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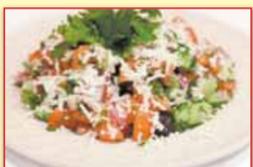


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County continued from D1

The result, though elegant, doesn't detract from the comfortable vibe. “I wanted to have a place I could go, feel comfortable, that was nice but not too fussy. ... One of my regulars said, ‘I love it because I can come in my sweats and it's cool.’”

“To me part of it is building community. I think people are hungry for that, especially in a city like New York City. It can feel something so anonymous,” Polo said.

Most of the time, jazz from the Great American Songbook is on the playlist, with lounge music on the weekends.

An Early Start

When County's executive chef Jon Feshan was young, he visited his father's catering hall kitchen in Tehran, Iran. The catering hall and restaurant was massive, a five-story building, with 3,000 seats. He was so excited by the sight of the chefs working there—with their white jackets, their tall hats, the efficiency of their movements—he thought, he had to learn their craft. “I didn't know what was going on, but I was really impressed and inspired.”

When he approached the chef, a tall man from Austria, he was told, “I don't care whose son you are, [that] your dad's the boss or whatever. I'm going to have you peel potatoes and onions,” Feshan recalls. “No problem,” he answered. He almost cut off part of his finger cutting eggplant, but he was hooked.

“I went back again and again, to the point that my dad stopped me, because I was about to drop out of school,” he said. He was 11 or 12 at the time.

It wasn't until 1997, after he had left Iran and moved to the United States, that cooking called out to him again. After some time in Los Angeles, he moved to New York City, working for David Burke, and then for Jean-Georges Vongerichten's ABC Kitchen as a sous chef. Working for Vongerichten was one of the best work experiences he had. “You have to forget about everything you know, you have to relearn everything. He taught me you can make food out of everything—out of everything,” Feshan said.

Surprises

The menu at County changes seasonally—and that doesn't mean only four times a year. Feshan is keen on working with ingredients at their prime.

“If it's not in season I cannot use it because it's not going to look the same, it's not going to taste the same,” said Feshan.

“If I let him, he'd change it every other day,” quipped Polo.

When I visited County recently, looking at the salads alone, I saw apples, Bibb lettuce, fennel, and kale.

As much as possible, condiments and pickles are made in-house.

One popular starter—a must—is the homemade ricotta and honey, served with grilled slices of bread (\$10). It probably doesn't get simpler than this but quality ingredients make all the difference, from the local honey, which chef Feshan buys at the Union Square Greenmarket to the freshly made ricotta, smooth, creamy, without any trace of graininess. The ricotta is accompanied by a touch of delicate Arbequina olive oil, mint, and chili flakes. As tempting as it is, don't fill up on this; there's more to come.

Feshan gets a heads-up from his fish purveyors at Gotham Seafood about what fish are coming in. The black cod on my plate is about as fresh as it comes; it's excellent. Part of its deliciousness lies in its architect-



Homemade ricotta and honey, served with country bread.



Braised short ribs with red wine glaze, maple celery root puree, and citrus salad.

ture and how it gets you to play hide-and-seek with the ingredients. One bite gets you fish and sweet onion purée, and another might get you earthy roasted beets, cauliflower, and pistachio nuts. The different and possible permutations keep you interested.

I start to think that I'm probably going off the deep end, thinking I'm playing childhood games with my dinner. But when I spoke later to Feshan, I realized part of his intention is to make sure diners don't get bored.

“The idea is that is if you try something, there's always a little surprise in it,” he said.

That might throw you off if you're expecting something else, or even if you're not expecting anything, in the case of our staff

photographer, who unsuspectingly bit into the salad of Bibb lettuce, apples, and spiced walnuts without reading the menu first (\$16). And boy, were those walnuts spicy!

The short ribs, which are marinated overnight in red wine, and slowly braised for eight hours, are then finished in a reduction of their own braising liquid (\$20). They're tender, with all the depth and warmth of red wine, perfect for winter, but the surprise lies in their accompaniment.

Traditionalists will expect a heaping serving of mashed potatoes or polenta, which is perfect to send you into a long, deep hibernation. But here, at the moment anyway, it comes with a maple celery root purée, and a parsley citrus salad. Rather



Apple walnut salad: Bibb lettuce, spiced walnuts, and parmesan vinaigrette.