

NEW YORK

THE RESTAURANT REVIEW

Humble As an Apple

Braeburn is a simple restaurant for simple times.



(Photo: Hannah Whitaker/New York Magazine)

By Adam Platt Published Mar 15, 2009

Not so very long ago, new restaurant rollouts in this town were conceived along the lines of Colin Powell's famous doctrine for military engagement: If you're going to fight, use overwhelming force. Restaurateurs shocked diners with giant, spangled rooms, awed them with inventive culinary techniques executed by imperious superstar chefs, then pummeled them into submission with a multitude of menu choices and highly sugared cocktail drinks. But these days, with the city's upmarket restaurant community tucked in a protective crouch, culinary entrepreneurs have something more elemental in mind. At all levels, glitz and grandeur have been replaced by simplicity and economy. Neighborliness and congeniality are in, and destination dining is out. Your goal, if you're crazy enough to open a new restaurant in the midst of this economic tsunami, isn't to dazzle, distract, or even entertain. It's to cut your costs as much as possible, provide a soothing bunker of comfort for your customers, and, above all else, survive.

Everything about Braeburn, which opened a few months ago on the corner of Perry and Greenwich Streets, on the western fringes of the West Village, seems calculated to induce a sense of almost somnolent calm. There is the lilting, vaguely clichéd, bucolic-sounding name. There are the decorative pinecones and apples (in keeping with the restaurant's name) strewn around the entrance (which prompted my wife to label the restaurant "Gramercy Tavern Lite"). There is the promise of a sturdy, though elegant, brunch on the weekends (biscuits and gravy, poached eggs with duck confit, cheddar grits) and the presence of daily blue-plate specials on the dinner menu (macaroni and cheese on Mondays, chicken pot pie on Wednesdays, braised-short-rib pot au feu on Saturday night). There is the use of what appear to be birch-tree saplings as a prominent decorative motif, and the display, in the little dining room, of a breezy, wall-size painting depicting a silhouette of barns, a stand of trees, and one or two contentedly grazing sheep.

“This is all very New Canaan,” someone said, as we squeezed into our little wooden chairs, at our little wooden table. Nor was the generic, slightly twee vibe in the joint greatly relieved by the clientele, some of whom wore thick cable sweaters and employed bifocals to peer at their menus through the faux-candlelight gloom. But Braeburn has what most bourgeois little dining establishments in the wilds of suburban Connecticut do not. It has the services of a topflight New York City chef, Brian Bistrong, who ran the kitchen for several years at the Harrison, in Tribeca. Bistrong’s mentor was Jimmy Bradley, one of the originators of high-end, bistro-style American restaurant cuisine. So the menu at this unassuming little restaurant is filled with all sorts of Bradleyesque elevated-barnyard treats, like pots of cauliflower tossed with raisins and buttery bread crumbs, hand-rolled pasta folded with bitter greens and bits of braised rabbit, and rigorously sourced artisanal lamb loin, cut in delicate slices and set in a spicy chickpea stew, spiked with preserved lemon.

Braeburn isn’t a particularly ambitious restaurant (there are only seven appetizers, six entrées, and four desserts), but none of the items my little band of tasters and I sampled was bad, and many of them were quite good. The first thing out of the kitchen was a nourishing quail sausage, served over sweet figs, a bed of puréed sauerkraut, and a soothing slick of yogurt. After that came two elegantly articulated, if small, salads, one made with roasted beets and slivers of Braeburn apple, the other with house-smoked brook trout touched with horseradish and cream. Bistrong’s wan version of clam chowder had too much dill in it and not enough pork, and a strange creation called “Corned Beef of Short Rib” tasted more or less like a corned-beef sandwich, only deconstructed. These underwhelming appetizers were followed, however, by a helping of fat, perfectly seared sea scallops (plated with gently braised endives and a sweet walnut purée), and my wife liked her hand-rolled rabbit pasta so much that she refused to give me a second bite.

My wife enjoyed a lot of the food she tasted at Braeburn. She enjoyed it so much, in fact, that she did what she almost never does when dining with her grumpy, sauce-stained husband in strange, random restaurants: She asked to come back. Chefs around town tend to prepare skate in the same redundant, Francophile way, but Bistrong rolls his in bread crumbs and sets it with wilted spinach and Japanese mushrooms in a rich broth flavored with mussels. The priciest item on the menu is a hunk of New York strip (\$32), which was fatty and undercharred when I tried it, although the sturdy short-rib pot au feu (served Saturdays for \$24, with apple sausages and lots of root vegetables) is rich and nourishing enough for two. The duck breast (sliced and served with Brussels sprouts on a bed of wheat berries) and country chicken (drizzled with brown butter and lemons) are competent renditions of these standard haute-barnyard dishes. But neither was quite as good as the lamb loin, which combines classic French technique with the unexpected spiciness of Moroccan cuisine and costs only \$24.

I never tried the butter-poached lobster at Braeburn (special, on Fridays), or the chicken pot pie (Wednesdays), but my daughter Jane can attest to the quality of the crunchy, sweet French toast, which is flavored with a touch of citrus and made from chunks of Italian bread baked fresh at Il Forno in the Bronx. The weekend-brunch cheddar burger isn’t bad, either, and neither are the poached eggs, which are dropped into a mini duck-confit cassoulet and accompanied by a slice of toasted baguette. The restaurant’s modestly priced (\$8) desserts include a little stack of surprisingly edible doughnut holes, piled like little cannonballs, with apple-cider-flavored syrup on the side. If you like banana desserts (I don’t), you might enjoy the banana pudding, with southern-style vanilla cookies, and if you like lemons (I do), order the creamy Meyer-lemon tart, with a brûlée top. For sheer impact, however, I recommend the chocolate bread pudding. This heavy-ordnance dessert is dense, like a brownie, and saturated with enough high-grade chocolate to make even the most grizzled restaurant veteran smile.

Braeburn

Address: 117 Perry St., nr. Greenwich St.; 212-255-0696

Hours: Dinner: Monday through Thursday 5:30 to 10 p.m., Friday and Saturday 5:30 to 11 p.m., Sunday 5 to 9 p.m. Brunch: Saturday and Sunday 11 a.m. to 3 p.m.

Prices: Appetizers, \$10 to \$14; entrées, \$20 to \$32.

Ideal Meal: Sea scallops or quail sausage, loin of lamb, Meyer-lemon tart. French toast or poached eggs and duck confit at brunch.

Note: In keeping with the apple theme, the bar offers a small but good selection of hard ciders.

Scratchpad: This isn’t a destination restaurant, but it’s a solid addition to the neighborhood. And in this, the age of the neighborhood restaurant, one star is nearly the equivalent of two.