



THE PRODIGAL CHEFS RETURN

TOP TOQUES THOMAS KELLER & GRAY KUNZ STAGE A NEW YORK COMEBACK

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BEST PLACES TO EAT 2004

FROM DIVINE FRENCH TO
SOULFUL STREET FOOD, A
CULINARY TOUR OF THE CITY

BY ADAM PLATT





salty cod fritters in garlic sauce, skewers of pork and potato sprinkled with smoked paprika, and little cherry-size saffron rice cakes with a shrimp balanced on top.

Tapas is also one of the many new themes at **DJANGO**, in midtown, where the talented, well-traveled new chef, Cedric Tovar, has scrapped the old unilateralist brasserie menu in favor of dishes like steamy spiced beef tagine, tuna tartare flavored with yuzu and green apples, and racks of lamb paired with lamb-shank moussaka. The tapas menu is available downstairs in the swanky, gypsy-themed lounge area, although if you ask politely, like I did, the waiters will bring a sampling upstairs (try the shrimp and calamari arias and, yes, the grilled baby back ribs), grandly arrayed on a long wooden tray.

BARBECUE CHIC

Ever since Danny Meyer

opened the doors at **BLUE SMOKE**, barbecue joints have been popping up around Manhattan like pods of cacti in the parched western desert. Mr. Meyer's bustling establishment is still the place in Manhattan for a big-city approximation of Texas brisket or Memphis pork ribs, or a newfangled fusion confection called the BLG (bacon, lettuce, and fried green tomatoes), served at lunchtime, of course, at the bar. When I'm in Brooklyn, however, I waddle over to **BISCUIT**, on the upper reaches of Flatbush Avenue, where you can splatter three different varieties of vinegar-based sauces over the fine pulled-pork sandwich, or a messy confection called a Mr. Brown (composed of the browned tops of the pork shoulder). "Save the Cows... Eat a Pig" is the motto of this little storefront enterprise, which, when it first opened,

held monthly communal Carolina-style pig pickings. These days, they'll arrange a picking at your own home (one pig for \$160 or so, depending on weight), and if you're wise,

you'll order a batch of the excellent double-dipped fried chicken, whose exterior is the color of burnt sugar and thick enough to crack with a spoon. A spoon is about

all you need to negotiate the tasty little cupola of spare ribs served nightly at **IDA MAE KITCHEN 'N LOUNGE** in the garment district. Chef Kenneth Collins's ambitious restaurant isn't a barbecue joint at all (try his fancy version of chicken and dumplings, and the gourmet pecan torte), but it's a curious pleasure to taste mesquite sauce made from scratch and have your ribs deboned and served on a little pile of potatoes au gratin. The proprietors of

CROSS-CULTURAL: Crisp-skinned red fish with ponzu butter sauce at Jefferson (above).

DAISY MAE'S BARBECUE USA, over on Eleventh Avenue, bring a similar classic technique to the ancient smoky art, and while they serve a decent (by Manhattan standards) pulled-pork sandwich, and Oklahoma jumbo beef short ribs as big as cricket bats, their real specialties are side dishes like mashed sweet potatoes folded with vanilla cream, little go cups of creamed corn brewed in butter and melted cheddar, and thick baked beans (with burnt ends) that taste faintly of caramel.

LOWER EAST SIDE CHIC

What began, not so long ago, with a few adventurous prospectors staking claims up and down Clinton Street has blossomed into a full-scale, helter-skelter restaurant gold rush. At least that's the impression you get when you take a stroll down Rivington Street, where the greatest prospector of them all, Keith McNally, recently opened **SCHILLER'S LIQUOR BAR**.

The room looks like the dining annex of an aged, not very commodious Russian bathhouse, but brunch is generally superior (try the lethal old New Orleans dish eggs Hussard), and if you're willing to brave the feverish late-night crowd, you might just catch a glimpse of Moby himself pondering a plate of McNally's authentic (it's made, among other things, with Stilton, melted Cheddar, and a dash of beer) Welsh rarebit.

There are all sorts of other-worldly delicacies newly available on the Lower East Side, including an exemplary, after-hours version of beef Wellington served at **SALT BAR**, on Clinton Street. Across the street, at the snug, brick-lined room at **CHUBO**, \$28 is all it takes to purchase an urbane prix fixe dinner of seared foie gras, miso-glazed monkfish, and a slice of sweet-potato cheesecake for dessert. And whenever my carnivore