

MANHATTAN

MODERN LUXURY™

THE HOLIDAY ISSUE

WISH LIST '08!

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The New Gold Standard

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MAN UP! NYC'S 25
MOST MACHO MOMENTS
MEET THE BRIGHT YOUNG THINGS
SHAPING ARTS & CULTURE
ACHTUNG! IS BERLIN STEALING
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BUY LOW! DOWNTOWN'S
GALLERY SCENE EXPOSED

PLAY TIME

JEREMY PIVEN TAKES ON BROADWAY

MANHATTAN 7 W. 51ST ST., 8TH FLOOR NEW YORK, NY 10019



NOV/DEC 2008 \$5.95

**PER SE**

RATING ★★★★★

10 Columbus Circle, 4th Fl.
212.823.9335
Dinner 7 days 5:30–10 PM;
Lunch Fri–Sun,
11:30 AM–2 PM

WHO'S THERE Deal-sealing
business groups, couples
celebrating anniversaries,
Mayor Bloomberg
BEST SEAT Lower level
overlooking Columbus Circle
WHEN TO GO Whenever you
can get in

ABOUT THE WINE An epic wine
list, helpful service, pairings
ranging from \$75 to infinity,
including a glass of Keller's
own California cabernet,
Modicum

WHAT IT COSTS \$275 for
dinner, \$175 for lunch
(weekends only)

Se It Isn't Ko

It's staid uptown vs. gritty downtown for upscale dining dominance

| By Adeena Sussman | Photography by Evan Sung |

Is this goose liver, or an ice cream sundae? I thought as I sat at the 12-person counter at Momofuku Ko, devouring what has quickly become one of chef David Chang's signature dishes: lush, juicy lychee fruits, quivering Riesling-wine gelée and crunchy pine nut brittle under a drift of buttery, frozen foie gras that was Microplaned messily onto the plates before our eyes.

It was a weirdly delicious combination that begged comparison to another foie gras preparation I'd had a few weeks before at Per Se, iconic chef Thomas Keller's restaurant in the Time Warner Center. There, the goose liver was a rosy disc of meltingly rich terrine accented with ripe, summery heirloom peaches, peach jelly and pickled red onion—a gorgeous presentation, cerebral

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.

in its interplay of rich, savory and sweet—everything it should have been. Delicious, for sure. Risk-taking? Not exactly.

The tale of two foies is an object lesson in the differences between the two restaurants, both darlings of the press, and both continuing to make a serious case for luxury when others are going “casual chic.” Ko's 17-course, three-hour lunch costs \$160 per person (dinner is two hours at \$100 a head), Per Se's 11-course dinner is \$275 (prices are before wine), but they're coming from different perspectives—one outfitted with every culinary bell and whistle, the other a minimalist, stripped-down experience. The one thing they have in common, of course, is the bitch of a time getting in the front door.

MOMOFUKU KO

RATING ★★★★★

163 First Ave.
reservations.momofuku.com
Dinner 7 days 6:50–10 PM;
Lunch 7 days 12–12:45 PM

WHO'S THERE Girls with visible
tattoos, Upper East Siders
in the East Village for the
first time in years, Wylie
Dufresne from WD-50
BEST SEAT Any of the
12 available

WHEN TO GO Whenever
you can get in
ABOUT THE WINE Wine list
presented in a Moleskine
notebook, or \$90 for 13
eclectic pours including a
small-grower Champagne,
unusual sakes, and five
Spanish selections

WHAT IT COSTS \$100 for
dinner, \$160 for lunch

Snagging one of the 16 tables at Per Se was meant to be a harrowing experience, which is why what actually transpired was such a pleasant surprise. After being informed that everything was booked for a month and a half, a cancellation came through the next day, and I was in. The opulence begins at this Michelin three-star with a greeting in the elegant reception area, before moving on to the spacious two-tiered dining room filled with towering flower arrangements. Views of Columbus Circle and Central Park through the expansive windows helped me forget I was dining on the fourth floor of a shopping mall—as did a twice-refilled glass of Veuve Clicquot.

