

July 9, 2013

# A Wizard Dares to Relax

By PETE WELLS

Wylie Dufresne is probably called a mad scientist more often than any other American chef, but nobody ever says what kind of mad scientist he is.

The obvious answer is that he's a mad chemist, weighing out colloids and starches and sugars by the gram. That's what has helped him win international acclaim at [WD-50](#). And so far, that's how people have seen the menu at [Alder](#), his new, more casual place in the East Village where you can build a meal out of three to five smallish plates, or just check into the bar with a slightly twisted Cheddar spread and a fully twisted mai tai.

Of course, there's also a case that Mr. Dufresne is a mad zoologist. With an enzyme known in the trade as meat glue, he creates such unnatural species as the cylindrical quail. This boneless, beakless pink column of poultry doesn't cluck or walk. Its sole purpose is to be deep-fried in panko in Alder's kitchen and stretched out across ripe bananas and broccoli leaves in a sweet and easygoing curry. Sliced, it looks like a cross section of an unpeeled red banana, suggesting that maybe Mr. Dufresne is a mad botanist, too.

Or a mad marine biologist. Alder's excellent fish and chips is made from spiny dogfish, which looks like a small, dimwitted shark who's lost his dentures. As any ocean scientist knows, though, it is one of the region's most abundant edible saltwater fish, with fine-grained and mild white flesh that fries up beautifully. As only a mad ocean scientist knows, fried dogfish is even better with powdered malt vinegar, which solves the problem of soggy fish and chips that plagues New Englanders and Britons.

But if you ask me, these are all hobbies that Mr. Dufresne picked up while pursuing his true vocation as mad neurologist. He and his colleagues at Alder (Jon Bignelli is the executive chef, leading an intensely collaborative kitchen with heavy input from Mr. Dufresne) get into your brain and rewire its pathways until you find yourself looking at one thing and tasting something else. They are like [Oliver Sacks](#) in reverse.

Some of the madness and a fair amount of the neurology can be traced back to Mr. Dufresne's early encounter with Ferran Adrià's mock olives and the like at [El Bulli](#), in Spain. People tended to focus on the chemicals and laboratory equipment in Mr. Adrià's kitchen, a

shame because he mainly used those things so that his cooking could make us see the world differently.

At Alder, you will probably not mistake your wife for a hat, but you may mistake your rye pasta for a sandwich. This is a nice, normal plate of fettuccine, except that it tastes exactly like a Katz's pastrami on rye with mustard. They can't be right, these signals your neurons are firing off. But they are, and the noodle sandwich is a lot of fun to eat, right down to the shaved pastrami jerky, chopped pickled green tomatoes and mustard sauce.

You won't mistake the clam chowder in a red enamel camping mug for anything but clam chowder. Very little about the soup of smoked bacon, cream and shellfish would be out of place in Hyannis or Kennebunkport, although this version is more seductively smooth than usual. The oyster crackers, though, may cause some cognitive dissonance. After the first crunch, they dissolve, leaving nothing but a ghostly flicker of oyster flavor on your tongue.

Sometimes all the mad neurologists at Alder need to do is hit you with an ingredient you weren't expecting. The ricotta next to beets pickled in rice vinegar isn't ricotta at all but crumbled coconut milk gel. The flavor is wonderfully refreshing, especially when you eat it with the green shards that taste of tender, minty Thai basil.

Did that bite of foie gras terrine, topped with a shiso leaf and a semicircle of yuzu-infused watermelon, really sit on a Ritz? Yes. Yes it did, and it was delightful beyond all reason. [Good cracker](#). Great snack.

True, there are moments when you wonder if your synapses are experiencing side effects. Slabs of raw yellowtail were overwhelmed by Parmesan-dressed leaves of romaine; the dish, called Caesar salad nigiri, seemed to call for an oilier, more forceful fish, like the mackerel that is sometimes on the menu. I was fascinated by the banana curry, but wished the quail had been juicier and the breading crisper. Fresh cherries in a disassembled cheesecake tasted like a manhattan, which was the intended effect, but the waxy lumps of cake brought to mind only cheese-scented candles.

I've had at least one dish I could not unravel each time I've eaten at WD-50, but the next thing I tasted would bring redemptive manipulations of flavor, texture, temperature and shape. At Alder, redemption often takes a simpler form. After the nigiri, you can lean back and smile as you eat airy scrambled eggs with smoked trout and skinny twigs of grilled asparagus. You can have octopus that's just chewy enough with an unexpectedly charming pesto of watercress and cashews.

