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MELISSA O'DONNELL ON HER NEW RESTAURANT THELMA ON CLINTON AND HOW CLINTON STREET USED TO BE

By Alia Akkam



A decade ago, Clinton Street was a very different place. Wylie Dufresne was busy introducing a nascent crush of gastronomes to the theatrics of molecular cooking at wd~50, tapas was relished at 1492 and oenophiles got their flight fix at Punch & Judy. The edgy street was perfect for Melissa O'Donnell to open Salt Bar, the more low-key spin-off of her now-shuttered Soho restaurant Salt. Like the neighborhood, O'Donnell thought it was time for a change and now Salt Bar has paved the way for **Thelma on Clinton**, specializing in New American small plates. Here the New York-bred chef talks about food fetishists, restaurant reality checks and an era when lighting up Camels indoors was welcome.

The Lower East Side is wildly different from when you first arrived, right?

When I opened you could still smoke at bars. They were building wd~50 at the same time.

What drew you to the neighborhood?

I was just wandering around when I saw the space. I saw the 'For Rent' sign and little windows with bars and the reason I liked it was because it felt like it could be a speakeasy. When I first went down to the Lower East Side it felt like its own other city, totally undeveloped. It still has that feel, and I think being so far east preserves Clinton Street from rapid gentrification. Then again, Ivan Ramen is opening.

Why have you stayed?

The block I'm on in particular is great. It's one of the prettiest in the neighborhood, with trees and a quaint feel. It's very community-oriented and everyone is friendly. Clinton Street is special, and that's why we put it in the name of the restaurant.

Do you live on the Lower East Side?

I actually live in the West Village, but wish I lived closer to Thelma because I feel like the Village has gotten overrun. But I have a wood-burning fireplace, so it's going to be hard to get rid of me.



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What made you decide to rechristen Salt Bar as Thelma on Clinton, which you named after your grandmother?

Without the restaurant--Salt closed in 2011--the bar didn't make sense. I had been in the same space for so long and thought I needed something different, more food centric. The dining area is cozier, cleaner, lighter and warmer with new wood floors, upholstered booths and white brick walls. It's an evolved version of Salt Bar really. The personality of a place after 10 years it is what it is, but when you're staying in the same space you have to do new things. I just needed to do something that better reflected my approach to food. I'm inspired for more, but I think I kept the best elements.

What can we expect from the menu?

I brought the risotto back, and this season's incarnation is caramelized onion. I got a smoker and I'm looking forward to using it, to making duck breast and house-kipper salmon. I put an exhaust system in, too.

The cocktail craze has changed so much since you first arrived. Will the drink menu reveal that?

The cocktails have also evolved, but like the food they are not overly complicated. I'm very much a purist when it comes to food and drink; I don't like it when it becomes too overwrought. We are using all fresh, cold-pressed juices and making our own infusions. We will be doing five classics and five specialties, like the Five Points with Thai basil, reposado Tequila and an absinthe-soaked sugar cube on the rocks. We're also serving all-natural wines picked by Bill Fitch of Vinegar Hill House in Dumbo.

Why all natural?

What you put into your body matters. I'm not a health nut in any way but I think good quality is important and I like the idea of purer and simpler. It's what we do at Thelma on Clinton. Natural wines are also more interesting.

Did you always know you wanted to be a chef?

I wanted to be a social worker. I went to college in Texas and when I came back I was waiting tables at the Peninsula hotel while working at Covenant House. I grew up with food as an integral part of my childhood; we went out to eat all the time and every special occasion was marked by a meal. In retrospect it's not surprising I fell in love with cooking and that I want to have a place that makes people feel at home.

What were you doing before Salt?

I've had a downtown cooking career. Right before I opened Salt I was at Le Zoo--the old Spotted Pig space. Before that, in the late '90s, I was down on Avenue B and 12th cooking. There were drug busts right in the middle of service. It was interesting.

Where do you like to eat when you're not in your own kitchen?

I thought I was going to go out all the time when we were renovating, because I've been working 12 years straight without taking a break. But I just didn't. Upstate, on First Avenue, is a cute little place with great oysters. The other restaurant I like in the East Village is Calliope. The food is amazing and I'm happy they are doing well. I love the rabbit kidney special.

Along with the Lower East Side, food culture in NYC has dramatically changed since you first started cooking. What happened?

People have gotten fetishistic about food. TV makes it all seem like one big party, but you have to really love what you are doing. Every time you have to unclog the toilet or something starts leaking you realize it's not all that glamorous. But people have become more knowledgeable about food. My feelings about it are pretty straightforward and simple: use good, uncomplicated ingredients. What I eat adds to my quality of life and I think diners understand that more and more. When you have a good meal you are nourishing yourself physically and emotionally.

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