

The Day The Chefs Ate Lunch

Naturally, they started
with foie gras.

THE WORLD OF NEW YORK CHEFS IS rarely punctured by daylight. In the gray before dawn, some can be found at the Fulton Fish Market sniffing, poking and gazing into the eyes of a yellowtail snapper. After midnight, usually in jeans and leather jackets, they might observe the sky while hailing a taxi home. But in between, their world is a professional kitchen as brightly lighted as a surgical theater, as hot as an ironworks and as frantic as a Wall Street trading floor.

Most chefs work 14 hours every day except Sunday. Which might explain why four of the city's top chefs, as they assemble at a midtown loft to cook themselves Sunday dinner, are genuinely surprised by the sun streaming through the kitchen window. They also seem reluctant to pierce the cozy quiet of the room.

Mincing and chopping, they work without speaking, like one body with four sets of hands. Silence is intimacy to them. Silence is deliverance from the roar of exhaust fans, from the clattering white noise of professional kitchens. Silence is also a respite from the sound bites most New York chefs have mastered for the sake of the media and for their customers.

Besides, most chefs are shy. The restaurant kitchen, for all its physical demands, is the equivalent of a cloister. The precision and organization required to cook well demands a monomaniacal focus. And that requires freedom from distraction. Once that need is met, the chefs' own needs are heartbreakingly modest. "To sleep until noon and walk in the sun is a day off," says Sottha Khunn, the chef of *Le Cirque 2000*. "But to cook with each other — this is a vacation."

Khunn grew up in Cambodia. The other chefs, Jean-Georges Vongerichten, Diane Forley and Anne Rosenzweig, hail from Alsace and New York. Not that it matters. When they begin to cook, where they come from is not



nearly as important as where they have landed.

New Yorkers want their food to have the intellectual flair of an artist and the solace of an earth mother. They want their food to be both a reflection of their life and an antidote to it. They want it all, and they want it fast.

"California is American cooking, but New York cooking is the world's," says Rosenzweig, who in the 13 years since she opened *Arcadia* has seen the culinary lodestar shift. "We don't watch France anymore," she says. "They watch us."

New York delights in being the center of the universe. And these highly talented chefs seem

Sharing a hot lunch and baked apples are Sottha Khunn (top left), Diane Forley, Anne Rosenzweig and Jean-Georges Vongerichten (bottom left).

humbled by that experience. But as Vongerichten, who co-owns four Manhattan restaurants, including the four-star Jean Georges, explains: "There is no new fish coming out of the ocean. We must make something different from the same things."

Cooking shoulder to shoulder, tasting course after course, they are at the top of their game. Is there such a thing as a New York cuisine? Definitely, they say. "It's a marriage of cultures," Khunn says. "Eclectic," Vongerichten says. "Expensive," adds Forley, the chef and owner of Verbena.

New York cuisine is a reflection of the grand, ambitious city. And as they sit down to lunch, the city's best can congratulate themselves on how delicious that is.

Sotha Khunn's Roasted Foie Gras With Figs and Grapes

- 1 whole Hudson Valley foie gras, about 1½ pounds
- Kosher salt and freshly ground white pepper to taste
- 1 cup port wine
- 1 cup Cognac
- 6 black mission figs, stems removed, halved
- ½ pound jumbo muscat or large red grapes, skinned and seeded
- 3 cups duck stock.

1. Season the foie gras on both sides and place in a 1-gallon zip-lock bag. Add the port and the Cognac, seal the bag and marinate in the refrigerator for 4 hours, turning occasionally.

2. Preheat the oven to 500 degrees. Heat a large, shallow ovenproof skillet in the oven for 10 minutes. Meanwhile, remove the foie gras from the bag, reserve the marinade and pat the liver dry with paper towels. Place the foie gras, smooth side down, in the hot pan and roast 10 minutes. Turn carefully and roast for 10 minutes more. Remove the foie gras to a warm plate. Cover.

3. In the same pan, add the figs and roast 5 minutes. Add the grapes and roast another 5 minutes. Remove the fruit and drain.

4. Discard the fat from the pan, add the marinade and heat over

medium-high heat, stirring until the mixture boils. Lower the heat and simmer until the sauce is thick and syrupy, about 15 minutes. Add the duck stock and continue to simmer until the mixture is reduced to about ¾ cup, about 25 minutes. Remove from the heat and pour through a fine-mesh strainer into a small saucepan. Season with salt.

5. To serve, add the fruit to the sauce and warm over medium heat. Slice the foie gras into 12 pieces. Arrange them on 6 plates and spoon the fruit sauce over the slices.

Yield: 6 servings.

