

TABLES FOR TWO



BLT FISH

21 W. 17th St. (212-691-8888)—On the first floor of Laurent Tourondel's latest venture, the white wainscoted walls are strung with thick rope and larded with antique rods and reels, stuffed marlin, and oars, giving it the feel of a Nantucket clam shack in August. The crowd dresses to match: as snow fell outside one night, three young women stripped down to tank tops to show off their winter tans, a dashing, sea-weathered man with salt-and-pepper hair ordered up flutes of champagne, and teen-agers in Andover crew hats shared baskets of spicy fried calamari. It's boisterous and down-home, in an upscale kind of way: the generously chunky lobster roll comes in a red plastic basket, balanced on a white china plate.

It's a bit jarring, then, to take the elevator up to the cool sophistication of the dining room, on the third floor (the second floor hosts private functions). Here, Tourondel has created what feels like a Nordic refuge, with sleek white lines and a ceiling entirely taken up by a stunning, retractable skylight. At the back wall, under bright lights in the open kitchen, diners can watch chefs in their *toques blanches* putting knives to scales.

In such minimalist surroundings, parts of the menu feel excessive: port-infused figs, caramelized walnuts, and a tart blue cheese overwhelm a sweet scallop salad. But the fish is superb. Served whole, for two, or in more modest fillets, they are brushed with olive oil and grilled, with sauces—tomato-tarragon mayonnaise or soy-citrus wasabi, among others—offered on the side. The whole Cantonese-style red snapper is more elaborate, arriving at the table propped upright and mouth agape, with a dorsal fin of vivid greens, perfectly crisp skin, and a sweetly spicy chile-plum-wine sauce. Some of the restaurant's other whimsical touches are oddly out of place: the after-dinner glass jar of green-apple cotton candy seemed better suited to the carnival-like atmosphere downstairs. (First floor: open weekdays for lunch and dinner and weekends for dinner. Entrées \$14-\$24. Dining room: open Mondays through Saturdays for dinner. Entrées \$25-\$35 per pound for whole fish.)

—Andrea Thompson