

EatOut

THE CITY'S BEST RESTAURANTS, BARS AND CULINARY RICHES

COUNTER INTELLIGENCE
Chefs at Chickenbone
Cafe work wonders behind
one end of the bar.

EAT OUT

SPACE CADETS

Operating with almost no kitchen space—or equipment—these chefs crank out serious dishes

By Zoë Wolff Photographs by David Allee

On a recent Saturday night in South Williamsburg, the cedar-wood-lined dining room at Chickenbone Cafe teemed with stylish young professionals. At every table, they savored rarefied dishes such as Moroccan lamb shank with cardamom farro, *tartiflette* (a rich casserole of potatoes, Reblochon and smoky bacon) and a mysterious special called “cauliflower two ways,” which turned out to be a creamy puree

with sautéed florets, pine nuts and mustard fruit. Everyone was clearly enjoying the dishes, but it's unlikely any of them appreciated the ingenuity involved in getting the food to the table. Every Chickenbone meal is a logic-defying feat of engineering and efficiency: The kitchen, an exposed area occupying the space behind the shorter arm of an L-shaped sheet-metal bar, measures just 36 square feet. Head chef Brendon McDermott and two sous chefs navi-

gate the area like Baryshnikov, miraculously managing not to get in each other's way. Even more compelling, the food is prepared without gas—there is no stove, grill or even a standard oven. The kitchen runs solely on electric power: two convection ovens, two toasters, three induction burners and a panini press.

Adapting to small spaces is part of every New Yorker's initiation rite—none of us are above turning a closet into a bedroom. And restaurateurs such as Scott Spector at Chickenbone have the same mentality; they learn to work with what they've got, without letting their culinary standards slip. The idea was novel four years ago when the Tasting Room challenged the industry by turning out dishes like seared foie

gras with Medjool dates and pistachios using only Flash Bake (halogen lamp) ovens and induction ranges. Now many other new restaurants are rethinking the professional kitchen. Call them haute holes-in-the-wall; they're proving that tight cooking quarters need not dictate a menu of ho-hum panini or quasi-stale pastries.

Such exercises in minimalism have their benefits. Confining the kitchen to as little as 10 percent of the restaurant's overall square footage shrinks the overhead spent on staff; plus, an owner can fit more tables in the dining room. Going electric also saves budding restaurant owners from waiting for ConEd to turn on the gas (a notoriously frustrating, politically charged process that can take months) and negates the need for fire and ventilation systems, which are pricey and call for special inspections.

The former garage that Scott Spector and partner Zini Lardieri turned into *Chickenbone Cafe* (177 South 4th St between Driggs Ave and Roehling St, Williamsburg, Brooklyn; 718-302-2663) didn't have any incoming gas lines, but the duo didn't see this as a problem. Neither of them had any experience in the restaurant business, so they wanted to start small—with a sandwich bar for musicians who use rehearsal spaces in the building. Gastronomes that they are, however, they couldn't stop there; they kept dreaming up more ambitious dishes. To make the sublime lamb dish, for example, the chefs braise the meat beforehand and boil the fennel on the range. When an order rolls in, the chef on duty pulls the meat and grain into a mint-scented broth and warms it on the induction burner. Instead of braising short ribs in the oven, the chefs place them in liquid atop the induction range, where they can stew all night with no risk of fire. For each order, the chef takes the ribs out of the braising liquid and plates them with hash potatoes in a reduction of the juice they were cooked in.

All of *Chickenbone's* prep work is done on the premises; for example, McElmott roasts half a Vermont pig in the double convection oven to make his high-end Cubano sandwiches. The most popular of *Chickenbone's* many designer sandwiches, Cubanos hog the double panini press during service; as many as six slide at one time. The system of pre-roasting the meat and then assembling the sandwiches to order is so efficient (the bread is stored overhead, for easy access), the kitchen often cranks them out faster than the servers can get them to the table.

