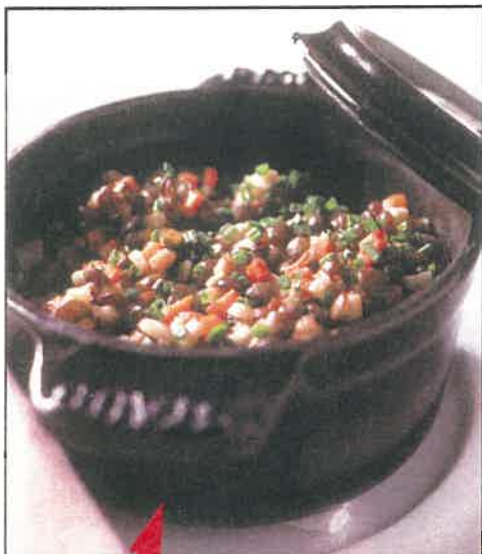


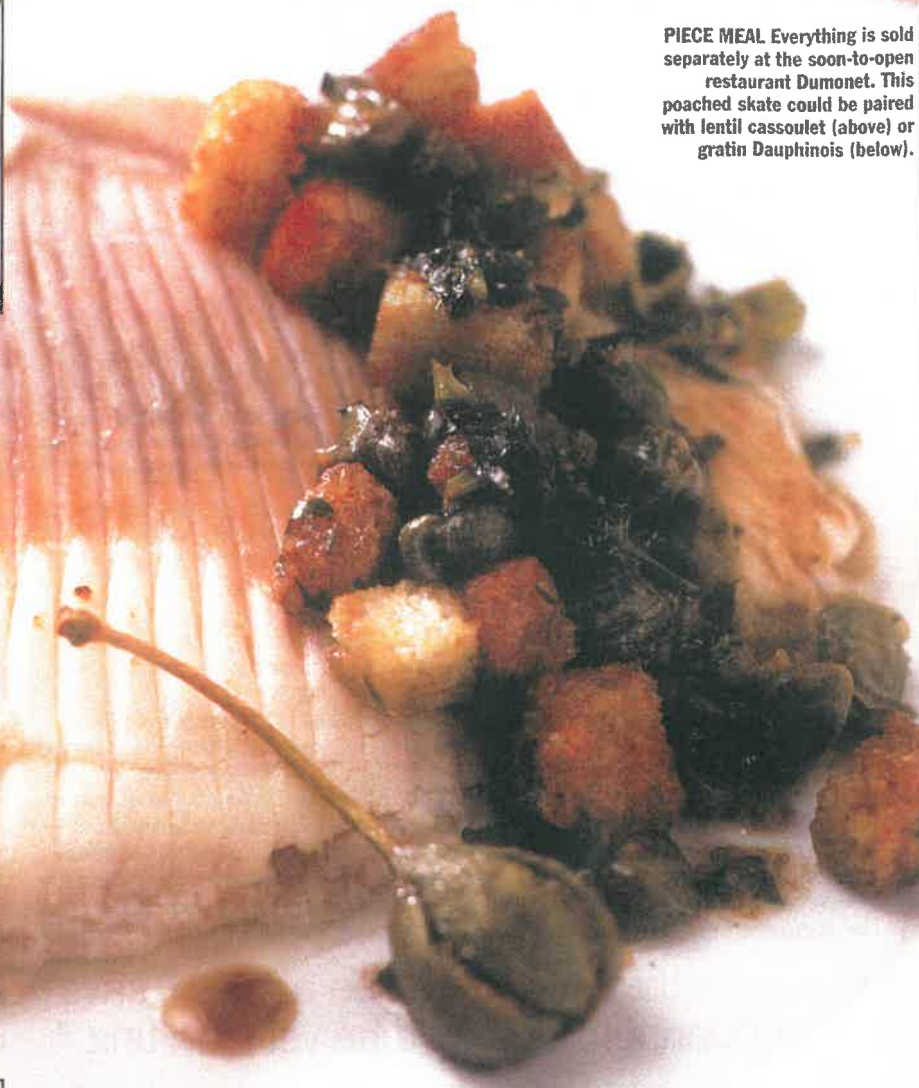
EatOut

THE CITY'S BEST RESTAURANTS, BARS AND CULINARY RICHES

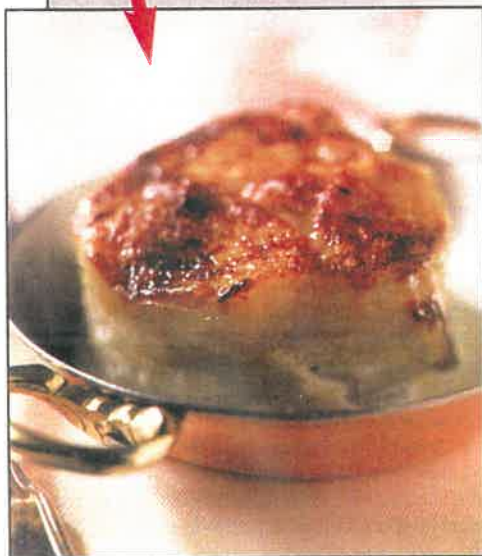


THIS...

OR THAT?



PIECE MEAL Everything is sold separately at the soon-to-open restaurant Dumonet. This poached skate could be paired with lentil cassoulet (above) or gratin Dauphinois (below).



Choosing sides

Taking their cue from Craft, a slew of new restaurants are saying "power to the people" and letting customers design their own meals By **David Katz** Photographs by **Harry Pocius**

If this year's People's Choice Award for best actor goes to Rob Schneider for his conflicted titular performance in *The Hot Chick*, I won't be too surprised. Like most "people," I don't put much stake in our collective ability to offer sound cultural criticism. Some decisions, we can all agree, are best left to the experts. I've always adhered to this principle when dining out. I trust a

master chef to plan a meal more than I trust myself to choose the right dishes, which is why I often succumb to the tasting menu. When we're selecting the president or the next *American Idol*, I say, "Power to the people." But when I need a braised fish matched with the right sauce, I'll gladly submit to a little culinary dictatorship.

Thus, I'm alarmed about a recent trend in city

dining: the democratization of the menu. Rather than presenting us with a list of hard-and-fast dishes, half a dozen new restaurants are giving diners the freedom to compose their own meals. For this we can blame Tom Colicchio, the chef-owner of Gramercy's Craft and pioneer of the do-it-yourself high-end meal. At Craft, guests order every dish (proteins, vegetables, grains) individually; each item arrives on a separate plate. Now in its third year, the restaurant remains only slightly easier to get into during peak hours than a *Vanity Fair* Oscar party, in part because of the ordering gimmick but also because of Colicchio's dead-on ingredient-driven cooking. Following Colicchio's lead: Soho's recently opened Salt, where guests order a "protein plus two" (a meat or fish and