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SEPT | OCT 2008 \$4.95

**ADOUR ALAIN DUCASSE**

RATING: ★★★

*The St. Regis Hotel**2 East 55th Street**212.710.2277**Sun – Thu, 5:30 – 10:30;**Fri – Sat, 5:30 – 11:00*

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.

Clockwise from far left:

The David Rockwell-designed interior establishes Adour's tempered formality; duck breast filet, shallots, lemon confit, olive sauce, served with creamy polenta; the high-tech yet pesky wine list beams to the bar.



Adour Or Die

Is the third time the charm for Alain Ducasse in New York?

| By Adeena Sussman | Photography by Evan Sung |

"This must have looked really good on the drawing board, but something got lost in translation," said the man to my right at the four-person wine bar at Adour Alain Ducasse. We could have been forgiven for thinking we had stumbled upon an oenophile's elaborate pantomime act, as the two French-speaking gentlemen waved flattened palms in an attempt to conjure up Adour's prodigious wine list by employing a modified "wax-on, wax-off" motion which calls to mind Mr. Miyagi in those Karate Kid movies.

Developed exclusively for the restaurant and projected onto the bar's surface, the technology was designed to be motion-sensitive, allowing patrons to dissect the list by region, color, flavor profile, food pairings and more. Though I, for one, was flummoxed at every turn. The menu would display information I hadn't requested, then retreat in a puff of digital fairy dust. When I asked for French whites by the glass, the shadow of my cuff bracelet sent the software careening in a whole different direction.

Not being able to get the hang of that wine menu got me thinking about the problems Alain Ducasse has experienced in communicating with New Yorkers. It hasn't been an easy relationship for him with a city that should have welcomed a titan of modern cuisine with open arms, but instead has treated him like a sort of high-class Rodney Dangerfield.

After collecting Michelin stars with ease the world over, he arrived in New York in 2000 enveloped in a frisson of anticipation over the opening of the very opulent, very expensive Alain Ducasse at the Essex House. It could

have gone either way, but the unabashed luxury caused an almost unanimous revolt among local food lovers and critics—no cheapskates when it comes to discretionary dining spending.

Ducasse brought in chef de cuisine Tony Esnault (now at Adour), tweaked the menu and gained critical acclaim, but the restaurant closed quietly in 2007. This puts Adour—where Ducasse and company promise a slightly more relaxed (and less, but not much less, expensive) experience—in a bit of a dress-down pickle. His more casual restaurant, Mix in New York, shuttered in 2005 after two years (it's still thriving in Vegas), and early reviews of midtown bistro Benoit haven't been stellar. Adour boasts the décor and menu of a fine-dining restaurant, but the question remains: Can Ducasse finally take Manhattan?

Back at the bar, I managed to order a glass of Channing Daughters Clones, a well-balanced Long Island Chardonnay blend which was generously topped off several times. That, and an amuse of garlicky red and yellow gazpacho granité studded with lush chunks of tomato concassé, calmed me just as my dinner date arrived and we were ushered to our table.

The dress code ratchets down the formality a notch or two, another barometer of the restaurant's intentions. Jackets are recommended, but not required (most men wear them, and women are elegantly turned out). The

WHO'S THERE *Wine lovers, Michelin stargazers, homesick French gastronomes, business diners, St. Regis hotel guests*
WHO'S NOT *People eating before a night at Tenjune*

WHAT TO WEAR *For men: Any suit made in Italy, master of the universe watch; for women: Celine, something that glitters that is not only gold*

BEST SEAT *A center table facing the Jackson Pollock-like painting in the banquet-lined side dining room*

ABOUT THE WINE *One of the most comprehensive, well-culled lists in town, ranging from fantasy bottles to reasonably priced wines by the glass*

WHAT IT COSTS *Appetizers \$19 – \$29, entrees \$32 – \$49, five-course tasting menu \$110*

waitstaff is professional, even friendly, without a whiff of snobbery. You know you're in a serious restaurant, but one that's taking pains not to put on airs.

Once the food started coming (ordered from a blessedly low-tech paper menu), Ducasse's hand was evident. A poached egg "purse" and sweetbread appetizer was scattered generously with morel mushrooms, which soaked up a rich veal reduction. Foie gras terrine, a visual dead ringer for a strip of double-cut bacon, was lined with a ribbon of Sauternes gelée and accompanied by wafer-thin apples.

The menu at Adour sports the tagline "cuisine designed with wine in mind," and our sincere young wine steward started out offering up some of the big guns. When we demurred, he immediately shifted gears, offering glasses in the \$9 to \$20 range, plus a splurge-worthy Tremblay Chablis for \$29. We eventually dipped a toe into more precious territory by opting for the "carafe program," essentially half bottles culled from pricier selections. Damien Laureau Loire Valley Savennières (\$80 for the carafe), had the right amount of richness and minerality to take us through a variety of dishes. For such a serious wine program, the experience is decidedly devoid of hot air.

Still, some conceits remain. Bread is par-baked in Paris and flown to New York a couple of times a week, finished off in Adour's ovens and served with delicate, sea salt-flecked olive butter which dissolves like snowflakes on the tongue.

Entrées were indulgent and luxurious, if a bit safe. Rosy, tender ingots of Colorado lamb rack, the rib bones so immaculate we were tempted to pick them up with our hands, were garnished with apricot confit and piquillo peppers. It made for a pretty, albeit visually traditional, plate. An accompanying quinoa casserole was a cheeky surprise. Barramundi with tender-crisp braised fennel, vegetable jus and citrus was firm yet delicate.

Only one dish sputtered. Zucchini ravioli was topped by a mildly soapy citrus foam, and the dish wanted both the essence of the vegetable and the energizing, sunshiney tang of the promised, but elusive, lemon zest.

As our meal wound down (our reservation was for 6 PM), Adour was coming alive. When full, it has a fun, appealing energy that transforms the space. On an earlier visit, we wished we were more a part of the action. We'd been seated at the periphery of the dining room, where only a semi-transparent scrim separated us from the hotel lounge, with 55th Street in the distance. It was momentarily distracting, but for the most part the space creates a separate, cosseted identity for itself, providing measured intimacy for every table.



It hasn't been an easy relationship for Ducasse with a city that should have welcomed the titan of modern cuisine with open arms, but instead treats him like Rodney Dangerfield.

The décor is lovely, with glass-windowed wine storage integrated throughout. Opaque panels depict clusters of grapes etched in gold, and glass orbs suspended in midair evoke effervescent Champagne bubbles.

The infamous upholstered handbag ottomans which got Ducasse in trouble at the Essex House have been replaced with simple wooden shelves which slide out from dining chairs for storing—and displaying—status bags.

For dessert, a disc of lightly glazed strawberries nestled on a flaky, fromage blanc-topped pastry crust was served with tart lemon-thyme sorbet, the essence of summer on a plate. The "Chocolate sorbet" was a bowl of molten mocha and bittersweet chocolate studded with crispy brioche croutons and a flourish of gold leaf.

What we couldn't finish of our ethereal, Ladurée-worthy macaroons was packed for us in sleek gold cases. As we exited, I saw the bartender giving a tutorial on that darned wine menu. "Most people get the hang of it after a try or two," he intoned. The same could be said for Adour. Give it a chance; it's a restaurant worth getting to know. **M**