

Open! Open! Open!

Thelma on Clinton Opens on the Lower East Side This Tuesday

By Nicole Schnitzler Fri., Dec. 13 2013 at 12:00 PM
Categories: [Open! Open! Open!](#)

[Write Comment](#) 

To honor a grandparent in the rest of the country, name a child after them. To honor them in Manhattan, name a restaurant after them. Chef Melissa O'Donnell took this cue with **Thelma on Clinton** (29 A Clinton Street, 212-979-8471), a New American small plates eatery opening this Tuesday in the same Lower East Side space as her former project Salt Bar.

O'Donnell's grandmother didn't exactly leave behind culinary marvels (she didn't spend much time in the kitchen), but the woman's upbringing in an immigrant Lebanese family gave her resilience and a hard work ethic, and that's where O'Donnell derives meaning for the name of her soon-to-open venue. "She really represents this American spirit to me in that she actually had an Arabic name her entire childhood -- it wasn't until she was 18 that she was given her American name," O'Donnell explains. "She used to sell buttons door-to-door at the age of five, and then she worked at a mill factory and had two jobs to send my father to college. Her story is reflective of that American spirit that the Lower East Side really represents -- that immigrant culture that is still alive and well here but is not in a lot of places."

That culture, in addition to supportive neighbors, were the two biggest reasons O'Donnell decided to maintain her Lower East Side location: "The sense of community really prevails here. We're all friends. We all help each other out."

Thelma on Clinton will serve nightly rotating entrees, several of which are regulars' favorites from Salt Bar days -- including Thursday's beef wellington with balsamic bordelaise. Small (but mighty) plates like a mushroom and truffle-charged cauliflower soup, a tea-smoked chicken, and a caramelized onion risotto fill out the menu and are meant to prompt table sharing. In keeping with a from-the-heart-and-home mentality,



the village VOICE

O'Donnell will also be debuting several "from scratch" offerings: A new smoker will turn out house-kipped salmon, and charcuterie gets a makeover with merguez sausage with labne and mint and a seasonally tweaked rabbit terrine with juniper, allspice, and bacon. And above all, O'Donnell's menu will draw from the cultural diversity of the neighborhood without straying too far from her deeply-rooted, straightforward approach to cooking. "In my heart of hearts I'm a minimalist," she says. "I always have been. I don't like to make things complicated. It's one of the reasons I originally named Salt 'Salt.'"

The same simplistic approach informs the décor -- O'Donnell modified her space with new wood flooring and upholstered booths that line white brick walls -- and the cocktail list, an ode to lower Manhattan with drinks like the Tenement, an apple cider that gets its spice-packed quotient from an overlooked bar weapon: curry. The list will also include a bullshot -- a 2.0 bloody mary with beef bouillon replacing tomato juice -- a classic that O'Donnell would make for a regular while bartending at the Peninsula. It was there, in between social work job searches, that O'Donnell's restaurant career launched.

"I just found that I really liked serving people and making people happy," she notes. "And then I sort of just fell into cooking. I found that the more I was in the restaurant industry and the more I was cooking, the more I loved it, and I always wanted to just learn something new or get to the next place with what I was doing."

Thelma on Clinton will open on Tuesday, December 17, and it will serve dinner Tuesday through Sunday.