two sides); Dish, on Allen Street, which offers one entrée and two sides for \$14; and Terrance Brennan's Seafood and Chop House, where steaks are sold with pick-your-own sauces and butters. Next month, Krim Boughalem plans to open a new Chelsea restaurant, Snackbar, and serve almost all dishes à la carte. And the Carlyle Restaurant will soon become Dumonet, where chef Jean Louis Dumonet plans to do the same.

Diminutive Salt isn't nearly as formal or pricey as Craft, and owner Melissa O'Donnell says Colicchio's success had nothing to do with her approach. "I just want to say I did not copy Craft," she says. "I wanted to create a place that people would visit several times a week. People need to be able to get what they want, not what I want them to eat." O'Donnell recognizes the danger of letting diners choose their sides, so she sticks to basic flavors: A whole roasted *daurade* entrée might be paired with brussels sprouts and Yukon gold puree, or sautéed eggplant and pearl barley. She also keeps the menu short, ensuring that angst-ridden customers won't be overwhelmed. Craft has more mushroom varieties on its menu than Salt has entrées.

At Dish, Perry also thought through the complications of a pick-your-own system. "You just have to leave certain things off the menu," she says. Her menu stays focused on Southern com-



DIP SCHTICK At his eponymous steakhouse, chef Terrance Brennan lets diners pick as many sauces as they want to go with their meat or fish.

Hoping to breathe life into the Carlyle restaurant without alienating the existing, snooty client base, the Carlyle Hotel hired the same consulting firm that remade its Bemelmans Bar. The firm's solution was to go à la carte at Dumonet, which it hopes will create buzz without altering the classic French menu too much. Chef Dumonet proffers one superficial reason for the trend: "Last year, when I came back from France, I gained so much weight I had to go on a no-starch diet," he says. Those who are on diets such as the Zone or Atkins, he predicts, will appreciate the freedom to order that steak tartare with a side of steamed spinach instead of the typical frites.

