

**INSATIABLE
CRITIC**

Gael Greene

New Season at Jean Georges

City, Central Park
West restaurant come
alive in September

IN PARIS, they call September the *retour*, when *toutes* breeze home from August out of town and the city comes alive again. I'm feeling that New York *retour* right now. It's that precious moment when a tomato can still astonish, corn remains sweet in its short Byronic life, and fruit begs to be eaten quickly.

I'm at Jean Georges, lunching with a longtime associate with whom my ties have always been proper. But in the shared rapturous discovery of firm, perfectly cooked shrimp with flutters of celery leaves and the alchemy created by a voluptuous dose of peach paired with horseradish, I am already feeling a new intimacy.

Jean Georges at lunch is like that. The room, filling up at 12:30, has a buzz of contentment, tables turning, business plotters, Asian tourists, ladies who lunch. It's not just the *retour*. It was like this in July, too. It's been this way since I wrote—and certain affluent influentials agreed—that lunch at Jean Georges is the best deal in town, even at \$29.50 for two courses (up from \$28), with each additional dish at \$14.50 (up from \$12) and with just two macaroons per person (down from six).

BUCK ENNIS



EGGED ON: Caviar over molten egg yolk

JEAN GEORGES

1 Central Park West
(212) 299-3900
www.jean-georges.com



CUISINE American

PRICE Two-course lunch \$29.50

SERVING Lunch, noon to 2:30 p.m.

RESERVATIONS Yes

NOISE LEVEL Restrained

I take my hat off.

I can't wait to return.

I will definitely go back.

I'll let them simmer awhile.

NO HATS Never again.

Often when I eat here, the kitchen sends an inhibition-melting hill of caviar atop a thin leaf of buttered toast enfolding molten egg yolk, a \$30 giveaway. I go mad. Now I'm flying over the edge after tasting the sea trout sashimi. Draped in trout eggs beside a swath of dill, it's arranged as if alive on the side of the bowl trying to escape a roiling sea, a foaming whirlpool thick as mayonnaise, fiercely lemony with an undertone of horseradish. The first taste is so smart-ass tangy, I almost cry out. The next bite has a crunch, from crispy curls of skin, cut thin as can be, and fried in hot oil until it puffs up. It's one of those oh-my-god moments I've come to expect here. It's not easy to distract my companion from the heirloom tomatoes to negotiate an exchange.

Chef Jean-Georges Vongerichten has substituted wild black bass for the snapper on my next dish. "He liked it better," the server explains. It is "rarish," as I prefer, just barely opaque, paved with a thin crust of pounded nuts and seeds, its sweetness set off by a tangy broth where cherry tomatoes float alongside soft pearl onions. A brilliant show, especially alongside an overdressed grilled halibut with corn and chanterelles in a too-distracting carrot slick.

You might dismiss the room in its latest makeover as unremarkable, rather gray, with a ridiculous octopus of a chandelier above. But it's comfortable, and the light—today in clarion sunshine, but also on overcast days—is cosmetic. And with leaves blowing on the trees outside, you are sheltered. You could be anywhere, in the Bois de Boulogne or Central Park.

Before he rushes off, my friend orders dessert. The house's pastry Adonis, Johnny Iuzzini, sends out two. "Garden"—with chocolate creux, mochi, blackberries and sweet pea ice cream—is much too creative, too discordant for me. I'm happier with "Market"—grilled poached peach, apricot panna cotta and brown sugar ice cream, especially the quite weird sugar plum and tomato gazpacho in a cone alongside. I don't expect it to be so delicious.

My friend runs off to an appointment, and I should, too, but I stay for chocolates because Iuzzini's are the best I've tasted in any restaurant. I think I'll just have two. But then I have three, remembering that I'm due tonight at ABC Kitchen to show off what Jean-Georges and chef de cuisine Dan Kluger can do with vegetables to food friends from Florence. I have six hours to clear my brain.

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