



WOMEN'S WEAR DAILY

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Salt Shaker

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By **WWD STAFF**

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NEW YORK — Of all the downtown restaurants that caved after Sept. 11, Stella — a cozy little jewel of a place on MacDougal Street just below Houston — was one of the best. The food of Melissa O'Donnell, a former executive chef at Le Zoo, balanced extravagant notions like Indian mustard oil (a massage-parlor staple) and black pepper ice cream with the simpler stuff of roast salmon and chicken stew. Stella was delicious. It was also empty.

"After 9/11, we never got busy again," says O'Donnell. "SoHo suffered a lot — it was awful. The stench of burning was in the air for months." Part of the problem was that [people.\(https://wwd.com/tag/people/\)](https://wwd.com/tag/people/)'s tastes seemed to have changed, too. "Stella was a great concept," O'Donnell continues, "but it was a little too boutique-y and

complex at a time when [people \(https://www.wwd.com/business-news/media/liz-vaccariello-editor-in-chief-people-1235131490/\)](https://www.wwd.com/business-news/media/liz-vaccariello-editor-in-chief-people-1235131490/) didn't want to have to study a menu and be impressed by it. They just wanted to be taken care of."

So O'Donnell closed her restaurant in June, bid her partners goodbye, painted the dark wooden walls a baptismal white, and reopened two weeks ago as Salt. "I was looking through my 'Larousse Gastronomique,'" she says. "and I got to 'Salt,' and it talked about how salt is a necessity for living — it just seemed basic and universal. So I knew that was my name."

The menu at Salt is basic and universal, too. It's built around a list of "Proteins"— lamb skewers, bluefish, roast chicken breast, etc. Each comes with two "Sides," which diners select from a list that includes Israeli couscous, leeks vinaigrette and creamed corn. "I wanted a place that people would treat more like their own kitchen," O'Donnell says. "One night, you want your bluefish with tomatoes, the next you want it with corn. You don't have to want what I want you to want."

And yet Salt's dinner card doesn't overwhelm with options in the way that Tom Colicchio's do-it-yourself menu at Craft can. After an ample list of appetizers — including Stella souvenirs like sweet pea risotto and cantaloupe soup — O'Donnell has included a handful of "chef's entrées," composed of main courses including veal saltimbocca and a somewhat high-flown roasted red snapper with bean sprouts, kumquats, edamame and miso broth. For dessert, O'Donnell's old latte cotta, a light, coffee-flavored panna cotta, is still on the menu, alongside nectarines roasted with honey and butter.

Perhaps the best news is that even with its white walls and long, white communal tables, Salt hasn't sacrificed any of the low-lit, twinkling comfort of its previous incarnation. "The idea behind the white is that the thing that should stick out — bring color to the room — is the food and the wine," says O'Donnell.

Nightly wine specials are scrawled in marker on a giant, French-bistro-style mirror. It's also on that mirror that O'Donnell — whose head of curly hair is always visible through a window into the kitchen — communicates with her new customers.

"By request," she writes, "the dates and bacon are back."

"It's tomato season — eat tomatoes."
