

# Oddball Combos that Work

*Small portions, but plenty to satisfy with Fraser's global cuisine*

By Tom Steele

After cooking in a few of the most exalted kitchens in California—most notably French Laundry—and the legendary Taillevent in Paris, Chef John Fraser landed in New York where he and a friend opened the Greek trattoria Snack Taverna in the West Village. There, Fraser really learned the restaurateur ropes. After a few years, in 2005 he was tapped to become executive chef at Compass, which had had some difficulty finding its culinary direction. In no time, the young Fraser's sure handedness and capacious imagination put Compass on the short list of the Upper West Side's destination restaurants.

Most chefs long to own their own restaurant, and Fraser is no exception. Just last month, he opened Dovetail in an 11-year-old townhouse on a serene stretch of West 77th Street, a stone's throw from the American Museum of Natural History. Esteemed architect Richard Bloch created a space that honors the existing structural components, leaving lots of bricks and columns exposed, while infusing the areas with sweeping, industrial touches. Beige, brown and bricks are everywhere you look. There are discrete dining areas throughout the main dining room, which seats 75. Recessed track lighting is nice and even. Soft piano jazz floats through the dining room. The perpetually smiling staff never stops moving.

In addition to a large and distinguished wine list and an unusual 25-bottle sherry menu, lovely and highly talented Beverage Director Jennifer Lordan has devised some really nifty cocktails. She told us she especially favors the use of Aperol, a complex, burnished orange aperitif made by Campari that blends rhubarb, bitter orange and strawberry flavors, containing only 11 percent alcohol. When my companion asked for something with Curaçao in it, Lordan invented a drink on the spot for him, blending and chilling Hanger One Mandarin Blossom vodka, fresh lime, simple syrup, orange Curaçao and Aperol. The result was so refreshing we each had two and Lordan promised to try one herself after work.

From the moment chef Fraser sends



Dovetail inhabits a townhouse re-imagined by architect Richard Bloch.

## Dovetail

103 W. 77th St.

Between Amsterdam

and Columbus avenues

212-362-3800

Entrées: \$28 to \$36

out the first of several amuses-bouches, you know you're in for a highly unusual—and unusually delectable—meal. Certain chefs around town go too far in the name of inventiveness, lacing cod with licorice and such. Fraser's atypical and truly global combinations may seem risky, but they aren't whimsical. They're thought-through and, more importantly, they really work.

A tumble of miniature vodka gelée cubes are found under a dollop of sour cream and caviar. An octopus "lollipop" perfectly concentrates the smoky flavors and spongy texture of that creature's luscious flesh. Little low bricks of freshly baked white cheddar cornbread arrive.

Freshly shucked Blue Point oysters laze around in a creamy pond of pineapple vinaigrette with daubs of sea urchin, all under a scattering of fried sunchoke chips.

Impossibly soft potato gnocchi are laced with foie gras butter, plated in a tender veal short-rib gravy and graced with a sprig of chervil.

Two plump venison medallions, which are—and should be—crimson rare, are plated in a coffee-dark and mysterious gravy and a yam puree sided by a few tiny marshmallow cubes.

Fraser's monkfish preparation is par-

ticularly triumphant. Perfectly seasoned and sautéed plump tail meat is plated on a low pool of broccoli rabe puree, under a rich slab of seared foie gras. Hunks of lobster tail and claw meat are placed over all.

Luckily, Shafer brought his pastry chef at Compass, Vera Tong, along for the Dovetail ride. Seldom has a pastry chef been such a perfect match for the executive chef's cooking. Three one-inch balls of chilly cheesecake are rolled in granola. Warm and soft brioche bread pudding lies beneath a scoop of rummy vanilla ice cream and a sheath of bacon lattice brittle (reminding me that, at Compass, Tong devised white chocolate-covered pork rinds).

I must say that the portions are uniformly pretty small, but I must also say that, due to the ongoing arrivals of amuses-bouches and the richness of many of the dishes, neither I nor my ravenous young companion departed the restaurant even remotely hungry. Fraser and Tong want you to taste as much of their cooking as possible.

The many flavors, the relaxing if somewhat austere décor and, above all, the innovative brilliance of the chefs and beverage director all do indeed dovetail into an intriguing and utterly delightful dining experience.

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