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## SALT BRINGS OUT THE FLAVORS

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SALT, 58 Macdougall St. (212) 674-4968. Open for lunch/ dinner daily. Closed Sundays. Dinner entrees: \$12.50 to \$25. Reservations suggested. 2 Stars.

When I walked past the restaurant Stella in SoHo several weeks ago and saw the place was boarded up, I nearly sounded off like Marlon Brando's Stanley: "STELLA!"

How could Stella close?

It was the perfect neighborhood spot: Glowing reviews aside, it had a warm, intimate interior, a deft and caring chef and a casual front-of-the-house team that made you want to linger. And, of course, that dreamy sweet-pea risotto.

I was relieved to learn a few days later that the chef, Melissa O'Donnell, was taking over the place herself, minus her two partners. She stripped two letters from the name and, fittingly, stripped Stella's dark wood, so that Salt's dining room is bathed in creamy white. The tables used to be round; now, they're long and communal.

The kitchen is still wide open, revealing a battery of copper pans, but during dinner service, that's not where you'll find O'Donnell. She has removed the kerchief that kept her curls in check and greets guests at the door in such a neighborly manner, you'll wish you had brought a hostess gift.

The risotto starter, once topped with lamb's lettuce, comes with two wide belts of nutty parmigiano that melt progressively into every bite. The firm, copious peas stay intact. No matter what the dinner conversation is about, your feet will be doing a little dance under the table.

Under the Stella regime, I found O'Donnell's signature cantaloupe soup shampoo-frothy; I prefer its current, thicker incarnation, which has more oomph and body. But steamed shrimp and crab dumplings, paired in a towering nest of bamboo baskets, don't live up to their presentation; the wrappers are rubbery. The baby-spinach salad with portobello mushrooms, beets and goat cheese is tossed in a warm pancetta dressing that coats your mouth with tingly, guilty pleasure.

O'Donnell seems to have been inspired by Tom Colicchio's mix-and-match concept at Craft. For entrees, you can pick your protein from among roasted bluefish in a balsamic reduction, tamarind lamb skewers, grilled Newport steak and the cold poached fish of the day. Then add two sides from a list that currently includes, but is not limited to, grilled corn on the cob with chili and lime (delicious, but a high dribble factor); lemony braised baby fennel with olives; tender leeks in vinaigrette, and pearl barley.

I opted for the poached cold salmon with the leeks, along with organic tomatoes with capers and red onion, one warm night and couldn't have been happier with my refreshing, righteous combination.

Too many decisions? Choose from a short list of more elaborate entrees. Perhaps to compensate for the sparseness of the "protein + 2" section, O'Donnell goes a little heavy on ingredients here. Classic veal saltimbocca with prosciutto and sage goes New American with the addition of caraway, wilted iceberg lettuce and a cauliflower puree. Very good, though not "jump in your mouth" good, as the name suggests. But the roasted monkfish on a braised fennel-bulb raft, floating in lobster broth thickened by a rich fennel puree, would make seafood titans Eric Ripert and Rick Moonen pay attention.

One night, we couldn't get a table until quite late, and these more elaborate dishes seemed to suffer from post-rush letdown. Not surprising, when the chef's at the door, not in the kitchen. Consistency could be an issue here.

Desserts also need minding. The fig tart with its sidecar of rosemary ice cream is seasonally smart and simple. And though I loved the subtly sharp black-pepper ice cream accompanying the chocolate tart, the tart itself seemed confused: warm? cold? solid? liquid?

Not so long ago, this location was home to a French restaurant, Sans Souci, famous for its dog, Popette, who used to lounge on the sidewalk. Now, O'Donnell's vintage Schwinn is parked in that spot. Friends and I wondered one night why O'Donnell had named her first solo venture Salt, but as we watched her slip her messenger bag over her shoulder and pedal off into the night, it made perfect sense.

Like its owner, this place is salt of the earth.

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