Befitting its place at the top of the New York food chain, the first few courses of Per Se's tasting menu skewed to the rich and pampering. A chilled

fraiche and American Osetra caviar. It was more than a little reminiscent in its composition to that Keller menu chestnut, the crème fraiche-filled mini cone topped with lush smoked salmon.

Like a trust-fund kid in beat-up sneakers, Ko takes great pains to downplay its high-end bones. The view from my seat consisted of a griddle cooktop and burners, oven and broiler, stacks of spotless All-Clad pots and pans, and a shiny red fire extinguisher hooked onto the wall. And other than two hostesses who also serve as knowledgeable sommeliers, the three humble, tattooed cooks in well-worn aprons and peach-logo baseball caps were my go-to guys for information. Nice and knowledgeable as they were, I hesitated to bother them as they focused on my next course; Ko's elimination



avocado soup with tiny cubes of compressed honeydew melon and smoked paprika-scented mousse was a silky eye-opener, though a sprig of mint was too chewy for my taste. Fragrant, truffle oil-infused custard piped into a meticulously hollowed-out egg came topped with a funky black winter truffle ragout, an indulgence of the first order.

My sautéed halibut with bok choy, meyer lemon, pea shoots and white soy was perfect, and my friend's plate of grassy, lean grilled Snake River Farms beef left us yearning for more of the lusty Bordelaise sauce it came with. But the (tad overdisciplined) food at Per Se is only half of what makes it special—the service takes it over the top. When our waiter saw me coveting a Japanese ale at another table, he procured one for me. We chatted about everything from Brooklyn restaurants to Keller's role as consultant on the movie *Ratatouille*. Extra courses came out with regularity. Guests can even tour the kitchen, where dozens of minions in crisp jackets work with factory-like efficiency. If I could have slept over at Per Se, I would have.

Not so at Ko, where the much-reported-upon, highly vexing online-only reservations system kicks off your—what's that?—*luxury experience*? I finally did snag a spot, though walking through Ko's gridlike iron front door, I continued to harbor unresolved hard feelings, compounded by the necessity to hand over a printout of confirmation. Were we boarding a plane, or having lunch? But my post-reservations stress disorder evaporated when a jagged stone plate appeared cradling a crispy corn cup of silky, tomato jam-topped pork rilette and a hollow tube of pommes soufflé filled with crème

UPTOWN Clockwise from top left: One of Per Se's two private dining rooms; the restaurant's main dining area; the term is Latin for "just a wee bit expensive."

DOWNTOWN Clockwise from top right: Ko's chefs get up close and personal with patrons; the lucky few who clicked their mouses at the right second; Ko's cozy size.

of the middleman occasionally left me wanting.

Still, service isn't everything. Ko's meltingly tender Elysian Farms lamb chop, a thoughtful meditation on a Greek taverna dinner, hit a high note. The meat's crispy layer of fat was so addictive I swiped my friend's portion when she wasn't looking. Not only was it delicious, it was fun.

That sense of whimsy continued on through dessert: first a corn-and-chocolate pudding with chocolate crunch, then a blushing peach sorbet with dehydrated milk crumbs and a smudge of streusel ganache which turned the prosaic summer cobbler on its ear. My tastebuds looked for the right phrase to describe the plate, which

they eventually did with just one word: *Yum*.

At Per Se, the hour-long howitzer of a dessert service came in joyful waves. A refreshing blackberry-anise parfait with yogurt arrived with three irresistible, Holly Hobbie-sized pancakes. Then came the silver tray with 27 types of house-made chocolate, then truffles and tiny spun-sugar candies, then a personal prayer for no more sweets. Subtle it wasn't, but it drove the point home: We'd been served, and served remarkably well.

As I left Per Se, cellophane-wrapped nut cookie bars in hand, I was crowing as much about the experience as the dinner itself. Over at Ko, where the fusing of lunch-counter cool with luxe prices can take a little getting used to, the memories were mostly about what was on the plate. As we stood to leave, the chef reached across the bar, awkwardly handing us a miniature glass jar filled with house-made pickles. "This is for you," he said, almost apologetically. "We're getting kind of fancy around here." ☑