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Putting food first

Eateries shed their white tablecloths for comfort, menu choice

Elizabeth Johnson The Journal News

Correction The Freelance Cafe & Wine Bar in Piermont opened in 1988. The year was incorrect in an article yesterday on Page One.

Dining at Auberge Maxime used to be a formal affair, with upholstered chairs and velvet drapes. The menu offered a choice of seven sauces with the roasted duck.

Today, there are wooden chairs and blinds, and the menu offers seared duck with bok choy.

Even the name has changed. The restaurant, in North Salem, is now called Vox. But the owners aren't different – the culture is. So they renovated to embrace what customers of modern restaurants are demanding: upscale casual.

Upscale describes the food. Casual describes everything else – the diners, the decor, even the staff.

"It's the way people live their lives now," said Deborah Marquardt, a regular at Plates, an upscale-casual restaurant in Larchmont. "You want to have places where you can go to be comfortable, but that aren't such an event. But you work so hard that you want something that's up a notch from Papa John's pizza."

High-quality food in a relaxed setting can be found everywhere. In Manhattan, as culinary landmarks like Lutèce and Lespinasse were shutting their doors, spots like Craft and WD-50 already had opened theirs. In the Lower Hudson Valley, traditional restaurants like Maxime's in Granite Springs and Auberge Argenteuil in Hartsdale are just memories. Meanwhile, Nyack, once known for antiques, has become a dining destination without a tuxedoed waiter in town. Rye has been transformed by 11 upscale-casual restaurants within six blocks. White Plains is experiencing a renaissance nurtured by such new upscale-casual restaurants as Trotters and Blue and the chains in the City Center.

"It's a paradigm shift in the restaurant industry," said Zane Tankel, who as the owner of Apple Metro Inc. in Harrison has about 30 Applebee's in the New York region. "The lines are clearly blurred."

But the upscale-casual formula is clear: It's an open and airy, comfortable place – think exposed beams and

no tablecloths – where people can dress down. The menu is flexible. Instead of prix fixe or a la carte, diners can choose to have one course, or two appetizers, or several small plates for the table. The wine list is slim and has plenty of choices by the glass. The staff is professional but amiable.

"People are making the rules now," said Jean Le Bris, the owner of Vox. "They want to feel like they can go anywhere."

And they want to feel like they can wear anything. Just as the dress-code expectations for other social events have been lowered, so have the ones for dining.

The restaurant landscape started changing 20 years ago, when Danny Meyer opened Union Square Cafe in Manhattan, which, with its seasonal cuisine, clean design and long bar for dining, is still among the city's most popular restaurants. Locally, Peter X. Kelly was an upscale-casual pioneer with his Freelance Cafe & Wine Bar in Piermont, which opened in 1993. People still line up outside, hoping for a table or a spot at the granite bar.

"Americans have always been more comfortable being casual," said Paul Frumkin, the editor at large of Nation's Restaurant News, a trade magazine. "It fits into our culture better."

But casual doesn't fit everyone's idea of culture.

"It's a dumbing-down of American social life," said Letitia Baldrige, a protocol expert and the author of "Letitia Baldrige's New Manners for New Times." She likewise is appalled by sweat suits as airplane attire, jeans for a night at the theater and button-down shirts as funeral apparel.

Instead of focusing on their clothes, people are putting food first, said Clark Wolf, who has been a restaurant consultant for nearly 20 years.

"We're going back to some core human values – not just what is in the food, but where it comes from and who it comes from," he said. And as Americans want to taste that "terroir" – a French word that means a sense of place – they are pushing aside whatever gets in the way, whether an intricately carved garnish or a classic sauce.

As food gets simpler, so do the surroundings in which it's served. Craft in Manhattan made rustic cool when waiters set down copper pots with roasted mushrooms on bare wood tables.

It's just the style of restaurant where Marquardt, who is 38, feels most comfortable.

"I think there's a mint to be made in more places that are like trattorias – someplace like Lupa," she said. "Casual, rough-hewn wood tables, but great food. An exuberant, effervescent personality – a spirit. The kind of place you'd want to hang out."

That depends on who's hanging out, though. Sam and Renée Wilmit, who used to live in Wesley Hills and are regulars at Peter Kelly's three restaurants, pine for the old ways.

"I really like to get dressed up when I go out to dinner," Renée said. "I feel better getting dressed a little nicer."