Mr. Dufresne hasn't put this many relaxed and accessible dishes on a menu since he left [71 Clinton Fresh Food](#) in 2002. The dining room isn't intimidating, either. It even dabbles in a bit of downtown farm-to-table cliché, with slats of weathered wood salvaged from an old fence. Not everything is rustic, though: note the black rubber tops on the tables and the elastic bands stretched around the water carafes like dog collars. Green is for filtered, carbonated tap; white means straight from the faucet.

The angle of those slats looks as if they would blunt noise. This is an illusion. The conversational racket is ferocious when Alder is full, which it almost always is these days. If you are losing both hearing and eyesight, the restaurant will be a double ordeal, because the type on the menu is pill-bottle tiny.

Buy reading glasses if you need to, because Alder, even with a few misfires, is an exciting restaurant. Now that WD-50 serves only tasting menus, it belongs as much to the global foodie circuit as it does to the Lower East Side. Alder feels the way WD-50 used to. Some customers are there to write blog posts on the food, and some are just there to talk or flirt or drink one mai tai too many or look around and once in a while say, "Wow, that was cool."

With such ordinary tactics as small plates and reasonable prices, Alder has done something out of the ordinary, planting avant-garde cooking in what's left of downtown alternative culture. It belongs to anybody who wants to see things differently.

### ***Alder***

★★

*157 Second Avenue (East 10th Street), East Village;*

*(212) 539-1900, [aldernyc.com](http://aldernyc.com)*

***ATMOSPHERE*** *Casual, with smart, low-key design and a bar up front designed for eating.*

***SERVICE*** *Friendly and well versed in the menu's trickier passages.*

***SOUND LEVEL*** *What?*

***RECOMMENDED*** *Pub cheese; pigs in a blanket; pickled beets; fried cauliflower; foie gras terrine; fish and chips; rye pasta; root beer sundae; snowballs.*

***DRINKS AND WINE*** *Most bottles are under \$60 on a wine list that avoids the obvious without being willfully obscure. Cocktails can be more challenging.*

**PRICES** \$9 to \$24.

**OPEN** Daily for dinner.

**RESERVATIONS** Accepted through Web site.

**WHEELCHAIR ACCESS** Dining room and accessible restroom are on street level.

June 4, 2013

# A Red-Sauce Joint Steals the Show

By PETE WELLS

At Carbone, they don't ask if you've dined with them before. Even if you haven't, the answer would still be yes. This is supposed to be the Italian restaurant where you celebrated your birthday before anyone told you that chicken scarpariello isn't Italian.

This being 2013, and the two chefs, [Rich Torrisi](#) and [Mario Carbone](#), being former lieutenants of [Mario Batali](#) and [Daniel Boulud](#), Carbone is infinitely more self-conscious than those old restaurants. It is a fancy red-sauce joint in Greenwich Village as directed by Quentin Tarantino, bringing back the punch-in-the-guts thrills of a genre that everybody else sees as uncultured and a little embarrassing, while exposing the sophistication that was always lurking there. Carbone has a technical prowess that can make you giddy; a lust for excess that can, at times, make you a little queasy; and an instinct for sheer entertainment that makes a lot of other restaurants seem like earnest, unimaginative drones.

There are, in the Tarantino style, fanboy film allusions: the [tile floor](#) from "The Godfather," the narrow passageway into the back dining room that makes you feel like Ray Liotta handshake-tipping his way into the Copacabana.

There are the songs that make you think, "Oh, no," followed by "I forgot how great this is," as people with open bottles of Gaja on the table drum their fingers to "[We Open in Venice](#)."

Like Tarantino's love letters to pulpy exploitation films, Carbone affectionately picks up the clichés of its genre, twirls them, then hurls them at your head. Our captain wears a B-movie smile and a tuxedo in a shade of maroon last seen at Liberace's estate sale. Bearing a hollowed-out wheel of Parmesan, he stabs a nugget of cheese and slides it on to my plate. It tastes young, milky and uninteresting, but next come papery slices of smoky and complex aged country ham, Kentucky serving as a stunt double for Parma, and a stack of "grandma bread," a no-cheese Sicilian pizza with oregano and a shadowy, sweet pulp of tomato sauce. Both make me smile.

More unbidden genre tropes are on the way: tart giardiniera in oil, amazing garlic bread, fried ribbons of dough under powdered sugar, suave fig grappa, and delicate house-made limoncello in a bottle furry with frost. I don't love every one of these extras, but I love the way they make me abandon any hope of quiet moderation.

