New York's new Italians

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New York has been so closely associated with Italian restaurants for so long that news about the openings of Marea and Locanda Verde (pictured) earlier this year, and of Maialino a fortnight ago, came as no surprise.

Such has been the reception subsequently for the first two and the acknowledgement that the last is under the proven management of Danny Meyer's company, with Union Square, Gramercy Tavern and The Modern already to its credit, that all three were likely to succeed. But a note of scepticism still prevailed amongst the other restaurateurs I spoke to: would there be enough custom even in this city of pasta lovers to absorb another five hundred new seats?

The answer, having eaten in all three, is an almost certain yes, subject only to the state of the economy, I believe, as independently the restaurateurs and chefs concerned have created three very different restaurants.

Chef Michael White has created an impressive seafood menu at the elegant Marea; Andrew Carmellini, his counterpart at Locanda Verde, seemed the only calm person in his buzzy dining room of 200 customers; while Nick Anderer has the makings of a most authentic Roman trattoria at Maialino overlooking Gramercy Park.

Such is the distinguished comfort that Marea exudes that my guest looked round the dining room as his espresso was served, with such attention to detail that the cup came with a lid although it had not travelled far, and pronounced, 'This is the kind of restaurant I would like to spend my retirement in.' Happily, the prices, which includes a US$34 two-course lunch, means that he won't have to save for too long particularly in a city where restaurant-going seems to be so closely related to the mood on Wall Street.

But White, the chef with the strongest handshake I have ever encountered, revealing his Norwegian descent, and his partner Chris Cannon have created a restaurant that can calm and excite. Situated on the south side of Central Park, Marea boasts an exquisite Italian interior, a separate bar that dispenses the raw seafood dishes, and an exceptional menu. Highlights of this included his now signature dish of fusilli with octopus and bone marrow; spaghetti with crab and sea urchin; a salad of burrata, the buffalo milk cheese from Puglia, southern Italy, and Scottish lobster; and Heather Bertinetti's desserts.

Marea also revealed the worst and best in restaurants today. The former, and far more important for us all, is that here and in numerous other places in New York there seems scant recognition or appreciation of the world's dwindling fish stocks and the chef and restaurateur's collective responsibility to source from sustainable stocks.

On the credit side, Marea has the best acoustics of any restaurant I have sat in for a long time. This is due not just to plenty of absorbent material around the room but specifically to six inches of Topakustik, a system created in Switzerland to dampen noise levels, in the ceiling. It should be compulsory in all restaurants.

Whether metres of Topakustik would make the slightest difference at Locanda Verde, I doubt. A busy bar right by the front door; wood panelling and exposed brick; a wide, open kitchen at which the waiting staff queue with determination to be the first away from the blocks; and a genuine sense of fun in the air. Locanda Verde is probably not for retirees.

And yet in the midst of all this, Carmellini keeps his cool. He wanders along the corridor between the kitchens and where his pastry chef, Karen DeMas, displays his desserts, from time to time putting his glasses to one side and rubbing his eyes as though he is deriving as much pleasure from watching those eat his food as they obviously are from eating it.

While the layout of the menu is straightforward, with cicchetti, or small appetisers, followed by antipasti, pasta and main courses, each particular section contained at least one outstanding dish.

From the former came blue crab on warm bread, enlivened by jalapeno peppers; thin slices of testa, a pork terrine, with marinated vegetables; round, thin slices of pasta, described as priests' collars, with squid, chorizo and parsley pesto; and braised veal cheeks with risotto Milanese, where the cooking of the rice alone would have delighted the most discerning Japanese chef.

Two lasting memories of this dinner were that our waitress responded to my guest's request for a small change to her dessert with the phrase, 'Sure, I can make that happen for you,' which certainly boosted the tip I left. And that the otherwise excellent wine list on the back of the menu requires a magnifying glass to do it justice.

Maialino has been in the back of Danny Meyer's mind since he first worked as a tour guide to Americans in Rome thirty years ago. On its second night he looked around an already crowded dining room and confessed, as he turned imaginary dials in front of him, that he looked forward to adjusting all the vital settings a restaurant requires for the next couple of decades.

The basics for a successful neighbourhood restaurant are already in evidence. The front quarter is a bustling wine bar serving a range of wines by the carafe (a practice Meyer much enjoyed in Wild Honey, London), plates of cheese and salami and bruschetta.

This area is cleverly divided from the main dining area by two service stations opposite each other, where the cheeses, hams and desserts on show cleverly whet the appetite, a void that is promptly filled by Anderer's extensive menu, from which the tripe, pasta and pine nut tart were highlights. Go hungry.

Marea, www.marea-nyc.com

Locanda Verde, www.locandaverdenyc.com

Maialino, www.maialinonyc.com