"You lose some of the elegance – and, frankly, sexiness – of the experience in some of those restaurants," Sam said.

Sometimes, you might even lose your appetite.

"I still don't like the men coming in in shorts," Renée said. "Hairy legs turn me off at dinner."

It's not likely you'd see shorts at Crabtree's Kittle House in Chappaqua, but you do see diners in sequins at one table and jeans at another.

"I feel bad for folks who don't have a lot of choices where they can dress up," said John Crabtree, the owner. "The only place left are the country clubs."

And even those are changing. Three years ago, Crabtree, as a consultant, recommended allowing diners at Winged Foot Golf Club in Mamaroneck to dine without ties.

"One of the really old-school bastions of conservatism," he said. "And they've given it up."

But even as casual takes over, fine-dining restaurants still are thriving, Wolf said. Per Se in Manhattan is among the most formal and elegant restaurants in America, and it opened just last year. Jackets still are required at La Panetière in Rye. Even Mario Batali, the owner of Lupa, is aiming for formal dining with his soon-to-be open Del Posto. But most people save such meals for special occasions, or for vacations, when dining can be more leisurely. "Americans are learning that perhaps Thursday night is not the time to have a four-hour meal," Wolf said.

They learned it one little trend at a time. It started in the 1980s – not so long ago for a major culture change, Wolf said. Such Manhattan restaurateurs as Drew Nieporent and Danny Meyer were leaders. Chef-owned restaurants like Wolfgang Puck's Spago, and the burgeoning wine scene in California contributed. Economic upswings like the dot-com bubble and setbacks like the stock market crash of 1987 and the aftermath of Sept. 11 played roles.

"Every time there's an economic downturn, the food gets better in this country," Wolf said. "If you can't afford to go to Italy, you can buy a \$30 bottle of Italian extra virgin olive oil."

When LuShane's in Nyack opened in the late 1990s, dining at the bar was big. In 2002, Craft took the tablecloths off. Small plates were all the rage at Aperitivo Plus in Larchmont last year.

And everyone has learned from the success of chain restaurants, whether the national ones or the mini-empires of restaurateurs like Jim Sullivan and Jan Fabry, who own five local restaurants, including Lexington Square Café in Mount Kisco.

"Fine dining has learned that you can replicate and duplicate," said Tankel of Apple Metro. "It was unheard-of for a chef to have 10 restaurants, and they've learned from casual dining that you can do it. It's all about having recipes you can replicate, and training."

Restaurant owners just need to fill seats. As Americans become more sophisticated about food, more people are opening restaurants, and the competition gets fiercer, Crabtree said. To accommodate dress-down diners, he plans to open a new upscale-casual restaurant. He hasn't chosen a name, though the words "Wine Tavern" will be part of it. He hasn't decided whether there will be tablecloths, but jeans will be the norm.

But all things are cyclical, and some day, you might see jackets and ties at the Wine Tavern – or even on the airplane.

"At some point you hit a brick wall, and I'm waiting for us to get there," Baldrige said. "Because once we run into it and skin our noses on it, we will turn around and go back. We're going through a revolution right now, and I think we're going to come out of it in much better shape."

The scene will be altered, but there will be a return to elegant dining someday, Kelly said. Perhaps in anticipation, he is opening a new restaurant, X20, which he says will have the trappings of both Xaviars at Piermont, his high-end restaurant, and Restaurant X in Congers, which is more casual.

"There's a whole generation that has grown up in this more relaxed style of dining," he said. "Formal dining will be a new experience for them – and they will like it." Where to dine

The old guard – formerly formal restaurants

Auberge Argenteuil, Hartsdale – closed.

Auberge Maxime, North Salem – now called Vox.

Maison Lafitte, Briarcliff – now called Tara on Hudson.

Maxime's, Granite Springs – now called Traditions 118.

Xaviars at Garrison – now called Tavern at the Highlands Country Club.

The new guard – a sample of upscale-casual restaurants

Chiboust, Tarrytown

Lia's, Hartsdale

Ruby's Oyster Bar & Bistro, Rye

Wasabi, Nyack

Zuppa, Yonkers

Where jackets are still requested

The Arch, Brewster

Equus, Tarrytown

La Crémaillère, Banksville

La Panetière, Rye

Xaviars at Piermont