

RESTAURANTS | PETE WELLS

Fluent in French, With Perfect Inflection

A SoHo cafe makes the classics with every detail in place.

THE CLASSIC CAFES of Parisian boulevards — rattan chairs and their occupants facing the sun in all but the nastiest weather, waiters stepping nimbly over small dogs — are central to the city's street culture, but they're pretty marginal to its eating and drinking culture now.

Cafes may have been known for their namesake drink in Voltaire's day, but since then their coffee has become internationally notorious. Today the Parisian love of caffeine is more likely to be consumed over flat whites, cortados or, most un-French of all, filtered coffee at a third-wave espresso shop.

Meanwhile the pillars of the cafe menu — those blunt salads, trusty omelets and utilitarian ham sandwiches — are not exactly drawing crowds like the shakshukas, pan-cakes, avocado toasts and açai bowls found at younger cafes like Ob-La-Di and Holy-belly.

With some searching, you can probably find cafes in France that produce the standards with conviction. Or you can go to La Mercerie, in SoHo, for simple, determinedly old-school French cooking with every detail in place.

The chef, Marie-Aude Rose, does not make toasts, but she makes toast soldiers: sticks of white bread with butter smeared along their browned surfaces, but otherwise naked so they can drink up the orange yolk of a soft-cooked egg on a ceramic pedestal.

For the last four months, Ms. Rose has been cooking as if the fate of the planet depended on the tenderness of her cheese omelets, the judiciousness of her vinaigrettes, the airy spaces in her croissants and the crackle of the buckwheat in her savory crepes.

If those feats were as easy as they sound, La Mercerie's breakfast-through-dinner menu wouldn't be a major addition to the city's restaurant scene. But they aren't, and it is, and some of the thanks goes to Ms. Rose's hard-core training when she was embedded in the unforgiving kitchens of Guy Savoy and Pierre Gagnaire.

Then, like a lot of aspiring chefs of her generation, she heard the call of the bionomie movement, and went looking for a less cloistered restaurant. What she found was Spring, a new, relaxed, seasonally attentive place where an American named Daniel Rose was doing all the cooking himself. After she turned up, something clicked and the restaurant began to get attention around Paris and abroad. Her sensibilities overlapped with Mr. Rose's in other ways; the two started dating and later married, opening additional places along the way.

The Roses moved to New York about two years ago when Daniel opened Le Coucou, his tribute to the Le and La restaurants of old. La Mercerie, three blocks west, was not in their plans until Le Coucou's chief owner, Stephen Starr, was brought on to operate a cafe inside a furniture and housewares store being planned by Le Coucou's design firm, Roman and Williams.

La Mercerie sits at the junction of two mighty rivers of contemporary eating trends: the redundantly, if catchily, named all-day-cafe movement and the restaurant-

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as-shopping-catalog approach pursued by Jean-Georges Vongerichten's places inside ABC Carpet & Home.

When you sit down for breakfast (or lunch, or dinner — see, all day) at La Mercerie, you will get, in addition to a menu, a card printed with small line drawings of every piece of tableware in the cafe, and its price. If you are very taken by the “rustic washed linen napkins” you can buy a set for \$104. For \$275, there is a small teapot from a Danish potter who has supplied Noma. If this is outside your budget, you can still use them at La Mercerie for an hour or two before you have to give them back, like a rented tux of rustic washed linen.

As borrowed lifestyles go, it's a pretty nice one. Many of the servers are dressed in high-waist, loose-leg trousers and flowing white dress shirts, as if they were in costume for a Fred Astaire movie. Meanwhile, the customers never seem to be rushed or out of sorts, and I started to wonder if they were all extras being paid to sit there looking serene. Or maybe eating next to a room full of expensive vases, Swedish sheepskins, enormous woven baskets and antique tables makes everybody feel as if they



Top, the dining room at La Mercerie. Top right, the chef, Marie-Aude Rose. Middle, a salade niçoise. Above, white asparagus.

are one of the exhibits in a small museum.

The theme of the merchandise is craft — it's all handmade — and Ms. Rose has taken this to heart in her kitchen. La Mercerie's chicken bouillon is simmered and skimmed just the way it should be. Marked by balance and brightness, it is oolong tea to bone broth's double espresso. Also in the bowl are an egg with a liquid yolk and, down at the bottom, a flock of herb-pasta butterflies, each one the size of the tip of your pinkie.

