



Intelligencer



Le Binge

Gobbling along with a group of French professional gourmands on a three-day eat-a-thon that proves New York's gastronomical superiority. BY GAEL GREENE

BY THE TIME the gaggle of French critics and food writers left town last week, trundling their own over-indulged livers in wheelbarrows, they'd crowned New York the "undisputable capital of gastronomy." It was almost a total meltdown of the smug Gallic superiority I expected when I was invited to join them on their three-day whirl of our town's haute cuisine. Why was I not surprised that their itinerary was almost exclusively French?

This seasoned crew, up since 3 A.M., seems fit and quite hungry as they join a few local mouths in the brasserie of the Modern (Alsatian chef), pleased to discover a new fish, char, in tartare (though they demand *gros sel* to season it). As for chef Gabriel Kreuther's poached egg in a jar: "Over-complicated," says Jean-Pierre de Lucovich (*Monsieur* magazine), my pal from decades of shared excess. "He had the good idea, the egg, the lobster ... then he asked himself, 'What can I add that has never been done before in the world?' Salsify. Oyster root. Undercooked. A mistake."

Then a museum tour. Shopping. Barely time for a nap, and off they go again. Italian, Japanese, and American spots have been added. Like so many aristocratic ducks flocking eagerly to be force-fed, they move with deceptive charm, notebooks on guard, sharply critical. *Tabla*: Half love it; half are unmoved. *Megu*: "Too much avocado with the fatty tuna. Too mushy," says De Lucovich. As for David Bouley's obsessed lecture on chemistry and insistence on layering each dish himself, slowly, painfully—"megalomaniacal," my confrere notes. "It

was like an evening with Marcel Proust."

Sunday morning, Momofuku: "More *amuse* than *bouche*," author Pierre Rival dismisses the vaunted pickle plate, but all go wild for pork-belly buns. Of course they go gaga at L'Atelier de Joël Robuchon. L'Amadaï, a Japanese fish in a lily-bulb broth, excites Jean-François Chaigneau (*Paris-Match*). "I love this fish. I love my plate. I love you," he cries out. That night at Craft, gnocchi in black-truffle butter. No one at Del Posto is expecting sixteen professional eaters, but like magic, tables materialize and a fine tasting ensues. A staff of ten hovers. Then upstairs at Country for dessert.

The next morning, they meet up with local foodies at a round table at the Warwick to debate trends. Ariane Daguin dons a D'Artagnan apron to serve three kinds of bacon, fried quail eggs, then tries to rally forces to fight PETA's war against foie gras, which she serves, seared.

Midway through their eating marathon, after surrendering to the ultimate slurp at Le Bernardin, the visitors are seduced. "New York City should secede from the United States so we can make it the capital of Europe," says Rival. That night, after spicy rib eye, rare sliced porterhouse, hash browns, and creamed spinach at Porter House, they move on to the finale at Daniel. Everyone agrees this should be an annual spree, alternating between Paris and New York. Albert Nahmias, once a successful restaurateur at the defunct Olympe, provocateur of this binge, is smiling. "All this was in my head," he says. "I adore New York. I wanted to share my enthusiasm."