

# NEW YORK STATE OF MIND



**W**hy not take a holiday from the neighborhood and hop the Amtrak to Manhattan? The reasons to make NYC your destination this Valentine's Day weekend are plentiful:

**Fashion:** The Jacqueline de Ribes exhibit at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Little time remains to see the over sixty ensembles from the fashion icon's closets that comprise this enchanting display entitled "The Art of Style". (The exhibition ends February 21st.)

**Music:** Broadway musicals from *Kinky Boots* (this one could also be under "fashion") to *Fiddler on the Roof*.

**Food:** Restaurants, restaurants, and more restaurants!

The City's main attraction for me is the food (big surprise there). Vincent and I spent some time in The Big Apple early in the new year, and I brought back several dining recommendations for a Valentine's or other weekend getaway.

## Lunch on Saturday Casa Mono

The jewel box that is Casa Mono is located at 17th and Irving Place just steps

from Union Square. Chef Anthony Sasso and his staff were awarded a Michelin star for the 7th consecutive year for his tapas inspired by the cuisine on Spain's Costa Brava. On our recent visit, we sat at the chef's counter. I preferred this position to the table seating for two reasons: 1) we could witness the choreography of the open kitchen and 2) the counter offered more room than the open-front tables in which diners store their water glasses. (These tables remind me of the open front school desks in which I used to store my snacks in elementary school.) The sommelier recommended a juicy Montsant (the region adjacent to the famed Priorat) from the extensive wine list based on my affinity for Grenache and Syrah.

Some tapas I recommend:

- Sardinas Fritas – light, crispy sardines accompanied by a citrusy endive salad
- Cod Cheeks Pil Pil – the tenderest of fish cheeks in a spicy sambal sauce garnished with bright nasturtium
- Bone Marrow with Hot Chili Pesto – shanks split longways to reveal the earthy marrow intended for spreading upon arugula toasts
- Razor Clams a la Plancha – sweet, meaty razor clams topped with plenty of garlic

## Dinner on Saturday

### Option 1 Vaucluse

Located at 63rd between Park & Lexington, Vaucluse is the newest addition to the Altamarea Group. Vaucluse is classic French with a twist – a handmade pasta course, the hallmark of Altamarea restaurants. The brasserie-style menu showcases raw bar items, traditional French dishes from boudin noir to canard à l'orange for two, and daily specials such as cassoulet. The attentive service and comprehensive wine list – including my favorite "cult" wine Domaine de Trévalon – are certain to help Vaucluse become the Mont Ventoux dominating the landscape of the Upper East Side. Unlike Peter Wells in his December 2015 *New York Times* review, I was very pleased with our experience.

My recommendations are:

- Pâté en Croûte – duck and pork terrine with pistachios and cherries served with small crocks of whole grain mustard and cornichons
- Épaulettes – rabbit and reblochon cheese ravioli with black truffle (each filling has its own compartment within each ravioli – a true labor of love)
- Sole Meunière – wild Dover sole with lemon and parsley (a real treat)
- Selle de Chevreuil Grillée – grilled loin of venison with prunes and chanterelles
- Tarte au Citron – Meyer lemon crème, brown sugar breton and citron glace

## Dinner on Saturday

### Option 2 Aquavit

A highlight of our weekend was our New Year's greeting from Chef Emma Bengtsson of Aquavit. We had not been to this Scandinavian restaurant at 65 E. 55th Street in several years, but decided to visit in light of its two star recognition in the Michelin Guide. Aquavit has been serving diners in its sleek and serene space since the late 1980s, but did not win its first Michelin star until 2013 when Chef Bengtsson, who has been cooking and baking since a child in Sweden, was pastry chef. Two years later, Chef Bengtsson earned the distinction of becoming the second female chef in the country to manage a two star kitchen.

Aquavit offers a chef's tasting and a seasonal tasting, both with wine pair-

ing options, or a three-course prix fixe. These are ideal ways to sample the sometimes esoteric ingredients not even available at markets like Whole Foods. When we celebrated on New Year's Eve, we enjoyed the special seven course menu featuring memorable tastes, such as löjrom – a bleakfish roe from the Baltic Sea (much less salty than salmon or whitefish roe). We also savored a course of lamb tartare served with sweetbreads, black trumpet mushrooms and lingonberries. This dish was a careful balance of earthy, sweet and tart. I am confident that the tastings you will encounter will be as enchanting as ours.

## Brunch or Lunch on Sunday

### Marta

My top new dining destination is Marta in the Martha Washington Hotel. Danny Meyer (Union Square Café and Gramercy Tavern) created a warm and welcoming haven in the NoMad neighborhood. The open kitchen's two wood burning ovens create crispy thin crust pizzas. The wine list boasts over 45 champagnes in addition to other sparkling wines as (spoiler alert if you have not finished watching the Esquire Network's "Uncorked" On Demand) Master Sommelier Jack Mason believes in pairing bubbly with pizza. And it is a perfect pairing!

Marta is open for breakfast, lunch and dinner every day. Based on our lunch selections, I recommend:

- Giardiniera – crunchy and colorful house-pickled vegetables and mixed herbs
- Patate all Carbonara – white pizza with potatoes, guanciale, black pepper, pecorino and egg
- Funghi – another white pizza with fontina, mozzarella, hen of the woods, chanterelles, red onion and thyme
- Apple caramel torta with fior di latte gelato – sprinkled with large salt crystals to enhance its sweetness

Bon voyage et bon apétit! 🍷