



Picholine

Picholine Nouveau

Terrance Brennan gives his venerable flagship a deft makeover. BY ADAM PLATT

AS ANY STYLE-CONSCIOUS grande dame can tell you, the successful full-body makeover is a most delicate thing. Major overhauls are similarly tricky in the restaurant world, especially when a great, or even semi-great, establishment begins drifting, after decades of bouquets and acclaim, into its dowager years. And these days, dowager restaurants are in distress all over town. As the old Franco-centric, Continental style of dining melts away, fusty venues are being abandoned (La Caravelle) and age-old formulas are being radically retooled (LCB Brasserie, né La Côte Basque). Venerable restaurateurs find themselves tactfully deciding whether to tweak formerly stylish looks or to blow them up altogether. Should one use a little appliqué here and there or purchase a new set of cheekbones, a whole new wardrobe, and a line of brightly colored wigs? How do you do all this without losing your identity? And if it's appliqué you're using, how do you appeal to a more youthful crowd without startling your faithful though increasingly aged clientele?

Terrance Brennan's flagship restaurant,

Picholine, isn't particularly old by dowager standards. It opened in 1993, across from Lincoln Center, and quickly developed a reputation for the exceptional quality of Brennan's Provençal-accented cooking, and for its cheese cart, laboriously put together by the city's first celebrity *maitre fromager*, Max McCalman. Picholine never won any awards for its looks, however. Over the years, the windowless rooms have undergone a series of minor renovations, each one more dowdy and dated than the next. Mercifully, the baroque peach-colored paint is now gone, replaced with a silvery shade of mauve. The grandma-style sconces have disappeared, in favor of tall, silk-shaded lamps with an elegant seashell design. The bar area, so beloved by crowds of champagne-swilling opera loons, has been retooled, too, in tones of fresh Martha Stewart white (it used to be olive green), and although the lighting is still a little flat, the overall effect seems updated and clean, in a muted sort of way, even stylishly debonair.

The real focus of any serious restaurant makeover, however, is the food, of course. And the first place to taste the

new culinary innovations at Picholine is the bar menu, which features flavors not from tired old Provence but from that new hotbed of culinary fashion, Spain. These include servings of shrimp folded with smoked paprika, deposits of paella wrapped in crispy spring-roll skins ("paella spring rolls"), and decorative glasses of sherry-flavored sorbet stuck with giant plumes of crackly, baked serrano ham. "How did he think this one up?" asked a chef friend of mine, as he used one of the salty ham chips to scoop up the sweet, boozy sorbet. I was thinking the same thing when the waiter presented us with what looked like a little foie gras terrine. Only it wasn't foie gras; it was a finely whipped "trifle" of assorted game-bird innards (pheasant, partridge, pigeon), layered with a mousseline made from Jerusalem artichokes. The rich trifle was smoothed out by the creamy mousseline, and came together in a most pleasing, luxurious way when you spread it over slabs of truffled toast.

The main menu at Picholine has been similarly revamped by Brennan and his chef de cuisine, Craig Hopson, and is now divided, according to today's prevailing styles of simplicity and artisanal correctness, into categories like Preludes, Day Boats, and The Land. Some dishes predate the restaurant's makeover, but many are new. The excellent "Bacon and Eggs" consists of a simple polenta, served with shavings of smoky tuna bacon, more truffle toast, and a poached egg. For something a little more opulent, try the sea-urchin panna cotta, which is topped with caviar, and presented with seaweed-flecked rice biscuits tucked in white linen. My mother, who knows a deft makeover when she sees one, commented favorably on her serving of fat, buttery gnocchi (made with sheep's-milk ricotta, and mixed with shrimp and chanterelles), but the dish I liked best was the squid-ink linguine. It consisted of a tangle of dark pasta set in an inventive, delicately spicy "paella" broth (made with lobster and chicken stock, saffron, and almonds), and topped off with a creamy aioli spiked with bits of chorizo.