Jean-Georges Vongerichten's Crab Salad

For the cumin crisps:

- 1 cup minus 2 tablespoons all-purpose flour
- 1½ tablespoons sugar
- 1½ tablespoons cumin seeds
- ¾ cup white-wine vinegar
- 1½ tablespoons melted butter
- 3 tablespoons water

For the crab salad:

- 1½ pounds crab meat
- 2 small ripe tomatoes, cored and quartered
- 1½ shallots, peeled and coarsely chopped
- 1 large clove garlic, peeled and chopped
- 1½ tablespoons lemon juice
- 3 tablespoons olive oil
- 1½ tablespoons sherry vinegar
- 3 fresh basil leaves
- Kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper to taste
- 2 bunches of mâche, about 2 cups, rinsed
- 1½ mangoes, peeled and cut into ½-inch dice.

1. To make the crisps, preheat the oven to 425 degrees. In a small bowl, mix together the flour, sugar and cumin seeds. Add the vinegar, butter and water and mix thoroughly, but do not overmix.

2. Working in batches and using a pastry brush, dab very thin 2-inch discs of batter onto a nonstick baking sheet. Bake until golden, 3 to 5 minutes. Cool on wire racks.

3. To make the crab salad, break

up the lumps with your fingers, removing any shell or cartilage but leaving the crab as intact as possible. Refrigerate. In a blender, combine the tomatoes, shallots, garlic, lemon juice, oil, vinegar and basil and blend until smooth. Season to taste.

4. Slowly stir the tomato sauce into the crab meat. Coat the crab, but do not soak it. Place 3 scoops of crab salad on each of 6 plates. Place a cumin crisp between each scoop. Garnish with the mâche and the mangoes.

Yield: 6 servings.

Diane Forley's Arugula Salad With Artichoke, Ricotta Salata and Pumpkin Seeds

For the artichokes:

- 4 globe artichokes
- 1 lemon, halved
- 2 tablespoons olive oil
- 2 heads garlic, peeled and halved crosswise
- 1½ cups white wine
- ½ cup Champagne vinegar
- 8 large sprigs fresh tarragon
- 1 bay leaf
- 1 sprig thyme
- 10 black peppercorns
- 1 quart chicken stock, homemade or low-sodium
- 2 cups water

For the vinaigrette:

- ¼ cup grapeseed oil
- ¼ cup extra-virgin olive oil
- Salt and pepper to taste

For the salad:

- 1 bunch arugula, rinsed, stems removed
- 1 head frisée, rinsed, stems removed
- ¼ pound ricotta salata cheese, thinly sliced or shaved
- ¼ cup toasted green pumpkin seeds
- ¼ cup pumpkin-seed oil.

1. Slice the top ⅓ off each artichoke. Remove the outer leaves and rub the artichoke with lemon.

2. Heat the oil in a pot, and sauté the garlic for 5 minutes or until golden. Add the wine and vinegar and bring to a low boil for 10 minutes, until it is reduced by half. Add the herbs, peppercorns, stock and water. Add the artichokes, bring them to a boil and simmer

until tender, about 30 minutes. Remove the artichokes and cool.

3. Strain the braising liquid, discarding the garlic and herbs, and measure 2 cups. Pour the liquid in a small saucepan and simmer until reduced to ½ cup, about 15 minutes. Set aside to cool.

4. Remove the cooked artichokes' leaves, scoop out the chokes and slice each heart into 8 pieces.

5. Put the reduced braising liquid in a blender on low, and drizzle in the oils. Season to taste.

6. Toss the arugula, frisée and artichoke hearts with the vinaigrette. Divide among 6 plates. Arrange the cheese on top and sprinkle with the pumpkin seeds. Drizzle the pumpkin-seed oil around the perimeter and serve.

Yield: 6 servings.

Anne Rosenzweig's Baked Apples

- 6 large Rome apples, cored and peeled
- ¼ cup light brown sugar
- ¼ teaspoon cinnamon
- ¼ cup apple cider or applejack
- ½ cup grenadine
- 2 Granny Smith apples, peeled and cored
- 2 cups sugar
- 1 cup apple cider
- 3 tablespoons dark rum
- 3 tablespoons applejack
- 1 quart vanilla ice cream.

1. For the Rome apples, preheat the oven to 375 degrees. Place the apples in a baking dish. Combine the brown sugar and cinnamon and stuff in the apple cavities. Mix cider with grenadine and drizzle over the apples. Bake until tender, about 1 hour, basting every 5 minutes. Cool to room temperature.

2. For the syrup, dice the Granny Smith apples into ¼-inch cubes. Over medium-high heat, cook sugar and cider until sugar is caramelized, about 30 minutes.

3. Add rum and applejack and cook 1 minute. Remove from the heat and stir in the diced apples. Ladle the warm syrup over the baked apples. Top with vanilla ice cream. Serve.

Yield: 6 servings. ■