Salt owner Melissa O'Donnell conceived her spin-off *Salt Bar* (294 Clinton St between Houston and Stanton Sts, 212-979-8471) as a drinks-centric spot with some simple dishes—a place for informal dinners fueled by alcohol. That meant a downsized kitchen, with limited gadgetry. Only one chef works at a time, using a convection oven and an induction range in a 6-by-3' nook carved out of the bar area. Her cohorts with one bartender and one dishwasher and, on Friday and Saturday nights, an additional cook. Like *Chickenbone's*, *Salt Bar's* menu quickly snowballed to include highly intricate dishes, once O'Donnell realized what was possible. "I haven't compromised the way I cook anything. I've figured out dishes that work well when we just stick them in the oven," she says. Take the duck confit: The bird is seared ahead of time at

the parent restaurant—the lack of an oven hood makes searing impossible at *Salt Bar*—and because it's encased in fat, it can sit for several days without spoiling. When someone orders the dish, the chef simply pops a fat-swathed duck leg in the convection oven for about ten minutes, then plates it with a roasted head of garlic (also prepped at *Salt Bar*, to avoid stinking up the bar) and a side salad. It's as sophisticated a dish as you'd find at a high-end restaurant. Almost all of the dishes at *Salt Bar*, like pre-braised lamb shanks, need just a few minutes in the oven, which can accommodate up to four half-sheet pans at once. The induction stove is used sparingly, to minimize smoke and heat; its primary function is for simmering coconut broth and poaching the fish for O'Donnell's Thai-inflected red-snapper dish.



SMALL WORLD Big dishes come out of the diminutive "kitchen" at *Salt Bar*.

Sample (152 Smith St between Bergen and Wyckoff Sts, Boerum Hill, Brooklyn; 718-643-6622) is the Barnett Newman of the gas-free gang. The owners do away with cooking entirely, limiting the menu almost exclusively to cured and preserved foods—essentially running the place as a sit-down gourmet shop. Josh Cohen, who co-owns the laid-back restaurant with Maio Martinez (they also own the barbecue joint *Disquit*), says the minimalist approach suits his agenda: Diners can try carefully selected delicacies at judicious prices (\$7 per plate, on average). Because he isn't shelling out for ovens, or for kitchen labor, Cohen can spend more on food without gouging the customer.

Sample's "kitchen" is a mere 4' by 3' counter at the end of a wooden bar. Below it is a reach-in fridge, neatly packed with two dozen Tupperware containers labeled "Portuguese sardines," "hake roe" and so forth. There's a microwave, used to heat prepared foods from assorted purveyors (such as codfish rellenos from a Spanish importer), and a toaster oven, which has yet to find its culinary purpose. For now, Cohen uses it to toast spices—just to

make the restaurant smell good. Hunks of cheese, selected from the *fromage* paradise *Artisanal*, are lined up on the counter each night, while either Cohen or Martinez (there's room for only one chef) assembles the small plates. These include cured pork loin drizzled with olive oil and crowned with Spanish almonds; smoked *hamachi* lounging in a puddle of soy vinegar and flecked with Japanese pickles; or ultrarich *zambone*, a rare, locally made salami. The cold-food curriculum doesn't make for a hearty winter meal, but it's ideal for hunger pangs: Dishes arrive minutes after they've been ordered.

Perfect for the winter season is the stewy, saucy fare at the French-Caribbean-organic joint *Ivo & Lulu* (558 Broome St between Sixth Ave and Varick St, 212-226-4399). Heady

inventions such as jerk duck-leg confit and wild-mushroom cassoulet, with lamb merguez are made in a kitchen that's as tight and narrow as a pencil skirt. Despite having to share these confines with a human dishwasher, chef Sebastien Aubert appears comfortable as he steadily churns out plates for a full house (also tiny, the room seats just 24). He has figured out how to maximize his two *Avanti* Minikitchens, convection ovens the size of small televisions and equipped with two burners on top. He says he can stuff as many as ten appetizers into one *Avanti* while prepping *entrées* in the other. Two rice cookers—one for couscous and another for the slow-cooked cassoulet—and several saucepans take turns on the four burners. *Ivo & Lulu's* fridge isn't huge, but it needn't be: In classic French style, everything happens day-of here, including the shopping, roasting (if the meat isn't presmoked), and preparation of mango marinade and other sauces. "We found the most efficient, safest and easiest way to work was in a small space," Aubert says, adding, "If we were offered a bigger space, we wouldn't take it."