Nearly the entire menu at Carbone is a quotation, starting with the \$50 veal parm, which is larger than some fancy brick-oven pizzas and looks like one, too, with ovals of browned buffalo mozzarella and a bright red, summer-fresh, barely cooked tomato sauce. Served with a fried shaft of bone, it's a shock-and-awe dish, and the most shocking thing about it is that there is no real revisionism here; it is a veal parm, the way you always hoped it would be.

More often, the old tropes get an injection of technique that acts like a syringe of epinephrine plunged into the heart. The two-and-a-half pound lobster fra diavolo is both brash and polished, the huge portion galvanized by Calabrian chiles and soothed by Cognac. No shrimp scampi has been handled as gently or luxuriously as Carbone's chorus line of langoustines, claws extended, bodies split and slick with butter that implies garlic without coming right out and saying it.

Concentrated shellfish stock is the foundation a zuppa di pesce so deeply fragrant, you know it's coming before it's on the table.

I wish the clam broth that infuses linguine vongole had the same intensity. But other plates of what Carbone calls "macaroni" are remarkable. Knuckles of tortellini stuffed with whipped sheep's milk ricotta are a show of zero-gravity delicacy while elbows of rigatoni are forceful and substantial, their tomato sauce unabashedly spicy and slyly buttery.

There are also, in this movie, some lapses in taste and judgment. Fried broccoli rabe is locked inside some of the heaviest, greasiest batter I've ever tasted. Carbone's tiramisù, a wedge of layer cake with mascarpone between Marsala-soaked spongecake, is too wet and too boozy, a case where the middlebrow original is better than the highbrow makeover.

Strangest of all is something called Chinese chicken, which tastes as if Mr. Torrisi and Mr. Carbone were trying to recreate something from Chinatown Night at their college cafeterias. But old Italian-American restaurants generally have at least one dish on the menu that nobody orders. Maybe this soy-and-sesame-seed nonentity is supposed to be another in-joke, although it would be funnier if, when you ordered it, your captain said, "We just sold out."

They could get a laugh out of it, too. Carbone's captains are character actors who have mastered the jokey, swaggering, slightly bossy style that was a New York specialty before waiters began to have the blandly pleasant manners of the young people who carry Bibles and ring doorbells on Saturday mornings. There is a flash of three-card monte below the surface, as these men sell you on meatballs with your pasta or promise that the lemon cheesecake is "the best you'll ever have in your life." They aren't lying about the cheesecake, though.

And the most talented among them can improvise dialogue while grating creamy ricotta salata over a Caesar salad that is just as sharp with anchovies as you could wish. One night a star of romantic comedies was sharing one appetizer and one main course with her male date. When the date left the table, the captain leaned in.

Captain: Nice catch.

Star: Excuse me?

Captain: I said that's a good-looking young man you're with.

Star: (Raucous laughter.)

This kind of thing is funny only if you agree to play along. And I'm not ready to play along with all of Carbone's casting decisions: currently all the captains, typically the most highly tipped employees, are men.

But I admire nearly all the other choices that Mr. Torrisi, Mr. Carbone and their business partner, Jeff Zalaznick, have made. Many American restaurants are trying to reinvent fine dining by looking abroad. Carbone is mining the best elements of homegrown American style of service and cuisine that flourished when men in ties and women in heels, woozy from a final shot of sambuca, wobbled to the sidewalk clutching doggy bags.

We didn't know how good we had it. Carbone is here to remind us.

## **Carbone**

★★★

181 Thompson Street (Bleecker Street), (212) 254-3000, [carbonenewyork.com](http://carbonenewyork.com)

**ATMOSPHERE** Both formal and fun, in a way only upscale joints can be.

**SERVICE** Are these genuine old-school Italian waiters, actors playing a role or both?

**SOUND LEVEL** Like everything else, slightly heightened.

**RECOMMENDED** Carpaccio piemontese, scampi alla scampi, posillipo pan roast, Caesar salad alla ZZ, tortellini al ragù, spicy rigatoni vodka, bass vin rosso, lobster fra diavolo, double lamb chop, cherry pepper ribs, lemon cheesecake, carrot cake.

**DRINKS AND WINE** Period cocktails (stingers, mai tais) are smartly updated; the list of French, Italian and American wines is strong, though there are no bottles under \$60.

**PRICES** Antipasti and other starters, \$14 to \$38; pastas, \$19 to \$31; main courses, \$30 to \$52 and up.

**OPEN** Daily for dinner.

**RESERVATIONS** Accepted.

**WHEELCHAIR ACCESS** Dining rooms and accessible restroom are on street level.