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All That Glitters Is Not Gilt

For the new French eatery Corton in Tribeca, it's déjà vu all over again

| *By Adeena Sussman* | *Photography by Evan Sung* |

"What's the name of this place again?" asked the woman sitting at the table next to mine, her Rolex clanking against shiny Christoffle flatware. She was busy spreading green seaweed butter—a weirdly delicious mouthful of savory umami—on a crusty little baguette and taking delicate bites. "It's Corton," said her companion, who chose the creamy Lescure butter provided for the more traditionally minded. "Like 'cotton,' but with an 'r' in the middle."

Corton, which opened in October, is the latest project from Drew Nieporent, the godfather of Tribeca dining, who can claim Nobu, Tribeca Grill, Mai House and Centrico as his own. A big presence in the small room, Nieporent doesn't just open a restaurant, he inhabits it—circling the dining room, glad-handing guests, pouring wine, even picking up the phone to take and confirm reservations.

With this redesign of the former Montracher—the spot that started it all for Nieporent in 1985 when Tribeca was still the poor man's Soho—he reinforces a message of serenity. Mirror-hung walls and red banquettes have been replaced

with a white-on-white bas-relief of branches, flowers and birds napped with gold leaf. Gridlike gray carpeting ensures that the room never reaches an unmanageable crescendo. Still, there's a pleasantly energetic hum when the restaurant fills up with a crowd that's hard to pigeonhole; not to say my friend Brian and I didn't try.

"Those guys? Bankers unaffected by the economy," I proposed, looking toward the six white guys in dark jackets at a center table drinking bottles of Châteauneuf du Pape.

"Those two are on their second, third date, tops," said Brian, as he pointed at a woman in a lace cocktail dress and her cashmere-sweatered companion.

One gent was easy to identify: Tailor chef Sam Mason, a fellow experimentalist from the school of foams and freeze-drying, was in residence at the corner table, dressed in an impossibly skinny bespoke suit. As the night wore on, our profiling got more challenging. Just past 10, two guys in skinny jeans and Ed Hardy hoodies slouched in.

"Graffiti artists?" Brian guessed.

CORTON

RATING: ★★★★★

239 West Broadway
212-219-2777

Dinner only Monday–
Thursday 5:30–10:30pm;
Friday–Saturday 5:30–
11pm Closed Sundays

What the stars mean: 1 = fair, some noteworthy qualities; 2 = good, above average; 3 = very good, well above norm; 4 = excellent, among the area's best; 5 = world-class, extraordinary in every detail. Reviews are based on multiple visits. Ratings reflect the reviewer's overall reaction to food, ambience and service.

BEST SEAT: *Corner table #24 (best for people-watching and looking into open kitchen)*

WHO'S THERE: *Bankers in blazers, fans of foodie foam, date-night couples, mellow downtowners*

WHO'S NOT: *Paparazzi, wannabe Page Sixers*

WHAT TO WEAR: Men:

Loro Piana cashmere & Earnest Sewn jeans; Women: Tori Burch & Louboutins

WHAT IS COSTS: *\$76 three-course prix fixe or seven-course \$110 tasting menu*

ABOUT THE WINE: *Prodigious French selections from high-value to high-priced.*

Great selection of under-\$55 Country French bottles

THINGS OF BEAUTY *Top: Chef Paul Liebrandt's foie gras with hibiscus-beet gelée and blood orange. Below: Inside the casual chic dining room of Corton.*



"Trustafarians," I concluded as we finished a bottle of crisp, apple-tinged Henri Prudhon white from a value-packed selection of Country French wines.

Our table also afforded a great view of the narrow, aquarium-meets-*Blade Runner*-like slash carved from the glossy black wall—the open kitchen through which chef Paul Liebrandt's floppy, chin-length coif is visible. The design is a signal that though there is clearly a chef at work, it's not all about him. Nieporent took a risk on Liebrandt, a chef with talent to burn (three stars at the age of 25 for his work at Atlas) and a reputation for throwing his ego around like so many free samples (that, and an apparent case of molecular gastronomy run amok, were said to have contributed to his demise at Gilt, the restaurant in the Palace Hotel which jettisoned him in 2006).

As I sipped an alluring, sweet-smoky spiced root beer-and-bourbon cocktail and slurped down a briny Beausoleil oyster topped with puffed buckwheat, all signs suggested that perhaps the now-32-year-old Liebrandt's restless culinary brain had undergone successful integration therapy.

