

TABLE TALK

by Bob Lape



SET COURSES: Chef John Fraser and pastry chef Vera Tong, both formerly at Compass, are getting the attention of other high-end eateries in the neighborhood.

Dovetail offers a perfect fit

Upper West Side brownstone spot distinguishes itself with cuisine, service

SETTING HIS personal compass on ownership, ex-Compass chef John Fraser is giving the Upper West Side an infusion of excitement at his polished new restaurant, Dovetail. It's enough for Café des Artistes, Picholine, Telepan and Terrace in the Sky to take notice.

Dovetail's hard-to-find brownstone just west of Columbus Avenue has been redone, with elegance in the equation and style in the food. Architect Richard Bloch is author of the spot's clean lines, featuring recessed lighting, black walnut tables, brick columns and bird's-eye maple panels framing slivers of exposed brick.

The dining room seats 75 guests, and a downstairs sherry cellar accommodates 20 for overflow or private parties. Uncommon depth in sherry is just one of Dovetail's distinctions. It offers afternoon tea, weekend brunch and what it calls Sunday Suppa, comprising three top-notch courses for \$38.

An accomplished service team is led by General Manager John McKee and stars Beverage Director Jennifer Lordan, whose commodi-

ous wine glasses are a joy to behold and use.

Mr. Fraser's culinary style is contemporary American and uses local, seasonal ingredients and European technique. Portion size is modest, and prices are high for a neighborhood place. But its reception marks Dovetail as a destination where East Siders feel at home as well. Between word-of-mouth and blogger buzz, the restaurant was operating as full as it wished while settling in for the long run.

Appetizers (\$12 to \$18) are comfort food created with panache.

Take a simple idea like potato gnocchi. Up the flavor ante with foie gras, braised short ribs, prunes and pecorino, and it becomes a marvelous—luxurious nibbles of extreme intensity. Clam chowder climbs its own taste tree when enhanced with smoked potatoes, chorizo and toothsome Manila clams.

Beef tartare sparkles with such accompaniments as piquillo peppers on one visit, shrimp and American caviar on another. Risotto takes savory wing with duck confit and sweet potatoes, or parsley pesto and black truffles.

Salads are innovative but harmonious, as in brussels sprouts leaves tossed with cauliflower, Serrano ham and crisp sunflower seeds.

Mr. Fraser's entrées demonstrate his global grasp.

Cod poached in *bagna cauda* is

paired with saffron-accented chick peas, and roasted lamb with Indian spicing gets winter tabbouleh as a plate mate.

Monkfish "osso buco" is prepared with collar greens and spicy carrots, and pistachio-crust duck breast is served with risotto and a huckleberry condiment. Cold-weather braised offerings include a stout-and-beef duet, and tilefish accompanied by roasted-garlic polenta, salted peanuts and a lime salad.

Winter vegetables surround a blanquette of goat perfumed by dill. Lentil stew and applewood smoked bacon complement a delicate roasted skate. There's not a clinker in the lot.

A pre-appetizer of buttery, crispy-topped cornbread—arguably the best in town—is the work of pastry chef Vera Tong, who also spent time at Compass.

Ms. Tong's desserts (\$8 to \$11) are as good as they're billed to be. Notables are brioche-and-butter pudding playing off chestnut honey-braised apple and a vanilla ice cream; quince and pineapple crumble with buttermilk sherbet; and chocolate-caramel fondant topped with Earl Grey streusel and hazelnuts partnered with Ceylon cinnamon ice cream.

The restaurant's heating system

was all over the place on one visit, and the decibel level threatened but did not succeed in overwhelming conversation as evening deepened. Most of the talk is about the exceptional quality of the newcomer.

COMMENTS? cnyb@crain.com



DOVETAIL

103 W. 77th St. (between Columbus and Amsterdam)
(212) 362-3800
www.dovetailnyc.com



CUISINE Modern American

WINES 355 choices, 20 by the glass

DRESS No code, but elegant aura

NOISE LEVEL Substantial

PRICE RANGE \$26-\$36; six-course tasting, \$75

WINE MARKUP 120%-260%

CREDIT CARDS All major

RESERVATIONS Essential

HOURS Dinner, Mon.-Sat., 5:30-11 p.m., Sun., 5:30-10 p.m.; Brunch, Sat.-Sun., 11:30 a.m.-3 p.m.; Afternoon tea, Fri.-Sun., 11:30 a.m.-3 p.m.; Sunday Suppa all evening

★★★★ = Outstanding
★★★ = Excellent
★★ = Very good
★ = Good