February 25, 2004

RESTAURANTS

A Lavish Ice Palace High Above the Din

By AMANDA HESSER

DINING at Asiate begins with a whoosh! as the elevator shoots up 35 floors to the restaurant's glassed-in perch. On the way up, it's hard not to feel camaraderie in the air. There is the thrill of having secured one of the most elusive reservations in town, the excitement of dining in the new Time Warner Center as it transforms itself into a luxury food court and the simple anticipation of a fine meal.

But most of all, perhaps, is the joy at the prospect of dining among the clouds. Two of New York's best skytop restaurants, Windows on the World and Wild Blue, which were on the 106th and 107th floors of the north tower of the World Trade Center, vanished on 9/11.

This left the Rainbow Room, which has long thrived on its exhilarating views: getting to watch the sun set over Hoboken has a kind of romance unique to New York City.

And for a few minutes at Asiate, you get just that. A cityscape that makes your heart race and a restaurant that is designed to amplify the thrill. Tables are arranged so that most diners can overlook Central Park, and the lighting is arranged to offer a nighttime trompe l'oeil. When you look out at the skyscrapers, you also see a reflection of the lights outlining the restaurant's glass wine-storage towers — they, too, look like skyscrapers, doubling the brilliance of the city before you.

No extravagance was spared in the design, which might be described as tundra luxe — as if Philippe Starck and Mr. Cold Miser had collaborated. A sculpture affixed to the ceiling looks like a tangle of icicles, and the bread plates resemble chips of pale blue ice. Booths in the upper dining room are swaddled in toffee-colored leather and topped with feather-plumed pillows. Menus are delivered on hefty steel plates.

Do pause for an aperitif. The list, which includes sakes (the Hanahato Densho Junmai Ginjo is delicious), good sherries and an unusual selection of Scotches (some of which have been aged in Sauternes barrels), is rich in surprises.

And it may be the last moment of clarity, because then, alas, the food begins to arrive, and your senses, so far stimulated, slowly become conflicted. Nori Sugie, Asiate's chef, who worked with Tetsuya Wakuda in Sydney, Australia, joins a wave of New York chefs fixated on Asian and French influences. The best present a synthesis of cuisines. His cooking, however, seems to have gotten muddled in the rarefied air.

First a dish of gougeres, or Gruyère-filled choux pastry, is slipped onto the table. They are tiny as buttons — crisp little poufs, spiced with a whiff of cayenne. The flaky pastry collapses on your tongue.
From here, the ride gets a little bumpy. Prawns and linguine arrive in a parchment paper pouch that is twisted closed like an enormous candy wrapper and snipped open at the table by a waiter wielding garden shears. It's a good use of culinary drama. But you know what? Steaming pasta in a paper pouch makes for gummy pasta and soggy seafood.

The prawns are not nearly so worrisome as the benign-sounding vegetable appetizer, which looks like a circus parading across the plate. Flaglike sticks made of kuzukiri (a fried rice noodle), fried parsley leaves, wedges of roasted beet and miniature pattypan squash soar above dabs of potato purée. In the center a mountain potato slouches forlornly in a thick truffle sauce. There are reasons nouvelle cuisine went away, and this dish is one.

It also epitomizes the flaws in the cooking at Asiate. Mr. Sugie should not be serving pattypan squash in February. And he should not feel the need to load every dish with his entire culinary arsenal.

When Mr. Sugie does pull off the acrobatics, it can be marvelous. Pan-roasted branzino rests on a spoonful of brandade sweetened with caramelized fennel. Nearby, a pristine sautéed scallop sits, unfettered. Verjus and a seaweed sauce stream around the plate.

Suckling pig is pressed, its cheek confited and its trotters fried into a croquette. It's salty, chewy, earthy and rich.

But with many dishes, editing would help. The foie gras pâté is buttery, nutty, lovely to spread on the thick wedge of sweet toast — yet the venison and foie gras terrine on the other side of the plate does nothing but disrupt the pleasure.

The desserts are particularly prone to overcrowding. An Earl Grey crème brûlée is served with a side of litchi sorbet in a cool broth of tapioca, shaved fresh coconut, sliced litchi and coconut milk. I would happily skip the crème brûlée and have seconds of the sorbet. The same goes for raspberry granita with herbal sumac, which outshines a chocolate soufflé served alongside it. And Chocolate, Chocolate, Chocolate (a classic euphemism for dumbed down) has three components, which would be better off as three desserts — or, really, off the menu entirely.

But a quince tart possesses all the right magic. Delicate leaves of quince and a knob of almond purée are nestled in a crisp pastry shell. Chestnut ice cream is spooned into a tiny dish on the side.

When the waiters remembered to serve the petit four, it was also lovely: a pink and white die poised on a Japanese soupspoon. It was cool, a touch of fruit and coconut. Ah, yes, you think: ambrosia from the 1970's, brought up to 2004.

There are other things to admire about Asiate. The waiters are deft and have a sense of humor. When one of my dining companions demanded that the waiter stand closer so he could hear his suggestions, the waiter, Brian, promptly obliged. Later when my guest bellowed something to Brian from outside the established range, Brian smiled and held his hand to his ear. "What's that?" he said. "I can't hear you."

There is also the view. You sit atop an urban canyon, as the sheer cliffs of Midtown drop off into the park. From this height, the traffic below seems to glide and swirl without an ounce of contention. The pressures of city life ease a little. And for that alone, I might order a glass of sake, stay for the gougeres, then feign illness and steal across Columbus Circle to Jean Georges for a meal that never disappoints.
Asiate
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Mandarin Oriental Hotel, 80 Columbus Circle (entrance on 60th Street, west of Broadway), 35th floor; (212) 805-8881.

ATMOSPHERE French and Asian cooking are layered together and served in a room swathed in luxury fabrics. Overlooks Central Park; dim at night.

SOUND LEVEL Quiet.

RECOMMENDED DISHES Étuvée of clams; pan-roasted scallop with celery root; branzino with scallop and brandade; suckling pig; jambonneau of chicken; quince tart; raspberry granita and chocolate fondant.

SERVICE Enthusiastic and helpful, with a healthy sense of humor.

WINE LIST A slim but interesting list, favoring California and France. Peripheral drinks like Scotches, sherries, beers, sakes and ports are noteworthy.

HOURS Lunch, Monday to Friday, noon to 2 p.m. Dinner, Monday to Friday, 5:30 to 10 p.m.; Saturday, 5:30 to 11 p.m.; Sunday 6 to 8:30 p.m.

PRICE RANGE Lunch, appetizers, $13 to $15; entrees, $27 to $28; desserts, $12 to $14. Dinner, prix fixe, $65.

CREDIT CARDS All major cards.

WHEELCHAIR ACCESS No steps. Restrooms are on dining level.

WHAT THE STARS MEAN:
(Black)|Poor to satisfactory
*|Good
**|Very good
***|Excellent
****|Extraordinary

Ratings reflect the reviewer's reaction to food, ambience and service, with price taken into consideration. Menu listings and prices are subject to change.