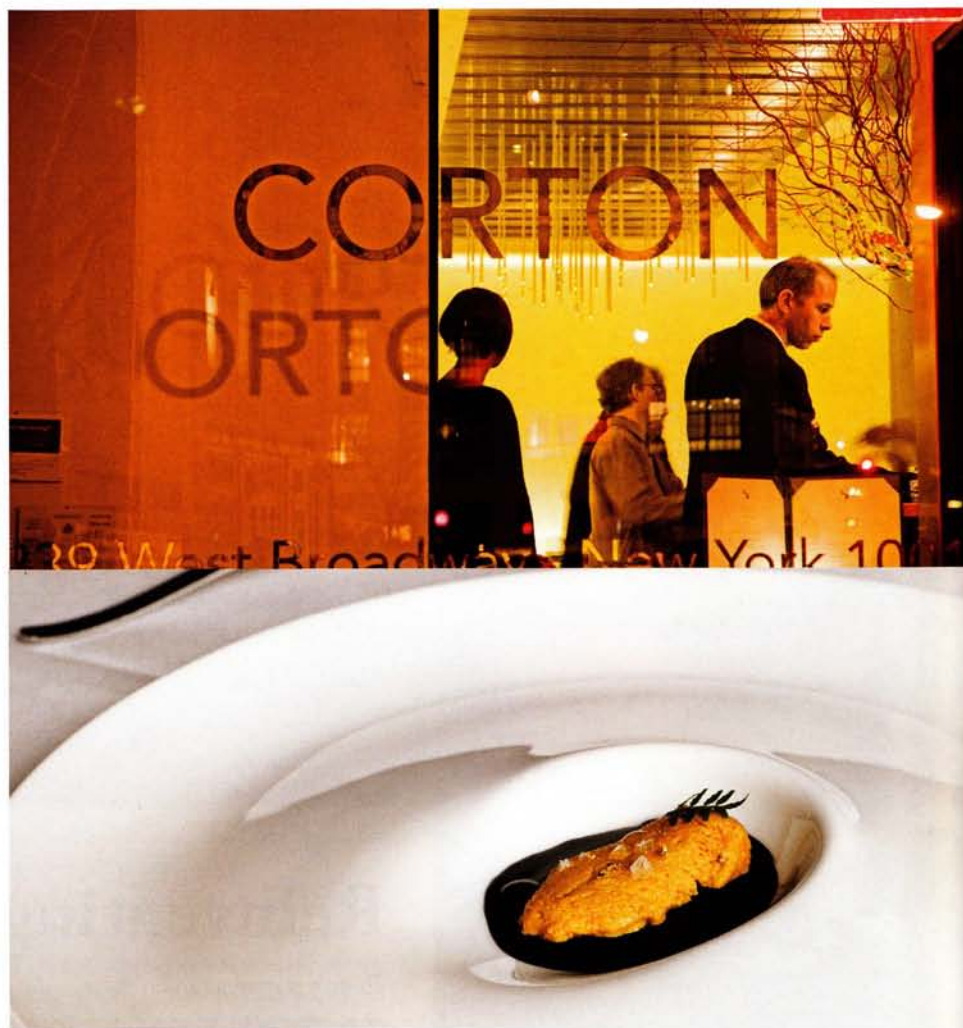
The focused, \$76 three-course prix fixe (there's also a \$110 tasting menu) is embellished with indulgent, sometimes experimental touches, but very little hot air, as in an appetizer of sweet, quarter-size scallops paired with a mound of chewy scallop tartare. The accompanying dollop of unctuous uni cream perfectly fused the funkiness of the sea urchin with the freshness of the bivalves.

Nobody's ever accused Liebrandt of being a hippie, but the menu's "from the garden" appetizer read like a refuge from the *Moosewood Cookbook*. On the plate, though, the flavors of each element—among them a flaky dehydrated cabbage chip, tiny cubes of sweet-roasted squash, brown butter-napped Brussels sprouts and an inky black garlic-and-mushroom purée—shone, crafted into a swirling surrealist sculpture almost too pretty to eat.

Potatoes show up in several inventive incarnations: An appetizer of almost fuchsia-hued octopus, Meyer lemon gelée cubes and a crisp slice of squid-ink brioche got a tableside pour of clear, golden potato consommé which made me reconsider the flavor of a spud's skin; earthy-creamy potato-eggplant terrine accompanied the Cobia; and a single, fondant potato topped with tiny violets complemented a round of beef fillet nearly as soft as the braised oxtail garnish it came with.

Still, there was the occasional misstep. When a busboy swung by to present a basket of brown and white Violet Hill Farm eggs nestled in a bed of hay for inspection, it seemed a fussy ritual in an evening that hummed with otherwise flawless, low-key service. I nodded my approval, but wasn't sure exactly what I was green-lighting. All was forgiven though when the egg returned, gently oozing an impossibly orange yolk and accompanying rich, almost caramelized sweetbreads and firm braised carrots.

Next came a nice surprise. Liebrandt takes squab, a dish sometimes plagued by a paltry meat-to-bone ratio, and rolls the meat in a wafer-thin thin layer of smoked bacon before poaching it in duck fat and deglazing in a piquant, cidery emulsion. The tiny quail leg was braised until meltingly tender, the whole affair unified by a rich chestnut cream



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and airy pain d'épices foam, one of the occasional in-your-face reminders of his yen for the avant-garde. If this is how Liebrandt chooses to flex his ego, I say bring it on.

"Chocolates, too?" we marveled, as four types—including one filled with an alluring white chocolate-olive oil ganache—made their way to the table in a Lucite box. We'd just finished pastry tyro Robert Truitt's impressive desserts, although a perfectly executed warm chocolate fondant felt like an every-menu standard—molten chocolate cake—hiding behind another moniker.

Leaving Corton, you realize what a pleasure it is to be in Tribeca, still blissfully devoid of the visible downsides of other downtown neighborhoods. No bachelorette party girls here trailing veils behind as they flash passersby from the limousine sunroof, no trash overflowing at the end of the night. Instead, you get streets that seem a little wider, with a bit more breathing room, and an escape from the city's omnipresent crush. All the better for enjoying a restaurant that, from the get-go, is anticipating your arrival. **M**



TRIPLE THREAT From top: Looking into the restaurant from West Broadway; uni with Konbu gelée appetizer; chef Paul Liebrandt.