

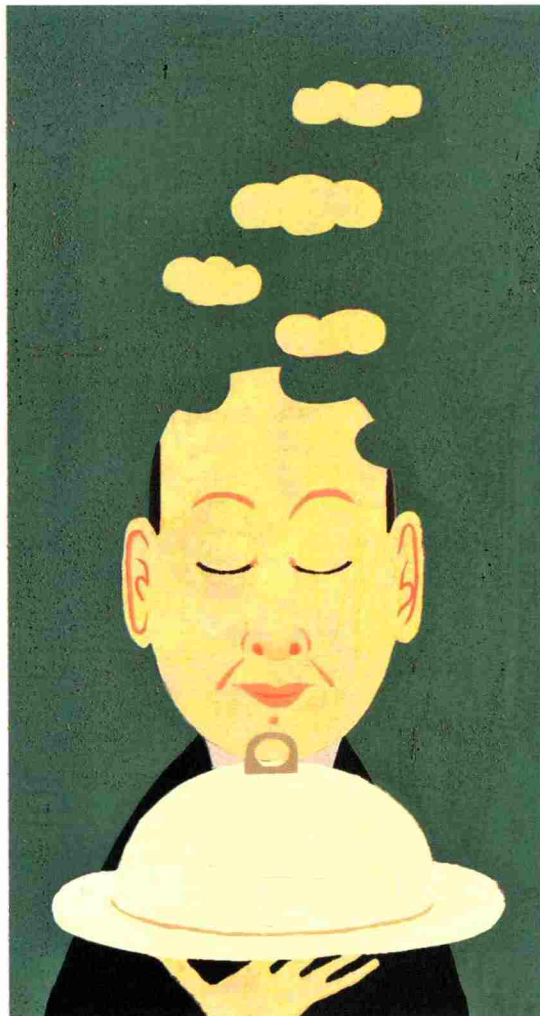
Should Fine Dining Die?

Now that chefs are busy opening burger joints and dumpling houses, the days seem numbered for fancy dining rooms. Writer *Anya von Bremzen* makes a case for why we need haute places more than ever.

illustration by beppe giacobbe

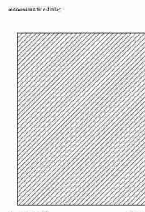
WHILE SCANNING the Russian press a while back, I came across an interview with Anatoly Komm, the country's top chef. Komm is famous for the dazzling avant-garde riffs on black bread and borscht at his Moscow restaurant Varvary. Asked why people need haute cuisine these days, Komm had this to say: "Why go to the opera when you can buy a CD? If I don't wow and regale diners with totally new sensations, I have wasted their money and failed as a chef!"

Of course, as a former Muscovite, I chuckled at Komm's bluster. But then I couldn't get his words out of my mind. As customers around the world abandon white-tablecloth restaurants, haute dining rooms have begun to feel like an endangered species. America's most elite chefs, like Daniel Boulud, are opening beer halls, and Thomas Keller dreams of launching a burger place. Their disciples, meanwhile, have swapped foie gras for chicken livers at the neighborhood bistros where they cook now. Fed up with elaborate four-hour, three-figure meals, diners aren't opting for the new sensations that Komm reveres; they would rather go to their local gastropub and order heritage pork belly.



After eating countless multi-starred meals around the world, I share—in spades—this aversion to the contrived *amuse-gueules-to-petits-fours* rigmarole known as fine dining. Yet there I was recently, nearly weeping into my lobster bisque at the unabashedly haute L₂O restaurant in Chicago. Why? Well, for starters, the bisque was extraordinary. A pool of decadent chestnut puree surrounding sweet, succulent nuggets of lobster meat (vacuum-cooked in a fancy gadget called a Gastrovac), it had an opulence you just can't find in a dish that's ever been described as "yummy." And in a clever conceptual gambit, chef Laurent Gras served the bisque as a nod to his classic French training—a stark contrast to the rest of his ultramodern tasting menu featuring sometimes-esoteric fish, much of it flown in from Japan. But there was more to my revelatory experience at L₂O than simply the food.