New Yorkers have been picking their own sides at steakhouses for ages, but chef Terrance Brennan, owner of Picholine and Artisanal, is

starches and grains, we thought, Who needs green vegetables? I chose gratin potatoes and let my friend pick one of the mushroom choices. Our waiter steered her toward the bluefoot variety, yet overall, he was less of a hand-holder than I'd expected.

When our food arrived, nothing was egregiously out of sync. Colicchio says his menu is built on the notion that seasonal food jibes, so it's damned near impossible to make a grave ordering mistake. But you can misstep. The subtlety of our fish was drowned out by the robust mushrooms. Maybe greens exist for a reason, after all. The waiter might have even suggested we order some, but at some point the restaurateur has to let go. Salt's O'Donnell, in fact, tells her staff not to interfere too much. "À la carte ordering makes the server more of a server than a seller; they're not there to unload our creations."

At the chophouse, Brennan puts full confidence in his clientele: "In New York, diners are educated enough to make these decisions." That's flattering, but it should be noted that we weren't savvy enough to navigate Craft's original menu, which had us choosing sauces and condiments as well as all of our sides. Customers found the system too confusing, and the idea was scrapped early on. "Sometimes people match things and I can't really imagine why they would want to eat one with the other," O'Donnell confesses. "I often think they'd be better off if they put themselves in my hands. I have mixed feelings about people ordering this way. It lessens the role of the chef too much." Yet it also keeps chefs from excessive fiddling. As nouvelle cuisine came to dominate high-end city dining in the '60s, '70s and '80s, chefs increasingly made their mark with daring combinations and fantastical platings. The current boom in à la carte cuisine is a backlash—it's the opposite of overly manipulated food.

"I stay passionate about getting the best meat," Brennan says. "But the steakhouse isn't my restaurant to get off on how pretty a dish is, or on flavor combinations." Brennan can still go wild at the fancier Picholine and Artisanal, while Colicchio flexes his plating muscles at Gramercy Tavern. O'Donnell wishes she could do the same. "To be honest, I miss having a more creative hand," she says. "If this were the only way to be a chef, I think it would be very limiting."

Control freaks (or those dating them) should relish places like Dish and Salt while the trend lasts. After concocting several of my own meals, I can safely say that the chance of screwing up is minimal, and the freedom is liberating. If my pairings were inferior because I was at the helm, it was a small price to pay to never hear my dinner companion ask about substituting salad for potatoes. Yes, I will still prefer being in the hands of a capable chef. But we can all take comfort in knowing that the culinary egos in this town will keep that opportunity very much alive.

"If this were the only way to be a chef," says Salt's O'Donnell, "it would be very limiting."

fort food; she had to omit a favorite Asian-inflected slaw because it wasn't likely to sit well with barbecued pork chops or meat loaf. The downside at Dish is that unlike at Salt and Craft, all the food comes on one plate, so unusual flavor combinations like tomato-and-basil *farro* with those barbecued pork chops are more pronounced.

Despite the potential problems, the people's-choice approach is no mere fad, says Ken Aretsky, a 30-year veteran of the NYC restaurant scene and owner of Patroon, Butterfield 81 and the Upper East Side's 92. He recently summoned a focus group to pinpoint what customers want from a restaurant. "They want the ability, in some fashion, to create their own meals," he says of the results. "I was quite shocked." The desire is more prevalent now, he says, because "people are more value-conscious, more attentive to how everything adds up. Whether you're eating at McDonald's or at Craft, you know where every penny is going."

granting red-blooded eaters even greater liberty at his new steakhouse by offering scads of sauces and infused butters—as many as you want to try. It's a fun concept, except that when presented with all-you-can anything, few diners have the gift of restraint. While I enjoy dunking McNuggets into different sauces, I should have realized that a fine porterhouse deserves better than to be treated as a vehicle for a dozen dips.

Of course, I couldn't legitimately argue against the à la carte phenomenon until I had visited the mother ship: Craft. I took my most indecisive friend, who can be sent into a panic by the question "Do you want fries with that?" Now she'd have to choose among dozens of meat and fish options and scores of sides. We planned on sharing, so we also had to make sure that everything would work in harmony. After serious deliberation, we settled on entrées: *kobe* skirt steak and braised barramundi (an Australian white fish). But as we scanned the sides of seductive