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ASINGLE MAN'S COLIN FIRTH





Inside the Fishbowl

At Marea, a gentleman chef tests the waters with a splashy new uptown restaurant | By Adeena Sussman | Photography by Evan Sung |

Michael White isn't a flashy Food Network kind of guy. Whenever he's spotted around town in anything but a chef's jacket, he looks slightly uncomfortable, like a kid who's been forced into a blazer and had his hair spit-combed by his mother. Soft-spoken, friendly and considerate, he's the anti-DiSpirito, and it's comforting to know you probably won't find him hawking frozen Italian dinners anytime soon.

In fact, you almost always get the sense White would rather return to the safety of the kitchen so he can get back to cooking the food that has earned him a reputation as a low-key chef's chef, first at Fiamma and Vento, more recently on the East Side at Convivio and Alto.

But with the opening of Marea earlier this year, White and his business partner, Chris Cannon, made a play for the big leagues, transforming the former San Domenico space into a high-profile platform for meticulously sourced and prepared seafood spirited in from all over the world, plus a repertoire of dishes for which White earned acclaim at his other restaurants.

With the Dow still puttering and anything bearing the patina of wealth seemingly vulnerable to a congressional hearing, the timing of Marea's opening

this past March seemed dubious. Was it doomed to become this year's Titanic of the New York dining scene, blithely charting its course with no regard for

the perils seemingly ahead?

Even before Marea debuted, much was made of its opulent design materials, and the first thing I notice upon entering is the massive pastel-hued wall of multicolored Egyptian onyx, famously imported by the ton at great expense. It backs the long bar on the left, where a well-dressed crowd-cashmere sweaters tied strategically over shoulders, and speaking a multitude of languages-sips glasses of wine and Italianate cocktails made with an untold selection of amaros, proseccos and liquoris. A number of the customers already seem like regulars, chatting freely with the barkeeps and nibbling on fat green-shelled pistachios before dinner.

The descent to the main dining room, past walls of Italian rosewood buffed to a high gloss, suggests the kind of décor Ron Perelman might order up on a \$50 million mega-yacht. Large silver-dipped shells line the perimeter of the tables, and the unabashedly posh vibe is rounded out by the endless parade of staffers who must sometimes proceed through the room in single file.





Marea

RATING: ★★★★ 240 Central Park South, 212.582.5100

What the stars mean:

★ = fair, some noteworthy qualities

** = good, above average

★★★ = very good, well above norm

*** = excellent, among the area's best ★★★★ = world-class, extraordinary

in every detail

Reviews are based on multiple visits.

Lunch Mon.-Fri. 12-2:30PM Dinner Sun. 5-10PM; Mon.-Thurs. 5:30-10PM; Fri.-Sat. 5-11:30PM

WHO'S THERE Upper East Siders on furlough, Time Warner executives, the David Patrick Columbia set.

BEST SEAT The crudo bar in the back, tables with a view of Central Park South.

DRESS CODE Loro Piana cashmere for the Euros, anything navy blue or black for the ladies, Ferragamo pumps, quilted Chanel flats, beadbands.

WHAT TO EAT Lobster with burrata and basil seeds, crudo selection, pasta with bone marrow and octopus, ricotta ravioli, cuttlefish with braised escarole, guinea hen, zucchini cake.

WHAT IT COSTS Appetizers \$8-\$25; pastas \$24-\$36; entrées \$35-\$57; desserts \$12-\$15.

It's Saturday night, and Marea feels like a recession-proof field-trip destination for Upper East Siders who may consider the 15-block trek from 10021 something of a journey. Ruth Madoff look-alikes with serious ice and Fekkai-worthy frosted blond highlights, their bangs sprayed firmly into place and secured under bowed headbands, make up a good portion of the crowd. They admire the scalloped white china embossed with the restaurant's name in delicate silver script. They tap their fingers to a Jill Scott song, then put on reading glasses to survey the wine list (one of those long and impressive leather-bound tomes that leaves you dependent on the blessedly friendly sommelier). And they stare. A young woman walking through the tables in a pair of Stella McCartney jeans, red top, bare

arms and stilettos causes a stir as she clicks by, but she disappears into a back room and is quickly forgotten, rendering the unspoken dress code of muted colors nearly 100 percent unbreached.

This isn't the crowd you'd expect to see indulging disproportionately in courses of raw fish, but White's reputation has earned him some leeway. The environment feels so safe, perhaps it emboldens them to try light-as-air dishes like skinny ribbons of firm razor clams tossed with fennel shreds and red pepper flakes. Pristine flying fish is topped with crunchy sea beans, a vegetable that always seems like the oceanic equivalent of fleur de sel. These sleek little appetizers are also available as a six-course tasting at the crudo bar nestled at the end of the barroom, a perch in high demand for singles, lunchtime business diners and young couples on dates.

Those crudos, as well as other appetizers like lobster chunks paired with a rich hunk of burrata cheese, signal the beginning of a deep-sea adventure. But it would be a mistake to assume White has lost his bearings. He's brought his prodigious talent for pastas with him from Convivio, where people still travel to the hinterland of

A young woman in a pair of Stella McCartney jeans, red top, bare arms and stilettos causes a stir as she clicks by, but she disappears into a back room, rendering the unspoken dress code of muted colors unbreached.



Tudor City to sample his creations. And here, along Central Park where yellow cabs are whizzing by and people are walking arm-and-arm as the night darkens, somehow those creations taste even more exquisite.

White's house-made fusilli, larded with cubes of gelatinous bone marrow, tossed with charred octopus and cloaked in a lusty tomato sauce rich in Ligurian olive oil, has more soul than some entire restaurant menus. Like an Italian nonna wearing an ermine stole, it's got homey roots enveloped in approachable luxury. So many restaurants' signature dishes don't live up to the hype, but this is one that goes the distance, just like a ricotta-filled ravioli whose delicate basil pesto holds back on the garlic with superior results.

This is food with innate structure, appropriately matched to the finishing-school-straight posture of the clientele who continuously replenish the deepbrown leather chairs.

Soon, beautiful plates of fish begin arriving: halibut atop earthy lentils and sweet-and-sour cippolini onions feels like a new take on surf and turf. Grilled cuttlefish stuffed with savory braised escarole, the plate marked with a dot of the squid's ink, puts a new and elegant spin on stuffed calamari. With the waiter's encouragement, someone in my party breaks rank from the seafood charter to order the guinea hen and is rewarded with a crisp, skin-on breast, juicy dark meat and a tangle of black mushrooms and fingerling potatoes soaking up a salty, herbaceous rosemary sauce. The dish is the first to go-scavenged to the bone by all of us.

Marea lends itself to long, leisurely dinners, and servers are no doubt trained to let guests linger. In due time, our desserts arrive, and they're a strong finish. Moist zucchini cake with crispy sage fritters and lemon curd ice cream is comforting and refined, while crispy polenta batons with warm spiced pears and vanilla ice cream feels like a Greenmarket dish with a pedigree. In due time, I signal for the check while sipping espresso from a little porcelain cup molded to look like shells. I, too, couldn't help but admire it. M





SEA AND BE SEEN Clockwise from left: Cuttlefish tagliatelle with soffritto crudo and bottarga di muggine; the dining room at Marea: halibut with lentils.