Ms. Rose's pastries are already some of the finest in the city. Croissants have crisp whorls on top that you can count like tree rings; the savory ones are filled with ham and Comté, or broccoli and cherry tomatoes in custard, which may not sound good but is.

More exotic is the tourteau fromagé, a palm-size cheesecake with a blackened, domed top. Born in Poitou-Charentes, it looks something like a Boston cream doughnut, but its interior is a moist, fine-crumb cake that tastes, just barely, of fresh goat cheese. Ms. Rose serves it with a poached apricot in star-anise syrup. If you are a serious pastry watcher, you will want to add it to your life list.

Having recently run up against a crème brûlée that seemed to contain no eggs and a plate of profiteroles allowed to get soggy at a purportedly French restaurant nearby, I was relieved to sink into the yolk-rich crème caramel and crisp choux puffs under bitter-sweet chocolate sauce at La Mercerie.

A devout and often disappointed Francophile I ate with eyed the crepes au sucré warily. “The sugar had better be crunchy,” she said. It was, of course.

The menu changes once a day, at noon. The soft-cooked egg goes away, replaced by the omelet. Four main courses arrive, including a very nice piece of roasted salmon with red-wine sauce. Salads appear.

It is almost impossible to rave convincingly about salads, so please trust me that La Mercerie's are great, particularly the niçoise, with tuna preserved in oil on the premises and anchovies cured in oil at the source, the Cantabrian Sea.

The same anchovies, swimming on the



LA MERCERIE ★★

53 HOWARD STREET (MERCER STREET), SOHO; 212-852-9097; LAMERCERIECAFE.COM

Atmosphere A corner cafe, sun-filled by day and candlelit after dark, with unusually handsome plates, glasses and so forth — all for sale.

Service Has a charm, finesse and poise you would expect in a much more expensive restaurant.

Sound level Moderate.

Recommended Egg dishes; pastries; anchovies with vanilla butter; salade niçoise; bouillon; crêpe complète; salmon in sauce meurette; all desserts.

Drinks and wine Aperitifs, beer, cider and classic and classically proportioned cocktails complement a versatile list of French wines.

Prices Appetizers and smaller plates, \$8 to \$29 (not counting the \$75 caviar and blinis); main courses, \$24 to \$36.

Open Daily for breakfast, lunch and dinner.

Reservations Accepted.

Wheelchair access The dining room is on the sidewalk level; the accessible restrooms are reached by an elevator.

What the stars mean Ratings range from zero to four stars and reflect the reviewer's reaction primarily to food, with ambience, service and price taken into consideration.

same plate as a wedge of vanilla butter, make an appetizer that you probably won't believe until you've tasted it. (The butter amplifies the richness of the fish while tamping down its sharpness.) The man who churns La Mercerie's butter, Jean-Yves Bordier, does not sell his stuff to just anybody, and the fat slices of his buckwheat and lemon-olive oil butters are worth the \$7 you pay.

Most things are so precisely as they should be that it is hard to find fault. But I am not sure that a sheet of Calvados-poached apple is of much use to a wedge of Camembert, and I wish that the boeuf bourguignon's dark and lovely sauce did not slide so easily off the smooth macaroni Ms. Rose sets under the stew. Maybe the buckwheat crepe curled above the creamed chicken reminded me a bit too much of a dosa. But the one around ham, Comté and a fried egg is reassuringly folded like an envelope.

The wine list is full of the amenably drinkable bottles you want with this food. As for the coffee, it too is drinkable — one of the rare departures from French cafe tradition.

HUNGRY CITY | LIGAYA MISHAN

Modern Russian Dumplings That Nod to the Past

At a small Brooklyn shop, the pelmeni are cooked to order.

LAST JUNE, Luda's Dumplings, a small pelmeni shop, pitched its yellow-and-white-striped awning on Shore Parkway in Sheepshead Bay, Brooklyn, an overpass away from the waterfront, where leafy trees hush the grumble of cars.

Inside, pelmeni are cooked to order, glossed with drops of clarified butter and tumbled into cardboard boxes. Each is crimped with a dolly-like fringe, the skin thin enough that you can see the shadows of its interior. The dough is supple but sturdy, not a mere diaphanous veil but offering a bite of its own.

The space, once an auto-leasing office, is trim and sunny, with white walls, a concrete floor and a patch of tin ceiling. There are no tables, just a few yellow stools along a marble counter. The atmosphere is distinctly minimalist and modern in a neighborhood where restaurants often unapologetically embrace the past.

