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Sea change on Madison

San Fran star chef brightens hotel spot



Steve Cuozzo
Free Range

PILLOW-soft pike quenelles. Tuna tartare redolent of a North African wharf. "Calamari carbonara" born of chef/partner Laurent Manrique's San Francisco-nurtured imagination. How did these disparate, "casual seafood brasserie" items end up on the same table in the Tiffany-skylit confines of what was once gloomy Country?

Millesime delights palate, eye and even the din-weary ear. How rare to see a chef unknown to New Yorkers, brandishing Michelin stars earned elsewhere, take on a Manhattan space several generations out of fashion and make it work!

The Carlton Hotel's second-floor dining room previously swallowed up and spat out Country, a pricey place with terrific food but zero vibe. A sly redesign banished the snores with Parisian-brasserie *joie de vivre*, some of it lilting on music and laughter rising, but not roaring, from lower-priced, Salon Millesime lounge below. Our loyalties were with the lady who sometimes sings on stairs between floors; we'd



Diners' eyes, ears and, of course, palates are all given attention at the new Millesime restaurant in the Carlton Hotel.

RESTAURANT REVIEW

MILLESIME

★★ 1/2

88 Madison Ave. (Carlton Hotel); 212-869-7100.

do without waiters who burst into "O Sole Mio."

The baronial, square columns are still there. But new, red-leather banquettes make all corners of the mosaic-tiled floor seem intimate, down to nooks overlooking lobby and lounge. Eiffel Tower salt and pepper shakers cue you that it's all a bit *langue-in-cheek*.

None of it would matter if the dishes didn't work. Star-flaunting chefs from afar typically fizzle instantly in New York.

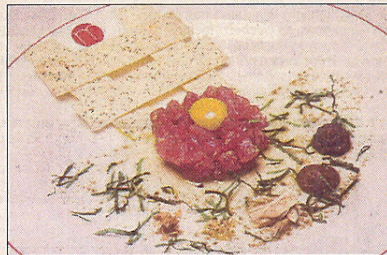
But Manrique cooked here before he found glory at San Francisco's Aqua, known for rarefied, minimalist seafood. His Mille-

sime menu — most dishes moderately priced in the low \$20s and under — is an odd, winning amalgam of traditional French favorites, lightened a smidgen if at all, and modern ones that would flatter a hip American bistro.

I don't know how big the audience is for creamy lobster and Choron sauces, but I hope those who fall for Vongerichten-worthy seafood tartares will also investigate the menu's more quaint precincts.

The lineup's unity lies in consistently strong execution. Manrique and executive chef Alan Ashkinaze run a disciplined team in the open kitchen at the rear. It turns out five *a la plancha* fish choices, underpriced at \$17 to \$21. Three I tried — cod, black sea bass and tuna steak — were so fresh and moist, they hardly needed sauces on the side. Juicy, roasted chicken lavished in garlic and thyme was worth the 45-minute wait.

Pike quenelles are hard



Tuna tartare is a star at Laurent Manrique's seafood brasserie.

to get right, but Millesime's are the real deal, deftly bound with egg whites and gossamer on the tongue, their lightness in bold relief against lasciviously rich, chives-garnished lobster bisque.

The kitchen's equally sure-handed with a dish old France never dreamed of: calamari shredded into spaghetti-thin curls, sautéed in carbonara sauce merged with a quail egg.

the side; tomato-Choron sauce left a timid, monochromatic impression.

"Everybody still working?" Our server clearly overlooked that we'd cleaned our plates down to the last sea bean. First to be finished every time was crystalline tuna tartare, topped by a quail egg and ringed by tiny mounds of harissa paste, dates, mint, cumin and almonds.

The waiter mashed them together. The result, mediated by light-handed olive oil, was a sensory starburst crackling and soft, piquant and soothing, spicy and sweet. A similar herbal constellation charmed mussels Berbere, one of five *moules* choices in vivid broths God could not make better for dipping crunchy, garlic-thyme baguettes.

With time and tweaking, Millesime can be even better. While some waiters are poised and savvy, others are of the "You guys OK?" school.

Raw bars usually bore me and Millesime's was no exception, while certain dishes are ordinary (chicken paillard) and others monotonous (duck confit/macaroni gratin).

But desserts end things on a forgiving high note — especially brioche et glace French toast soaked in *creme anglaise* with Grand Marnier and cinnamon.

Millesime is already making first-time visitors into repeat customers: My friend returned just a few nights after pronouncing her first meal among "the greatest" she'd ever had.

That night it was one of mine, too. When every one is that good — and several others came close — Millesime will be a three-star place. Until then, it's a grand addition to what was once the Creepy Hotel District. I'll be checking in again soon.

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