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FASHION AND HOME SPECIAL
THE BEST OF SPRING '10

MANHATTAN 7 W. 51ST ST., 8TH FLOOR, NEW YORK, NY 10019

MODERNLUXURY.COM



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CHECKING IN *Left:* Brooklyn ricotta cheesecake with citrus compote. *Above and below:* The Pierre's new darling.



Le Caprice

RATING ★★

2 East 61st Street, 212.940.8195, lecapriceny.com

What the stars mean:

★ = fair, some noteworthy qualities;
 ★★ = good, above average;
 ★★★ = very good, well above norm;
 ★★★★ = excellent, among the area's best;
 ★★★★★ = world-class, extraordinary in every detail. Reviews are based on multiple visits. Ratings reflect the reviewer's overall reaction to food, ambience and service.

HOURS 7AM–10:30PM daily

WHAT TO EAT *Octopus carpaccio, scallops, veal chop with chanterelles, fish and chips, Bakewell tart.*

WHO'S THERE *Condé Nasties in worn-out Manolos, perky Brits on permanent holiday, socialite Samantha Boardman Rosen, Fashion Week honcho Fern Mallis, Robert Pittman.*

DON'T COME *unless you're impeccably dressed, and even then, prepare to be scrutinized.*

LOOK FOR *gorgeous trompe-l'oeil murals in the rotunda of the hotel, through the swinging double doors at the center of the restaurant.*

WHAT IT COSTS *Appetizers, \$9–\$26; entrées, \$21–\$45; desserts, \$10–\$14.*

Dine and Dish

The Pierre Hotel's new restaurant offers scenery you want to chew, but the food is another story

| By Adeena Sussman | Photography by Evan Sung |

It was lunchtime at Le Caprice, and the women at the next table over, uniformly blond and black-clad, were rehashing their morning at the offices of a certain Times Square fashion magazine. “The new publisher started this week, and she made us take the subway to a meeting,” said the one with the raspy voice as she patted down her blowout. “And I was wearing Manolos!”

For those who find it tough to navigate the bowels of the city in rickety stilettos, Le Caprice may be just the place for a cushy landing. Much ballyhooed as part

of the \$100 million renovation of the Pierre Hotel, it's the first stateside restaurant from Richard Caring, who has built a portfolio of clubby London eateries like the Ivy and J. Sheekey, celeb magnets known as much for the crowds they draw as for the food they serve.

“Sorry I'm late,” said a petite, vaguely aristocratic and very pretty British woman as she joined the group, her upper-crust across-the-pond patois bouncing off the walls.

“Never fails,” said my lunch mate. “A British accent lets you get away with anything in New York.”

The allure of the faintly exotic and the highly exclusive is something Le Caprice exploits: Mineral water is imported from the English countryside; the managers are transplants, capable ambassadors for the Caring way; little pats of butter even come embossed with a curvy letter C. But New Yorkers are a tough crowd. The we're-always-booked reservations policy, typically employed by places that have earned the right to gatekeep, doesn't endear. Nor does its location at the edge of Manhattan's toniest ZIP code, which still engenders some hostility in this prolonged era of media-stoked wealth resentment.

And then there's the food, which seems almost deliberately mediocre, a play-it-safe list of dishes—chopped steak, rack of lamb, a Dover sole special—you could find at any number of restaurants. Whoever expects a breakthrough meal here clearly doesn't understand the concept, which can be summed up as, Replicate the British menu, add a couple of specials and hope for the best.

That strategy works better at some times than at others. Foie gras atop a crisp bed of apple pastry packed the expected punch of richness, but the pink lobe itself was raw in the middle. Like chicken, this flesh is not something you want to eat medium-rare. A salad of duck and watercress was more ably prepared but came lacquered in a late-'90s style reminiscent of a suburban P.F. Chang's. It shared this unfortunate association with the restaurant's signature starter, a peanuty, too-sweet pile of shredded poultry known as Bang Bang Chicken. On the other hand, sheets of thin pressed octopus carpaccio, sprinkled with scallion and chili and dressed in a light, herb-flecked vinaigrette, felt like an American original.

That's not to say Le Caprice doesn't have its charms, most notably a décor that successfully telegraphs understated entitlement, at once opulent and refined. Muted sconces line the walls, the banquettes at the front are cushiony and comfortable, and dozens of black-and-white photos by David Bailey depict London in the swinging '60s. It's a surprisingly cozy gathering place that may have the potential to become a less cool, uptown Minetta for an entirely different slice of New York society. On several visits I noticed that people seemed to know one another, craning their necks and conversing among tables. There was talk of decorating, Hamptons summer rentals and gossip that was held back only as long as it took passersby to move out of earshot. "I'm like a human pop-up video," I heard someone tell her friends, dating herself, like that salad, to the '90s, after assessing a passing outfit. "Everyone gets a caption."

She would have been in her glory at dinner on a Saturday night. At the host's station, a manager coddled a woman who had been made to wait too long for a table she deemed less than ideal. And on a Saturday night, to boot. Her face, pulled taut and tucked somewhere behind her ears, had just enough elasticity left to contort into a pouty expression that eventually helped get her a new seat assignment. As we waited at the bar for our table, a woman was perched on a high stool, eating a lobster, burrata and heirloom



BRIT POPS Above: A suitably dressed bartender at the super sleek mirrored bar at Le Caprice. Below: Fillet of cod with braised coco beans and chorizo.

tomato salad (though I'm not sure where one gets good heirlooms in the dead of winter), while refugees from a wedding in the ballroom upstairs trickled in and took seats near one of the potted hot pink fuchsia orchids. A couple, she in a fishtail-cut floor-length taffeta skirt, he in a tux, fed each other bites of yet another vaguely derivative Asian-style dish, Thai-baked sea bass served with an adorable little bamboo steamer of rice.

People-watching on this scale can generate a genuine appetite. Ironically, in a restaurant where I noticed several women pushing half-eaten entrées in the direction of their male companions in a clear attempt to watch their figures, the best dishes here happen to be the heartiest. Though hardly anyone was ordering the \$70 Champagne risotto with Périgord truffles special, the fish and chips—a crisp fillet of cod on a bed of bright green mushy peas, accompanied by a little porcelain dish of serviceable fries—was justifiably popular.

A juicy, flavorful veal chop, lavished with tender chanterelles and a thick, meaty reduction, was hands-down the best plate of the evening, if not the most politically correct. Bucking the current trend, wherein even the local Chipotle puts a pedigree on its protein, there are no allusions to farmhouse origins or claims of sustainability. Like some of the frozen faces on display, the food is a time capsule, begging not to be challenged for too much information.

This ethos of blissful ignorance grew on me as the night wound down. By the time dessert came around—the Bakewell tart, a meltingly good combination of toasted almond pastry, marzipan and almond ice cream, is the most memorable—I'd realized there were worse things than spending an evening in this sort of bubble. As the pianist played another Cole Porter tune, I almost hoped I was worthy of my very own caption. **M**



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