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RESTAURANTS

Sam Sifton

Down and Up for a Taste of the Sea



PHOTOGRAPHS BY EVAN SUNG FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

BRACING Millesime, in the Carlton Hotel, is all about the treasures of the sea, like platters of oysters and clams and mussels.

ANOTHER year, another restaurant keeping up its end of the bargain in an awkward hotel lobby space.

Millesime is a smart young French establishment from the talented chef Laurent Manrique. It is spread out over the back of the second floor of the Carlton Hotel on Madison Avenue and 29th Street, where Country was once strong. The entrance sits at the intersection of two lounges that lie off the hotel's sunken lobby: Salon Millesime, where you may run into a woman playing a lighted accordion, or see a Michael Jackson impersonator perform (really!); and the dark and comfortable Bar Millesime, which could easily appear in divorce papers as the location where plaintiff's husband initiated the commission of an act of adultery.

Visitors to Millesime the restaurant must first walk down a staircase, then through one or both of these spaces, to find themselves, perhaps confused and hesitant by this point, at the start of another staircase that leads up. The dining room lies at its end: Millesime, at last.

It is not particularly promising, all this walking and climbing through other businesses to get to the one where you have reserved a table. (And what's with the name? Millesime is French for "vintage," as in wine, though the restaurant does not use the accent that, in France, would appear over the first "e," nor the one that in some uses appears over the second. The resulting pronunciation — "Mill-ah-seem," "Mill-EY-zeem" — is up to you.) Crowds have as yet been sparse.

But, holy cats, is there a beautiful, even exciting brasserie up there at the end of the journey, a restaurant devoted to the pleasures of the sea that manages to be luxurious and humble, ambitious and rustic, all at once.

The room has red banquettes and tile floors and soaring walls that lead toward a Tiffany-style dome ceiling. There is white paper on the tables, and glinting little Eiffel Towers of salt and pepper, small galvanized buckets holding napkin-wrapped heavy silverware, all in beautiful light. The atmosphere is festive and urban, pleasant in the extreme. Waiters bustle this way and that in long aprons and black vests as Samy Kebbab, the restaurant's effusive and seemingly omnipresent maître d'hôtel, rushes that way and this, managing the room as if it were a party — a master of the hotel, in the truest sense of the term.



EVOCATIVE The tuna tartare with dates and mint at Millesime.

MILLESIME

★★

Carlton Hotel, 92 Madison Avenue (29th Street), Flatiron district; (212) 889-7100; millesimerestaurant.com.

ATMOSPHERE An airy and bustling brasserie.

SOUND LEVEL There is some musical leakage from the lounge downstairs, but otherwise moderate.

RECOMMENDED DISHES Raw bar; tartares; smoked herring; grilled Caesar; quenelles; mussels; cod; lobster pot au feu; roast chicken.

WINE LIST Not as French as you'd think, and interesting for that. Perhaps a little expensive for the menu, but there are a few values in the \$50 range.

PRICE RANGE Dinner appetizers, \$12 to \$24; main courses, \$17 to \$44.

HOURS Monday to Friday, 11:30 a.m. to 2 p.m.; Saturday and Sunday, noon to 2

p.m.; Tuesday to Saturday, 5:30 to 11 p.m.; Sunday and Monday, 5:30 to 10 p.m.

RESERVATIONS Recommended at least a few days ahead.

CREDIT CARDS All major cards accepted.

WHEELCHAIR ACCESS The restaurant is on the hotel's second floor, but there is an elevator. Restrooms are not in the restaurant, but are easily accessible down a hotel hallway.

WHAT THE STARS MEAN Ratings range from zero to four stars and reflect the reviewer's reaction to food, ambiance and service, with price taken into consideration. Menu listings and prices are subject to change.

PAST REVIEWS from The Times with additional capsule reviews:

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Eat, eat! There is marvelous bread with a butter cut with red wine and shallots. Mr. Manrique serves an outstanding appetizer of smoked herring placed on warm, glistening fingerling potatoes. He offers a silken grilled Caesar salad, with melting hearts of romaine wrapped with soft, smoky black cod, with a dusting of Parmesan and a squeeze of lime. There are bracing platters of oysters and clams, and of remarkable tartares that manage to evoke classical traditions in some preparations (a sweetly briny mixture of salmon and mustard, dill and fennel) and new ones in others (tuna cut with dates and mint, against a fiery Berber spice mixture).

Steamed mussels achieve much the same trick. Mr. Manrique offers a standard bistro

concoction of white wine, parsley and shallots, and another that ramps south to Marseilles with a Pernod broth flavored with saffron and fennel. A third option involves curry powder, apples, lime and coconut bouillon. It would be a treasure of the American South if there were mussels in Charleston Harbor; it is country captain, essentially, and exciting for that.

Mr. Manrique was for a number of years the chef at the renowned Aqua, in San Francisco (those who've been following the food game in New York long enough may remember him from Peacock Alley in the Waldorf-Astoria, back in the early 1990s). His menus have been slick and inventive. But he was taught in a very old school.

So, distinguished pike quenelles appear, as well, served in a

lobster sauce of great depth. These are far larger than the ones you'll find at those few elegant French restaurants that still serve them (La Grenouille comes to mind), but very much of a piece with their work: what Julia Child called "this delicate triumph of French cooking." Mr. Manrique credits them to the style of the New York chef Jean-Louis Dumonet. And there is an outstanding dish of poached eggs, briny clams and salty French ham, a liquid breakfast sandwich, and as satisfying.

Entrees bring a moment of pause: five species of fish, only vaguely identified (salmon, cod, black sea bass, snapper, tuna), that may be grilled or cooked on the hot griddle known as a plancha. To go with them, sauce: five choices again, ranging from a simple and technically perfect meunière to a gingery beurre blanc made with Jurançon wine. These are all expertly prepared, if a little boring after the first-course fireworks. (Save for a marvelous toasted brioche with Armagnac ice cream, the desserts follow suit: profiteroles, etc. Sigh.)

A steak for two is neither good enough nor frankly large enough to justify its \$86 price tag, even with an extra dollop of shallots plopped down around the meat. And duck confit cut into a macaroni gratin is simple fatty ridiculousness, a cheap nod at the city's fashion for excessive cuisine.

But Mr. Manrique — or his executive chef, Alan Ashkinaze — can cook a roast chicken to beautiful, burnished perfection, and serve it with a gravy rich with garlic, with a fragrant mist of thyme. And there surely cannot be a better deal or package of lobster flavor than the restaurant's \$48 pot au feu, which brings two people a fat lobster to share, with plump little lobster sausages and a heady, cream-heavy broth.

Millesime has opened in a city where restaurant tastes have lately been running Italian, and hard. But its earnest young servers toil under Mr. Kebbab to emulate a version of the scene you used to be able to find at brasseries all over Manhattan. (Ah, Jean-Jacques Rachou, we miss you so.) There is some of that energy, and verve.

The restaurant serves as a swell reminder of why this city fell in love with brasseries in the first place, and as a hopeful sign that there could be a resurgence in that affair. See if you can find your way there.