But the past has a hold here, too: The owners, Eugene Tulman, who immigrated to Brooklyn from Russia as a child, and Lawrence Rafalovich, who is American-born and of Ukrainian descent, named the shop in honor of Mr. Tulman's mother, Luda.

Ms. Tulman grew up in Kazakhstan, where her family — descendants of the Volga Germans invited to settle in Russia in the 18th century by Catherine the Great — was relocated by Stalin's edict during World War II. When she arrived in Brooklyn in 1996, her neighbors quickly discovered her culinary skills and began ordering her pelmeni for parties.

With the help of her husband and two sons, Ms. Tulman opened two restaurants (one now under a new name and ownership, the other shuttered) and ran factories that supplied pelmeni and crepes to New York, New Jersey and Connecticut. But after her death in 2012, her younger son, Eugene, grew disenchanted with how far the factories' products had strayed from his mother's original cooking.

At Luda's Dumplings, where he is the



chef, Eugene pledged to follow his mother's precepts — always use the freshest ingredients; mix everything by hand — if not exactly her recipe. The dough, for example, is made with organic flour and is “not as soft” as with traditional pelmeni, he said; growing up in Sheepshead Bay, a historically Italian neighborhood, he fell in love with pasta and wanted the dumplings to have a texture closer to al dente.

Of the six fillings available, the most robust and wintry in spirit is Siberian-style beef and pork, here grass-fed Angus beef shoulder and pastured pork butt, ground in-house and evenly split so neither lords over the other. One pierce, and the juices run.

In other versions, a mash of potato and Cheddar has surprising buoyancy, and

Luda's Dumplings, which opened last June in Sheepshead Bay, Brooklyn, is named after the mother of the chef, Eugene Tulman, who owns the shop with Lawrence Rafalovich. Above right, poached egg tops a serving of potato dumplings.



LUDA'S DUMPLINGS

3371 SHORE PARKWAY (SHEEPSHEAD BAY ROAD), SHEEPSHEAD BAY, BROOKLYN; 347-566-0604; LUDASDUMPLINGS.COM

Recommended Pork-and-beef dumplings with roasted mushrooms and dill; spinach-and-cheese dumplings with pickled jalapeño slices and roasted garlic; potato-and-cheese dumplings with poached egg, parsley and sliced pickle.

Drinks and wine No alcohol.

Prices \$3.99 to \$11.99.

Open Daily for lunch and early dinner.

Reservations Not accepted.

Wheelchair access The entrance is on the same level as the sidewalk. The counter for eating is too high for a wheelchair. There is no public restroom.



PHOTOGRAPHS BY SASHA MASLOV FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

spinach, melded with feta, Parmesan and mozzarella, retains its vivid green. But pulverized shrimp loses some of its briny character, muffled by Parmesan and ricotta inside a dough stained pink by beet juice.

All are enhanced by a choice of three toppings per order, among them soul-brightening dill, mushrooms chopped and sautéed until almost duxelles and slightly carnal, and roasted garlic minced so fine, it's undetectable to the eye but an insistent imprint on the tongue.

Best are pickled jalapeño slices, which give a little jump to the meal. (Higher-end toppings, for a \$1 premium, include a drape of melted mozzarella, snippets of bacon and a poached egg that when slashed unleashes its caldron of yolk.)

Each order comes with two sauces, for dipping or pouring. For those who hew to tradition, there's the bracing simplicity of vinegar or the velvety soft landing of sour cream, perhaps even better mixed together.

More maverick are variations of sour cream spiked with, by turns, raw garlic, Sriracha, chipotle, horseradish and pickled jalapeño, each with its own clarifying flare. “I know my mom would yell at me if she saw some of these things,” Mr. Tulman said.

Old-school pelmeni molds, looking like panels of honeycomb, hang above the counter. But Mr. Tulman shapes his pelmeni on a machine visible in the next room, built in Russia and customized with extra rollers so as not to overheat the dough when it's compressed.

For dessert, there are slightly damp farmer cheese pelmeni with cocoa-infused skins, nicely muddled with sour cherries and chocolate flakes that promptly wilt into sauce. A lighter finish comes with kompot, a decidedly sweet fruit punch. It's another nod to Luda, although Mr. Tulman allows that he's been “experimenting” with the likes of pineapple and mango.

“Things in Russia we never had,” he said.