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David Rosengarten's TASTINGS
Foods and Wines That Make Me Swoon

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The Restaurant of the Year

If you've been keeping up with your TASTINGS, and ROSENGARTEN REPORTS, you know that this has been, for me, one extraordinary year at table.

It started with a grand repast on New Year's day in Ventimiglia, Italy, replete with stellar cotechino and lentils. I snaked my way around the world after that, hitting a spectacular demonstration of real Sri Lankan cooking at a resort on that country's southwest coast; several extraordinary "English" meals in England, at new places called "Bumpklin," and "Roast;" some of the best Cantonese food ever in the US, south of San Francisco, near Daly City; a truly mind-blowing burst of creativity at a one-star restaurant in Riquewihr, Alsace; a hyper-display of talent at John Besh's August in New Orleans; a grilled octopus blow-out on the beach at Santorini; and multiple astonishing meals in Japan, from Buddhist temple food, to an insane yakitori place in Tokyo.

Any one of these places could be "the restaurant of the year" for me. However.....having never named a "restaurant of the year" before....I wanted to make sure this one really made sense. And I wanted my designation to indicate not only a great meal I had somewhere, but a great restaurant story, a *reason* why this must be restaurant *of the year*.

As I started to think it over, I said to myself: "Well, Dave, you may only come up with a list of great restaurants; you may not find a true *restaurant of the year*."

But I was wrong.

Last week I paid my third visit of the year to a restaurant in New York City, a restaurant that has been open for 14 years, during which time it has sometimes been my favorite restaurant in New York City. During some of that time, however, it has not been my favorite restaurant in New York City. The place eats up head chefs like me approaching a platter of oysters: 13 of them in 14 years.....so I never know how to give a current review of it. Mostly I've just been quiet. Mostly, I've stayed away.

Within the last year, all of the old trouble has vanished. Within the

last year, the restaurant has pulled itself up by its bootstraps, and turned itself into what I consider the premier dining destination in New York today. The restaurant, now, is greater than ever, greater than great, *the* place to go if you've got one night in New York City.....so foodies everywhere need to know about it immediately. Particularly because in its 14 years of existence....for some reason beyond the ken of mere mortal beings....the *New York Times* has never once reviewed this place. It's not in *Michelin New York*. The scores in *Zagat* are not very high. Go figure. This, my friends, is not only "the restaurant of the year".....for many, it will be "the discovery of the decade."

And the restaurant is.....**Il Buco**, on Bond St., in the East Village, just north of Soho. Its new chef is a young Uruguayan named **Ignacio Mattos**.....and it won't be long before you see his name and image everywhere.

Allow me to give you a little of the restaurant's history.

It began life, without any fanfare, in 1994, when **Donna Lennard**, an American who still owns the place, and **Alberto Avalle**, a passionate Umbrian, opened an antique shop on Bond St., near Lafayette. It had a transporting rustic feel from the beginning, as if you had chanced upon some barn in the European countryside selling beautiful things. Soon, Donna and Alberto--food fanatics both--were also offering *delicious things* to their antiques customers. Not pleased with the state of olive oil in the US, they started offering fresh-pressed Umbrian oil. They started offering home-made salumi, and began bringing in Italian wines that were not otherwise available.

Before long, the antique-shop-with-food.....became a restaurant where you could buy your chair. The adventure began, with a menu dedicated to authentically regional Italian specialties, as well as a range of tapas-bar-like Spanish specialties.....just because Donna and Alberto had a love for Spain, as well.

It is difficult to characterize the food over the last 13 years, because of all the different chefs. Each one tried to stay within the Lennard/Avalle mold.....but each one, of course, lent individuality to the place. In the late 1990s, while I was restaurant critic for *GOURMET*, I went out on a limb and subtly hinted that this was my favorite restaurant in New York.....only to discover that the chef (the wonderful Jodi Williams) was gone the week that that *GOURMET* magazine hit the stands and mail boxes.

I felt burned.....and told myself to be careful with Il Buco: you can't assume that what you ate there last week will be what people are eating next week. I stopped going, actually, finding it just too hard to keep up with.

This fall I received an invitation to a pig roast, mid-day, taking place on the street in front of Il Buco. It was too good an invitation to resist. I showed up, renewed my old friendship with Donna, discovered that Alberto had moved on (though he will continue to source products for Il

Buco), tasted some incredible roast pig.....and met 28-year-old Ignacio Mattos, a young chef with star quality, who seems ready for any prime-time reality cooking show that the little box can generate.

Yeah....but....the food. Oh, man. I hadn't had pig this good, this real, in ages. And the vegetable side dishes, and the salads, all selected from top-quality farmers and growers, all thrown together beautifully, perfectly, just in key.....the whole thing made me say....."maybe I should get back on the Il Buco track."

