
TABLES FOR TWO



JACK'S LUXURY OYSTER BAR

246 E. 5th St. (212-673-0338)—Good manners are everything in close quarters. The doll-house scale of this restaurant requires a profusion of “excuse me”s, many of them delivered gently by a bus-boy in a starchy cruise-ship coat carrying trays of “deconstructed” oysters Rockefeller and Mississippi paddlefish roe. In a spotless exposed kitchen on the second floor—it’s no bigger than one you’d find in a studio apartment, and inches from the upstairs dining room—Allison Vines-Rushing and Slade Rushing, the newlywed chefs, must be particularly diplomatic. “We trade off cooking and cleaning,” Vines-Rushing, who is from Louisiana, said. She was sautéing spinach in a pan. “It’s only fair.” The tact achieves consummation in Denis Le Denn, the maître d’ and captain, who runs the downstairs dining room. Tall and broad and formerly of Alain Ducasse, he is “one of the great peacock maître d’s,” according to the owner, Jack Lamb. (Lamb said he was anxious about asking Le Denn to work for him: “He’s so grand—and he’s so big!”)

The layout doesn’t constrain patrons from getting boisterous, particularly when they follow Le Denn’s recommendation of an apéritif of pink champagne. Every meal starts off with a scallop shell’s worth of pecans, burnt and sugary, with an afterbite of cayenne. Oysters—Hama Hama, Gold Creek, Salutation Cove—wink from a bed of ice on the bar, near a fish tank shaped like a Victorian bell jar. Someone always orders the New Orleans barbecued lobster, which is tender and buttery and served with a nip of thyme and a garlic clove, and then has to fend off poachers. The ceremoniously assembled three-tiered fruits de mer, for a hundred dollars, is easier to share: sweet Taylor Bay scallops, shrimp, caviar, lobster salad, oysters, and clams. The mignonette, relentlessly tart and full of minced onions, goes with almost all of it.

For dessert, Lamb serves only baba au rum but insists on calling it bananas Foster. (There are no bananas.) Le Denn has a heavy pouring hand, and the baba acts like a sponge on the rum. By the end of the night, cheeks are florid—the restaurant, with red banquettes and red checkered walls, is an altogether rosy place—voices loud, largesse abounding. The folks outside waiting for a table literally have their noses pressed up to the glass. (Open for dinner Monday through Saturday. Entrées \$24-\$36.)

—Dana Goodyear