Opened last year by the burningly talented Gras (an F&W Best New Chef 2002), L₂O is a seriously luxe seafood restaurant, with the grand gestures of French haute cuisine carefully refined for 21st-century Chicago. "In France, three-star dining can feel like going to church," declared Gras, who himself



Anya von Bremzen is a New York City-based food and travel writer. Her latest cookbook is The New Spanish Table.

trained with Michelin-starred chefs like Alain Ducasse before making a name for himself at San Francisco's Fifth Floor. "For American diners, you need a much more relaxing environment." For L₂O's serene open space, which references Chicago's glorious midcentury modernism, Gras opted for bare tables of expensive but understated ebony wood, exquisite pure-white German china and service with genuine warmth. In a great restaurant, details are crucial: They add up to what my boyfriend, wryly invoking composer Richard Wagner, calls a *gesamtkunstwerk*—a complete artwork on all fronts. And, from the first bite of Japanese snapper smoked over cherrywood to the ethereal salt-cod parfait, everything about the dinner reminded me of what a first-class meal can achieve. The refinement, the rigor, the setting—they deliver a fully articulated aesthetic vision that elevates the restaurant experience to something transcendent.

We left L₂O with a kind of post-opera glow, back into the real world of stress and uncertainty. I flashed back to Komm and then thought, Do I really want to see such restaurants disappear?

WHenever I talk to critics and chefs, they mostly blame France for our current fine-dining phobia. The Gauls did invent haute cuisine—and the restaurant proper—but these days, their Gilded Age model is seen as an elitist, over-codified relic that doesn't reflect what we now appreciate most in a restaurant: hospitality and human connection. If you pay an arm and a leg for a meal, shouldn't it have an emotional resonance and a value that represents something more than the sum of the food and the plush upholstered chairs and the designer-clad waitstaff? No wonder French chefs are sending back their Michelin stars, while the world has firmly embraced Spain's alternative paradigm. Even at the fanciest Spanish places, the experience never feels redundant or fusty, thanks to the immediacy and excitement that Spain's avant-garde chefs have brought to their food. Dissatisfied with the label "molecular gastronomy," the country's most famous cook, Ferran Adrià, prefers to call Spain's futuristic cuisine "techno-emotional," emphasizing the sense of connection, of diners' engagement. At its very best, an avant-garde Spanish meal is a piece of whimsical, interactive performance art.

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And yet. Why sink fortunes into a degustation menu from a multi-starred chef, whether he's from Spain or not? Why not enjoy downsized versions of those same dishes cooked by the chef's disciple at a convivial tapas bar? Recently I suggested to Adrià that the future of Spanish cuisine might not lie with his restaurant El Bulli, located outside Barcelona, but rather with Barcelona's new wave of casual gastro-bistros—pared-down storefront restaurants where young chefs are channeling cutting-edge inspirations into earthy, affordable food.

“Oh yeah?” Adrià replied, cocking an eyebrow. “And who supplies them with their ideas?”

That was Gras's line, too. Top-end restaurants, he insisted, are like creative laboratories; from them, experimental ideas trickle down to more casual places. Case in point: my lunch in Chicago the day after my L₂O meal. The place was Urban Belly, a hipster noodle joint opened recently on a very small budget by Korean-American chef Bill Kim. After working with some of the country's fanciest chefs, like Charlie Trotter and David Bouley, Kim decided, like most of us, that four-star dining wasn't his thing. His amazing, labor-intensive seven-buck dumplings, however, tell a different story—delicate squash pouches, for instance, with intricate background accents of kaffir lime and passion fruit. Would this sophisticated layering of flavors be possible without Kim's training? No more than a \$60 Zara knockoff of Prada could exist without Prada. Thanks to such trickle-down effects, the salmon on the crostini at **Spur gastropub in Seattle is cooked sous vide for ultimate silkiness, while the fried chicken at Washington, DC's Art and Soul undergoes two complex stages of brining—that “simple” bird takes two days to prepare.**

Intellectually, then, I conceded the need for serious restaurants. But I still wasn't sure (L₂O notwithstanding) that a dazzling dish really requires a setting to match. To expand my research, I went to Corton in New York City, which ace restaurateur Drew Nieporent recently opened to rave reviews. The minimalist, stunningly comfortable all-white room won me over the minute I walked in. Twenty-four years ago, Nieporent took the pretension out of linen-tablecloth dining with his groundbreaking Montrachet. Having recently revived the space as Corton, he has reenergized the allure of fine dining. No fan of what he calls “carpetbagger” Continental-style imports,