Like most serious-minded chefs, Brennan has worked in France (his mentor was Roger Vergé at the famous Côte d'Azur restaurant Le Moulin de Mougins), and his cooking is steeped in Continental traditions and technique. This fall, there's a tasting menu of game birds available at Picholine ("Birdshot may be present,"

★★★★
Picholine
35 W. 64th St.,
nr. Broadway
212-724-8585

★★★★ ETHEREAL

★★★★ EXCEPTIONAL

★★★ EXCELLENT

★★ VERY GOOD

★ GOOD

NO STARS NOT RECOMMENDED

advises the menu), and old-fashioned dishes like saddle of lamb and venison are as classically elegant as any in town. But like any inspired makeover artist, Brennan also has a knack for taking the most dated, even elderly, preparations and making them new. If you want a helping of the great Alsatian specialty choucroute garnie, you'll find that your cabbage and pork belly arrive at the table smothered not with sausages but bundled (with a refined mustard and beurre rouge sauce) in a perfectly cooked piece of skate. Chicken Kiev is on the menu, too, but it's updated and refined by Brennan in a most ingenious way. Instead of butter, the heirloom chicken is filled with liquefied foie gras laced with truffles, which is released over a bed of mushrooms when the waiter pricks the dish with a tiny silver sword.

Despite all the new touches, dinner at Picholine still unfolds in a refreshingly old-fashioned way. In a town filled with barn-size dining rooms, the space is still small enough to be intimate but just large enough to be grand, and on opera evenings, it's a pleasure to see one or two ladies enjoying their dinner in frilly, wide-brimmed hats. Dessert retains a special place in this stately ritual, but at Picholine, it's invariably overshadowed by the cheese. McCalman still trundles his cheese cart among the tables, and to simplify the selection process, there are now \$18 cheese plates available, each arranged by country. You can complement these with a variety of new desserts, the best of which tend to be traditionalist items formulated, again, with a slightly modern twist. I liked the caramel apple brioche, molded into the shape of a little bread loaf. My mother liked the chocolate soufflé, which comes with a racy scoop of fennel ice cream. "Mmmm," she said, dipping her spoon, ever so delicately, into the dark, fluffy chocolate. "They do this just right."

SCRATCHPAD

Three stars for general excellence, and one more to Brennan for deftly combining old-fashioned grandeur with the shock of the new.

BITES

IDEAL MEAL: Bar-menu tasting, "Bacon and Eggs" or squid-ink linguine, chicken Kiev, warm apple brioche. **NOTE:** Among the cheese plates, our favorite included Constant Bliss, Bartlett Blue, and Uplands Pleasant Ridge Reserve, all from the good ol' USA. **HOURS:** Monday through Wednesday 5 to 10 p.m. Thursday through Saturday to 11:45. Sunday to 9. **PRICES:** Bar-menu tasting, \$15 to \$18. Main menu, two courses for \$64 (\$14 for each additional course).

Asian Pears

IN SEASON

There are over 100 varieties of this mildly sweet and juicy fruit available in Japan. So it's odd that in the United States, where you can find at least a couple dozen, they're rarely categorized by their individual names. Nevertheless, they all share a spectacular crunchiness, which makes them ideal for winter salads like the one below from Iron Chef and Asian-pear aficionado Masaharu Morimoto.

R.R. & R. P.

MORIMOTO'S
ASIAN-PEAR SALAD

1 large Asian pear
Juice of 1 lemon
1 cup plum wine
2 tablespoons white balsamic vinegar

1 shallot, finely minced
6 ounces olive oil
Salt and white pepper
to taste
4 bunches mâche, washed

1 tablespoon fresh chives, cut
into half-inch pieces
2 tablespoons toasted
hazelnuts, coarsely chopped

(1) Cut the Asian pear into julienne strips. Place in cold water with the lemon juice and reserve. For the vinaigrette: In a saucepan, bring plum wine to a simmer and reduce to $\frac{1}{4}$ cup. (2) Combine with the vinegar, minced shallot, and the olive oil. Season to taste with the salt and white pepper. (3) To plate, toss the julienned Asian pear with the mâche, chives, and enough vinaigrette to coat. Adjust seasoning. Place in the center of a plate, drizzle with remaining vinaigrette and sprinkle with toasted hazelnuts. Serves 4.

