New York's restaurants bounce back

22 Nov 2012 by Nick Lander/FT

No sooner had Mia Van Der Water, the petite sommelier at **North End Grill** in Battery Park, New York, poured our first glass of Burn Cottage Pinot Noir 2010 (made by a Californian in New Zealand) than she explained with pride how soon this restaurant had managed to open after Hurricane Sandy.

'Fortunately, we are on the Brooklyn electric grid across the water so we were closed for only two days. And we all wanted to reopen as soon as possible to reassure all those who live and work round here that life was going to get back to normal as soon as possible.'

Restaurateurs, like so many, have been counting the cost not just in lost revenues after the hurricane but also in the many events that have been cancelled in its aftermath. And as the damage to flooded kitchens, wine cellars (particularly bad at the long-established River Café in Brooklyn) and stores begins to be calculated, there is a feeling that consigning all this expensive equipment to basements that have proven so vulnerable to flooding may no longer make as much financial sense as it once did.

Ten days on, not only was North End Grill playing host to many fortunate customers, but its layout may also be a portent of restaurant designs to come.

Set in a new Goldman Sachs development, the restaurant occupies an awkward, narrow space that was once a hotel lobby. Architects Bentel & Bentel have, however, turned this to every amateur chef's advantage by putting all the main kitchen sections on show; not just the main cooking section but also two wood-fired Josper grills from Barcelona and, at the entrance to the dining section, the shellfish section opposite the section from which pastry chef Alex Ray produces the best lemon-meringue pie I have tasted since my late Aunt Bessie's many years ago.

The busy bar may focus heavily on a broad range of Scotch whisky, served in sizes from a 'half a wee dram' to 'four wee drams', but the menu is far more cosmopolitan. Indian-born Floyd Cardoz is in charge and this culinary heritage comes out in the thrice-cooked, spiced fries and his potent rendition of avgolemono, the classic Greek soup incorporating chicken, lemon and egg. Two very different and unusual dishes that delighted me were a thin pizza topped with clams, chili flakes and dripping with clam juices, and a lobster egg custard with sea urchin and bonito flakes.

A more recent, and younger, import into the city's buzzing restaurant scene is Benjy Leibowitz, a 23-year-old north Londoner who is maître d' at **NoMad** restaurant in the recently opened NoMad hotel on Broadway.

French designer Jacques Garcia has done an extremely effective job of converting what was once a storeroom for typewriters and cash registers into an elegant hotel with two very different dining rooms - a parlour (pictured above) and an atrium with a skylight - and also of recreating within them what so many visitors believe is the essence of New York. It may have been open only since March but the dark wood, the choice of dark red for the carpets, curtains and drapes successfully recreates the city of a bygone, romantic era.

Thanks to an association with Daniel Humm and William Guidara, who as chef and general manager already have the highly successful Eleven Madison Park in their portfolio, the popularity of the restaurant has been testing Leibowitz's diplomatic skills since it opened. He stands resolutely but politely between the bustling lobby and the tables behind him.

Swiss-born Humm has put his classic training to great effect in a clever menu that is also a model of clarity. Highlights from our meal included a torchon of foie gras with pear, red wine and liquorice; tagliatelle with king crab, Meyer lemon and black pepper; roasted bone marrow with parsley, shallots and anchovy; and a chocolate tart with caramel and fleur de sel.

While these dishes emanate from a basement kitchen where the chefs work against a backdrop of a large photo of Mick Jagger in action and the last sign the waiters see before they mount the stairs to the restaurant is a sign from Humm extolling them to 'Make It Nice', Humm has added one very cost-effective section of an open kitchen.

In a corner between the two dining rooms, one chef and a rotisserie prepare what has become Nomad's signature dish,

a roast chicken stuffed with foie gras, black truffle and brioche for two for $79. This dish has proved so popular - with some justification as our greedy eyes followed them being taken out to those that had ordered them - that the restaurant is now selling over 500 chickens a week.

And while New York imports so many talented individuals, 2013 may see several of its landmark restaurants open in London.

Balthazar will finally make the transition from downtown SoHo to Covent Garden in February with strong rumours that the opening of the first branch of hamburger mecca **Shake Shack** will not be far behind.

A tip off that **Milos**, the Greek restaurant that has proved so popular on West 55th Street, may also open in London later in the year, prompted my first visit there. Its three-course $24.07 lunch menu is undoubtedly a great deal in a city where New Yorkers seem to like nothing more than doing a deal.

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