"Donna," I asked, "how long has Ignacio been here?" "About 14 months," she said. Hmmmm. That's a long time for Il Buco. Perhaps this one's a keeper. "And how, Donna, would you rate Ignacio in the continuum of 13 Il Buco chefs?" She looked at me as if I were way behind the curve, seemed disappointed that a few bites of porker hadn't revealed it all to me. "Ignacio," she said, "without any doubt whatsoever, is #1 of all time."

And I could see in her eyes that she was telling the truth.

So....what to do but return for dinner? Which I did....twice.....and had two glorious dinners, probably the most vivid and satisfying meals that I've had anywhere in the world this year.

When you enter Il Buco, things are the same as always: you sense, immediately, that you've left New York, that you're in a countryside albergo, that the hearth is burning somewhere to heat a rural barn. Except that there are beautiful antiques on the walls. Except that crazed New Yorkers are making a bar scene, waiting for tables, generally displaying joy that they're inside the door. For....without any press at all to speak of.....Il Buco has become the ultimate cult restaurant in NY today.....a place you'd better start reserving for a good month before you want to dine there.

Then....when you get your table.....the food starts working its incredible magic. Now, I've been looking carefully lately at the cooking of a lot of young chefs, trying to determine who's being effectively creative, who's being creative just for creativity's sake. Many of the "creators" out there, to me, are jokers, stuck in their heads, capable of bringing exciting "concepts" to the menu, but not great "dishes" to the table.

Not Ignacio. I wish all 28-year-old chefs could take lessons from him.

"Well," he told me....and he really didn't want to talk about it, because this stuff comes directly from his heart and stomach, completely circumnavigating the brain....."I like to re-create the flavors I had....at home." Home, in Uruguay, featured a fantastic blend of Italian ideas and Spanish ideas filtered through a South American sensibility. "It was simple food, home food," he said. Ignacio is not after re-inventing a Sunday supper as a foie-gras-and-truffle extravangza; he's not interested in de-constructing a South American casserole and turning it into dribbles and bits; he's not interested in finding a trendy dish that he can

South-Americanize, like "wow! yuca carpaccio!"

"I just start with things I always have in the fridge. Eggs. I love eggs. Anchovies. Parmigiano-Reggiano. Things that create the salads I grew up with: onions and parsley. And lots of potatoes everywhere."

"Also," he said--distinguishing himself from about four million contemporary chefs--"when I use something in a dish, I want you to see it. If I use kale.....you must see the leaves of kale. If I use eggs.....the dish is about eggs.....with eggs at the center of the plate. I hate hiding ingredients."

Of course, what you get at Il Buco is not strictly Italian food. It does have the mark of a great individual chef on it. Where does he take it? "Well," he reluctantly began, "the Italians are a little pure. Italian taste can be a little limited. True Italian dishes may fall short on acidity, or on chili heat. If I think more lemon, or chili, will improve the dish.....I push it to a new limit."

A guy basically being himself in the kitchen. What a revolutionary concept! When I taste Ignacio's food, I begin to see the three-step shape of the making of a great contemporary chef:

- 1) You must have a strong sense-memory of wonderful food at some point in the past. That memory must live in your mouth. Many chefs don't cook with a living memory raging inside them.
- 2) You must dedicate yourself to reproducing that taste memory, in whatever form. Many chefs go wrong by bringing superfluous tastes, foods, dishes, styles to their core cooking.
- 3) You must learn the technique that will enable you to be yourself in the kitchen. Just because you remember great tastes....doesn't mean you can reproduce them today.

To me, there are fantastic parallels in American movie acting. To become a star, you need an outsized charisma to begin with.....Jack Nicholson, Johnny Depp, Julia Roberts, etc. That's like the taste you formed in your childhood.

Then.....you need to resist the temptation to be anyone but yourself on screen. Jack Nicholson, at some point, decided to be Jack Nicholson for the camera. This is the equivalent of rejecting extraneous style.

Lastly....just because you have committed to being you doesn't mean you can. An actor learning how to be himself for the camera, finding the simplicity.....well, this is one of the most difficult tasks in acting. And in cooking.

I guarantee that if you visit Il Buco, you will find all of these things--in everything from the amazing salads, to the ultra-Italian but ultra-Ignacio pasta dishes, to the best empanadas I've ever tasted, to the roasted meats (including a heritage porker called Ossabaw pig that must be tasted to be believed.) And you know how I feel about balsamic

vinegar? I don't like. But Ignacio grew up with it. And it now crowns his *panna cotta with twelve-year-old balsamico*--simply one of the greatest desserts I've ever tasted.

Please heed me on this one. Go see Ignacio. I'm shouting as loudly as I can: this is the year of Il Buco.

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