Nieporent, like Gras, stresses the need to redefine haute cuisine for specific times and places. "I wanted my restaurant to feel right for downtown New York today," he insists. As I scanned the room, I could see what he meant about the "subliminal luxury" he was after. The banquettes' perfect curves, the flattering lighting—you can't get that carefully streamlined vision of downtown chic at a Michelin-all-star-Euro-chef franchise. And I'll certainly miss it the next time I fight for an uncomfortable stool in the sonic blast of a gastropub.

The food at Corton does its part, too, of course. Nieporent has smartly installed British-born wunderkind chef Paul Liebrandt at the stoves. Liebrandt is the kind of chef who will accent the saline twang of an oyster with the earthy crunch of toasted buckwheat and a hint of nutmeg oil—a dish with mysterious layers of flavor that unfold, evoking a dozen different taste memories. He brilliantly smokes—smokes!—the flour for pasta, which he then accentuates with dusky slices of black truffle and the barest suggestion of Gouda cheese. And he gives a classic foie gras torchon a haute-couture twist with a gorgeous pink gelée of hibiscus and beet. Personally, I don't need those totemic luxury foodstuffs—

truffles, foie gras—but indisputably, Liebrandt's playful, sometimes challenging riffs lend a sexy frisson to the stylish room. (Imagine a killingly glamorous supper club where Miles Davis might play.) Is fine dining dead? Not at Corton. The place does almost a hundred covers a night with a \$79 three-course prix fixe.

I BEGAN TO WONDER IF HAUTE CUISINE *DONE* right was the answer. I became convinced of it the following week, when I dined at Coi in San Francisco. This subtly experimental 29-seat restaurant is powered by the passion, intelligence and disarming humility of chef-owner Daniel Patterson (an F&W Best New Chef 1997). If for Liebrandt, beet is an accessory to foie gras, Northern California chef Patterson brilliantly spotlights the actual vegetable. The beets were presented on a plate like three small M&M's. My first reaction—ingredient worship—gave way to the childish pleasure of popping the delicious, vibrantly colored root-vegetable "candies" into my mouth. Later I learned that the beets, topped with shiny jellies made from a blend of their roasted juices and citrus oil, took Patterson hours of intense work to prepare. "It's an idealization of a beet,"

he explained, then added, "And who's to say that beets can't be as valuable and exciting as caviar?" Not I.

Similar thought and exquisite craftsmanship went into the rest of my meal at Coi. A dish called Abstraction of a Garden in Winter combined local, seasonal root vegetables, aromatic herbs, cocoa nibs and smoked oil in a dark still life that evoked a barren cold-weather landscape. There was supernally buttery beef from a boutique ranch that supplies loins almost exclusively to Patterson, paired with a classic wild mushroom duxelle and gently transmogrified roasted bone marrow. Liquefied and re-formed into its natural shape with gellan (a gelatin that can withstand heat), the marrow tasted like a delicate yet luscious distillation of offal, jolting my complacent taste buds, which had been numbed by a gastropub-pork-belly overdose.

The entire meal at Coi bridged nature and culture, past and future, while the intimate service, the idiosyncratic wine list and the tactile,

slightly irregular handmade ceramics on the table all brought home the idea—again—that a great restaurant is a total environment. Best of all, like Corton and L₂O, Coi spoke to its time and location, delivering that crucial sense of emotional authenticity. If this is the haute cuisine of the future, we'd be mad to abandon it.

After I finished my meal I needed no reassurances, but I asked Patterson anyway why he thought fine dining mattered. "Because a great restaurant," he replied, "cre-

ates an illusion of a life where everyone is happy to see us, every need is met and everything tastes better. And we need this now more than ever." Knock off the very top level, he went on, and the next level down becomes the top. Keep "democratizing" like that, and eventually, a five-buck burrito will be the new standard.

So what would be lost then? I asked Patterson before I left.

"Risk-taking, inspiration, the sense of discovery." In short: the transformative power of cooking. ●

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