent.

For quantity and value, the closest to compare in terms of Chinese food was the **Congee Village**, right by the evocative Lower East Side Tenement Museum, also on the Lower East Side. Congee is a watery porridge made from glutinous rice that is not to everyone's taste (I am continually teased by the rest of my family for enjoying it so much) but here it is served with over 30 different toppings that range from vegetarian to squid and ginger to the more unlikely combinations of dried scallop and white nuts to abalone and frog. The rest of the menu is vast and the vegetarian dishes are particularly good.

What initially distinguished our meal at **Aburiya KinnoSuke** on E 45th Street near Third Avenue was a most unwelcoming receptionist. As we walked in at 10.30pm she tried her best to put us off by telling us that they did not serve sushi; that the kitchen would be closing in 30 minutes; and that there were only seats at the counter in front of the robata grill. We persisted and what ensued was some of the most authentic Japanese food I have eaten outside Japan.

This included homemade tofu served in a bamboo basket; succulent pieces of Japanese organic fried chicken, aubergine and peppered pork cooked on the grill, and white rice in a dashi broth with a topping of spicy cod roe. Sitting at the counter brought the added bonus of watching the chefs wash, clean and dry their exceptionally long and sharp knives with tender, loving care as they closed down the kitchen. My bill for three came to US\$75 including sake.

Despite its name, the Asian influence is much less marked in **Asiate**, the restaurant on the 35th floor of the Mandarin Oriental Hotel by Columbus Circle, but it does offer one of the very best views of New York, looking down directly across Central Park. While this is remarkable in the evening, what makes it particularly attractive during the daytime is the great value US\$24.08 two-course lunch menu and some exceptionally friendly service.

The strong dollar does make those places focusing increasingly on great value wines even more attractive. For the best that Spain can offer, two very different interpretations are to be found at **Casa Mono**, which serves a broad range of dishes slightly bigger than tapas size and predominantly cooked. At the aptly named **Pata Negra**, the focus is on ham, cheese and desserts, overseen by Mateo, its warm-hearted host. **'Inoteca** (pictured) down in the Bowery does a similarly convincing job for the food and wines of Italy. Pizza lovers should head for **Una Pizza Napoletana**, owned by the obviously pizza-obsessed Anthony Mangieri and open from 5pm Thursday to Sunday evenings 'until sold out of fresh dough'.

And last but not least, for anyone travelling with children or those grown-ups wanting to treat themselves as if they still were, two very sweet stops would be **Dylan's Candy Bar** and either of the two branches of **Max Brenner** downtown. The former, diagonally opposite from Bloomingdales, has just expanded upwards to become, it claims, the world's largest candy store albeit definitely the most garish. Brenner offers a wide-ranging menu from breakfast to dinner with an excellent selection of chocolates and chocolate drinks. Neither is expensive but too many visits would probably entail a dentist appointment.

Porchetta, www.porchettanyc.com
Abraco Espresso, www.abraconyc.com
Ippudo NY, 65 4th Avenue, www.ippudo.com/ny/
Congee Village, 100 Allen Street, 212-941 1818
Aburiya KinnoSuke, www.aburiyakinnosuke.com
'inoteca, 98 Rivington Street, www.inotecanyc.com
Casa Mono, www.casamononyc.com
Pata Negra, www.patanegratapas.com
Una Pizza Napoletana, www.unapizza.com
Dylan's Candy Bar, www.dylanscandybar.com
Max Brenner, www.maxbrenner.com