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## Restaurants

By RUTH REICHL

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Not Terrance Brennan. When he opened Picholine (pronounced peesh-oh-LEEN) in 1993, it instantly became one of the best restaurants around Lincoln Center; it was popular, too. People filled the rustic rooms before and after the symphony, the opera and the ballet. But good enough was apparently not good enough for Mr. Brennan: he has pushed himself and his staff to make Picholine the best restaurant in the area.

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And he has succeeded. From the welcome at the door to the wine list, everything about Picholine has improved. Mr. Brennan has installed a cheese cave and hired a maitre de fromage to buy and age the cheeses. He has created one of the city's prettiest private dining rooms (it seats just six). He has hired an excellent maitre d'hotel. He has improved his wine list. Most important, the food keeps getting better.

Mr. Brennan named his restaurant after a Mediterranean olive for a reason. He loves the food of the region, and from the beginning he focused his menu on southern France, Italy, Greece and Morocco. Meals begin with good house-made breads, bowls of the tiny olives and olive oil. It is sunny food with warm flavors. But recently Mr. Brennan seems to have been letting his culinary imagination wander in other directions as well.

Picholine still serves beautifully cooked whole fish for two, boned at the table; anyone who wants to eat lightly will be happy here. Salmon in a horseradish crust is one of Mr. Brennan's signature dishes, and it is excellent. So is his poached halibut on eggplant pancakes. But the menu now also features robust dishes from the north, like daube of beef short ribs with a horseradish-potato puree, and a hearty cassoulet. And as you might expect from someone with such a passion for cheese, Mr. Brennan loves rich flavors. He is at his best when he lets his lavish side roam free.

So while he offers lovely oysters on the half shell, it is his oyster fricassee that I find myself yearning for. The blend of cream, gently poached Pemaquid oysters, salsify, leeks and potatoes is fabulous. Topped with caviar, an option, it is even better. In white truffle season he was serving fingerling

potatoes, smashed with nothing more than butter, tiny grains of kosher salt and shaved white truffles; it was simple luxury at its best. And he does extraordinary things with foie gras. In the fall he served it with grains and pomegranate, but by winter the dish had segued into foie gras with blood oranges and pistachios, a dish that mediates the richness of the liver in a particularly wonderful way.

Mr. Brennan also has a way with game. One night he served wild Scottish hare in a sauce laced with chocolate. On the side was a squash gratin. The combination may have been unusual but it worked because the chocolate was more bitter than sweet and it brought out the gamey quality of the hare. The squash added the needed note of sweetness. Another night there was pheasant, so wild the waiter warned diners to beware of buckshot, with roasted chestnuts, savoy cabbage, foie gras and pureed celery root. It was an earthy, intense combination.

The homey dishes are also wonderful. One cold, snowy night there was a chestnut and fennel soup dotted with slices of sausage that was the most perfect winter dish I've ever eaten. Mr. Brennan makes a terrific cassoulet in the style of Toulouse, rich with duck confit. And the Moroccan spiced loin of lamb, served on a bed of couscous with a minted yogurt, is excellent.

I have only one quarrel with Mr. Brennan's cooking: he has a tendency to excess when he cooks pasta and risotto. He throws so many ingredients into these dishes that the flavors begin to obscure each other. His sheep's milk ricotta gnocchi are wonderful, but they are overwhelmed by wild mushrooms, chard, butternut squash and cheese. And his wildly popular wild mushroom and duck risotto with butternut squash and white truffle oil just has too much stuff in it for me.

But this same enthusiasm leads to one of the city's most extravagant cheese carts. Picholine has made an extraordinary commitment to the food that Clifton Fadiman called "milk's leap toward immortality." I dare anyone to listen to the maitre de fromage, Max McCalman, talk about his cheese and not order something. He speaks so lovingly, and with such knowledge that I long to taste each cheese that he describes. Personally, I've given up on dessert at Picholine.

And that's a shame. Because the desserts are excellent. My current favorites are the apple empanada served with cinnamon ice cream and the beautiful lemon curd napoleon.

I wasn't crazy about Picholine when it opened. And I still find myself wishing that the room, which is modestly attractive, were as impressive as the food and the service. But Terrance Brennan could have done very well without changing a thing, and when a chef uses his success to push himself to further heights, you have to admire him.

Picholine \*\*\*

35 West 64th Street, Manhattan, (212) 724-8585. Atmosphere: Those who rush in for dinner before or after the opera are as comfortable as the casually dressed people who stroll into the rustic room for a leisurely meal. Service: Very accomplished. Recommended dishes: Fricasee of oysters, peeky toe crab meat salad, foie gras with blood orange vinaigrette, ceviche of black sea bass with sea urchin vinaigrette, grilled octopus, wild Scottish pheasant, Moroccan spiced loin of lamb, whole roasted fish for two, truffle-larded sea scallops, tournedos of salmon, cassoulet, daube of beef short ribs, cheese, lemon curd napoleon, apple empanada, sorbets and ice creams. Wine list: Good, and the staff is knowledgeable and helpful. There are some nice choices among the smaller French wines, and some good American pinot noirs.