

\$25 AND UNDER

## ***\$25 AND UNDER; Communal Comfort in the Company of Strangers***

**By Eric Asimov**

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IN anxious times, restaurants tend to head the opposite way, offering simplicity, security and refuge when the complexities of the world seem too threatening. A case in point is Salt, a small American bistro in SoHo that soothes rather than challenges and is drawing in youthful crowds nightly.

Salt is the reincarnation of Stella, an intimate, romantic restaurant that opened in the summer of 2001 and never recovered its business after Sept. 11. Two of the partners left. The third, Melissa O'Donnell, who was also the chef, took over and remade the restaurant. She got rid of the myriad little tables spread haphazardly around the dining room, replacing them with three long communal tables, with just a few individual tables in the front. She brightened the room, painting it white, and streamlined the menu and wine list.

The menu now offers two main-course options: conventional plates of food composed by Ms. O'Donnell or those that she infelicitously calls Protein Plus 2, her version of the Tennessee meat-and-three. Here, diners select a simple main course and pair it with two side dishes.

I have to admit that I initially felt hostile to Salt. I don't often care for communal tables, and, on an early visit, felt demeaned at having to squeeze in between an animated group to the left and a silent couple exchanging baleful glances to the right. To my surprise, my party of four was able to establish a zone of intimacy that went unbreached by the surrounding diners, an experience that was happily repeated on every visit.

I also did not warm to the "protein" designation, just as I don't to collegial invitations to grab some caffeine or alcohol. Reducing a food or beverage to its active chemical component robs it of what makes it special and enjoyable. You might as well suck nutrients from a tube. But maybe that's just nitpicking.

Regardless, Protein Plus 2 is the way to go, whether pairing a whole dorade royale (\$19.50) - its rich flavor enhanced by a balsamic reduction -- with buttery Yukon Gold potatoes and roasted brussels sprouts, or smoky slices of roasted duck breast (\$20.50) with puréed

butternut squash and braised beets and carrots. A roasted chicken breast (\$15.50) was juicy, while a thick grilled Newport steak (\$20.50) had an excellent aged quality.

The chef-composed main courses were less successful. Ms. O'Donnell likes to add savory accents to the, shall we say, protein component, and sometimes the accents take over. Roasted salmon (\$18.50) was well-flavored but overwhelmed by its chorizo garnish, while a thick hunk of cod (\$20.50) was dominated by an overly salty brandade de morue, its salt-cod-and-potato cousin. The pronounced flavor of lamb shank (\$20.50) was better equipped to stand up to spicy merguez, a nice combination with tender white beans and wilted spinach. A pasta special of whole wheat tagliatelle (\$13.50) with sautéed mushrooms, garlic, pancetta and pecans seemed as if it would be too busy, but I couldn't help cleaning my plate.

These are big plates of food, but Ms. O'Donnell puts together delicious appetizers that can be shared, like a mushroom bread pudding (\$9.50), soft and crisp with a touch of truffle oil for pungency, or honey-glazed dates wrapped in bacon (\$8), a tapas staple that offers a wonderful contrast between salty and sweet, though the honey is overkill.

Desserts (\$7) are disappointing, unless you stick with chocolate, like a moist and airy devil's food cake topped with buttercream frosting, a chocolate bread pudding or a dense flourless chocolate cake. Otherwise tarte Tatin is unaccountably flavored with rosemary, not a pleasant combination, and crème brûlée is thick and clumsy.

I have a few other quibbles, too. The wine list ought to have more bottles under \$35, and the rolls are wimpy. But on the whole, Salt offers a warm and secure environment. It's a cold world out there, and judging by the people lingering at their tables long into the evening, few are eager to return to it.

Salt

58 Macdougall Street (near Houston Street), SoHo; (212) 674-4968.

**BEST DISHES** -- Whole roasted dorade, roasted duck breast, chicken breast, Newport steak, lamb shank with merguez, tagliatelle with mushrooms and pancetta, mushroom bread pudding, dates wrapped in bacon, devil's food cake, chocolate bread pudding, flourless chocolate cake.

**PRICE RANGE** -- Appetizers, \$7.50 to \$9.50; main courses, \$13.50 to \$20.50.

**CREDIT CARDS** -- All major cards.

**HOURS** -- Monday through Friday, 6 to 11 p.m.; Saturday and Sunday, 11:30 a.m. to 4 p.m.; 6 to 11 p.m.

**WHEELCHAIR ACCESS** -- Ramp at entrance; aisles and restroom are narrow.

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