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RESTAURANTS

Solid and Cozy, Short on Ostentation

By AMANDA HESSER

RENDS in New York dining are never subtle. When an idea works on the Lower East Side, it is soon mimicked all over the city. One-name restaurants took hold with a vengeance five years ago, after Babbo was a hit. Then followed Otto, Ilo, Tappo, Beppe, Gonzo, Pazo, Pico and Crispo. And, of course, Bread, Butter, Salt, Good, Taste, Fresh, Supper, Grocery, Canteen, Commune, District, Town, Craft and — how could New York be complete without it? — Therapy.

The latest in this thread is Hearth, which replaces Tappo. Giving a restaurant a single name is intended to brand it: part mantra and part haiku. By this standard, "Hearth" works. It suggests an expansive coziness — Tuscany and your grandmother's house wrapped in one, with a little smoked bacon on the side.

I was hungry before I even got there. I first visited on the night of a snowstorm, and I trudged downtown, certain there would be cancellations. But East Villagers are a sturdy breed, and when they like a restaurant, they sink their teeth into it like sharks on bait. Every seat was filled.

The bar beckoned, a hospitable slab with six stools and a string of lights underneath that keep your legs warm, steeling you against the cold sweeping in the door. I ordered a Huckleberry Ginn, a feisty cocktail of Boodles gin, ginger beer and huckleberry syrup. Things took on a promising glow.

Marco Canora, the chef, used to work at Craft, and his former boss, Tom Colicchio, is an investor. Mr. Colicchio introduced New York diners to a new kind of cooking, in which ingredients are the master and the cook is their servant. Banished are the garnish, the layered sauce, the architectural tuna. This disciplined, almost stoical, cooking can be joyless at times but is mostly pleasing in its simplicity. Mr. Canora carries the torch here. A dish of hen-of-the-woods mushrooms, direct from Craft, could not be better. The mushrooms are roasted and served on a solitary white plate. Have your fork ready when they arrive; even good friends will betray you.

The Anson Mills polenta and its elemental presentation may also be familiar. The polenta fills a tiny copper pan. It is soft, like pudding, and on top is a shallow pool of olive oil flecked with thyme leaves.

And those are just the side dishes. Much delicious food awaits. The rest of the menu — a selection of composed dishes — is Mr. Canora's own. But first, order some wine or beer, because the drinks list is saturated with gems. Paul Grieco, the wine director here, as he was before at Gramercy Tavern, has a knack for assembling cellars that are both esoteric and beguiling, while keeping timid diners from squirming. If you want beer and aren't quite ready for the Old Engine Oil from Scotland, then there's Flying Dog pale ale from Colorado. There are delicate French ciders and a raspberry wine from New Jersey, and also a list of

"seasonal wines," which could lead you as far afield as Vogelsang from Burgenland, Austria, or as close to home as a Niagara riesling.

By now, you might have noticed that one thing seems to be missing from Hearth: a hearth. There is one, actually, but it's the size of a rabbit hole and is tucked away in a corner of the open kitchen. Warmth, instead, is supposed to emanate from the ceiling, which is painted red; from water pipes wrapped in saddle leather; and from copper pots suspended on brick walls. The main walls are covered with thick panels of white felt, affixed with gigantic copper staples. They look like big bandages, actually. Big cozy bandages. Just like home, if you live in an infirmary.

There is one homey touch: the small stack of cookbooks in the bathroom. On my first visit, it included an early edition of The New York Times Cook Book. When I next returned, that book had been stolen (I asked) and replaced by James Beard. By next week, it might be the Vegan Microwave Cookbook.

Mr. Canora has eased seamlessly into his new kitchen. He is fueled more by perfection than invention, and that's not bad. You will find dishes like ribollita, duck pappardelle and game bird terrine. No wild-card ingredients, no fussy presentations: just good, familiar food given a little luster. With the game terrine, red cabbage, brussels sprouts and apple are shaved into threads and then dressed aggressively with vinegar and thyme. Marinated sardines glisten like silver blades beneath a rough of frisée, parsley leaves and a miniature dice of sofrito.

In some cases, the food's visual clarity is not matched by the power of its taste. The red snapper crudo comes with six snowy pieces of fish, each crowned with a mince of red pepper and a fried rosemary leaf — lots of flavor, none from the snapper.

Socca cannelloni stuffed with spinach and hen-of-the-woods mushrooms is overwrought and indistinct, a detour from food defined by its conciseness. (The same for the peanut butter tart and the pecan pie.)

But the missteps hardly spoil the riches. The tuna appetizer is divided into four parts, each delicious. Fried capers are sprinkled over minced tuna. A sliver of anchovy bisects a cube of tuna sashimi. Tiny dice of tuna is flecked with preserved lemon and sea salt. And a piece of cooked tuna is dressed with tuna sauce.

Don't miss the oddest dish on the menu, a monkfish osso buco. The fish, cut to resemble a veal shank, is blanketeted with a dense tomato and veal sauce; the saffron risotto is tangled with calamari. There's no way to make it sound good, but it is.

Desserts are a bit of a minefield. The few that work are superb. Start with the goat milk panna cotta, which is tangy and luscious and so wobbly you think it will collapse. The maple spice cake is not at all what it suggests. Instead, it is more like a pale and chewy financier, inset with a fan of spiced pear. The apple cider doughnuts are frumpy by comparison — two dull brown rings — but they make up for it in dizzying wafts of vanilla and browned butter. If you'd prefer to go straight to the petits fours, order the confections plate, which is made up mostly of chocolates and arrives slightly chilled. Each tiny treat is self-assured, definitive and restrained, much like this young restaurant.

Hearth

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403 East 12th Street (First Avenue); (646) 602-1300.
ATMOSPHERE Refined country cooking in a room warmed with a red ceiling and leather and copper details.

SOUND LEVEL Cocktail party banter.

RECOMMENDED DISHES Tuna with capers, anchovy, lemon and parsley; game bird terrine; monkfish osso buco; roasted black bass; duck pappardelle; Anson Mills polenta; goat milk panna cotta; maple spice cake.

SERVICE Friendly, sometimes too friendly, and casual, in Levi's and Tommy Hilfiger shirts.

WINE LIST Adventurous and eclectic with seasonal selections from California to Israel. Niche beers mixed in with beauties from France and Belgium. Lively cocktails.

HOURS Dinner Sunday, Tuesday and Wednesday 6 to 10 p.m.; Thursday, Friday and Saturday 6 to 11 p.m.

PRICE RANGE Dinner, appetizers, $9 to $13; entrees, $18 to $26; desserts, $8; four-course tasting menu, $48.

CREDIT CARDS All major cards.

WHEELCHAIR ACCESS Two steps to enter restaurant, two steps up to the back dining room; restrooms on dining level.

WHAT THE STARS MEAN:
(None)|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.