

New York: Variations on a Theme Restaurant

Morandi

211 Waverly Place, near
Seventh Avenue South
tel 212.627.7575, www.morandiny.com
open every day from 8 a.m.
(10 a.m. on weekends)
\$30 to \$40 at lunch and \$50 to \$75 at
dinner (before wine)

Balthazar

80 Spring Street, at Crosby Street
tel 212.941.0364, www.balthazarny.com
open every day from 7:30 a.m.
(8:30 a.m. on weekends)
about \$30 at lunch and about \$55 at
dinner (before wine)

As I dip bread with a dark, thick crust and pull-apart crumb into the remains of a rich wild boar *ragù* with the woody flavors of juniper and bay, the



Looking into the dining room at Morandi

negative critical reaction to Morandi, the trendy trattoria in which I am enjoying yet another satisfying meal, puzzles me. I have the same reaction every time I eat here, which is often, since it's close to my office. Most of the friends I bring share my befuddlement. With good food, an affordable wine list, a comfortable dining room, hospitable servers, and a handsome crowd, you would think restaurateur Keith McNally had orchestrated another critical success.

McNally has long been a darling of the media and style makers. (This, even after having become the object of a yet unresolved lawsuit by waiters who claim unfair tipping distribution practices.) A 2004 *New York Times* profile called him "the restaurateur who invented downtown." Anna Wintour is an old friend. Decades after his eateries open, they still teem with trendsetters. In TriBeCa, Odeon is pushing 30 and it's packed every night. In SoHo, Balthazar has turned ten and dinner reservations are difficult to get even months in advance. In the Meatpacking District, at the

seven-year-old Patis the wait for a table on a Saturday afternoon can exceed two hours. And at any of these restaurants the sleekly dressed, Euro-inflected crowds can make an unsuspecting out-of-towner feel out of fashion and out of synch.

What makes Morandi different? While the same McNally restaurant groupies seem to populate the trattoria's rough-hewn wood tables, the critics are unimpressed. In *New York* magazine, Adam Platt called Morandi a "misstep," awarding it one out of a possible five stars. *The New York Times's* Frank Bruni declared that McNally "miscalculated with this restaurant." No one seemed able to explain how chef Jody Adams's Italian cooking could have been so spot on when she was around the corner at Gusto, her previous restaurant, and now be so lackluster and contrived at Morandi. The media wanted to know what McNally was thinking when, to create the restaurant's décor, he fell back on "hokey visual motifs," in Bruni's phrase.

A recent dinner began with a pile

of *olive ascolane*, colossal green olives stuffed with pork, breaded, and deep-fried. Packed with flavor and, impressively, not greasy, these little meatballs combined the most desirable attributes of the best hors d'oeuvres — a tad too much salt, a pleasant tang, and enough heft to take the edge off hunger, which together make them addictive. A focaccia of Gorgonzola and pear arrived hot from a wood-burning oven. Though not old-school Italian, the oblong flatbread was delicate and crisp, and the toppings showed a welcome restraint. Small, tender whole artichokes were ably fried in the Roman Jewish style. A dish of grilled radicchio and melted smoked *scamorza* proved an enlightened combination, the char on the edges of the radicchio complementing the smokiness of the *scamorza* and the bitterness of the leaves cutting through the unctuousness of the molten cheese. Grilled octopus, served with slices of crisp celery and black olives, was tender enough to cut with a fork.

Zuppa di farro, a traditional Tuscan vegetable and grain soup, was studded with dark Lacinato kale (the kind known in Tuscany as *cavolo nero*); its pleasingly homemade taste came partly from chunks of fresh vegetables. An overgenerous portion of pumpkin and radicchio risotto arrived as an amorphous, pale-orange blob with scant evidence of any radicchio, but its sweet, earthy pumpkin flavor and rich, creamy texture pushed the unappetizing presentation out of our minds. The juniper-laced *ragù* of braised wild boar enveloped ribbons of paper-thin *pappardelle*. The deep, mineral-rich flavor of a hanger steak, grilled to a char but still

bloody rare inside, was as good as that of any steak I can recall.

As at every restaurant, there are occasional misses. A whole-roasted *branzino* (sea bass) ordered at lunch was not as fresh as it should have been and it was overcooked. On one occasion the chef's rendition of *cacio e pepe* — *bucatini* pasta tossed with grated pecorino and black pepper — was glued together by so much cheese that it was difficult to eat, though at other times it has been excellent. But such small errors do not sufficiently explain the disconnect between the critical consensus and my experiences at Morandi. Nor do I believe that the restaurant improved at breakneck speed following the negative reviews, although a couple of critics I confronted claimed they did notice leaps in quality from one visit to the next. (Then why not wait to review it?)

Instead, I suspect New York critics and other food intelligentsia unwittingly apply a double standard to French and Italian restaurants, evaluating French restaurants and food against an arbitrary standard of *tradition* or *classicism*, while judging Italian restaurants and food against an equally arbitrary standard of *authenticity*. We generally accept that tradition and modernity can inform each other — the way *Le Misanthrope* can be set in modern times without offending Molière — so that “traditional” French restaurants in New York are allowed to manipulate their décor and menus as long as they remain within the idiom of a French restaurant. Authenticity, on the other hand, though a slippery concept, is sacred. Restaurateurs who attempt to manipulate our idea of authentic Italian restaurants and food get a slap on the hand. Of course the search in Italy for an authentic Italian dining

Michael Harlan Turkell



experience brings up all manner of menu, décor, and hokey decoration. But that's beside the point. In the case of Morandi, McNally fiddled with a trattoria, and the slap on his hand reverberated through the press.

I looked back at the opening reviews of McNally's other restaurants to see what they revealed. “Visually, Pastis is perfect,” wrote *New York Times* critic William Grimes in 2000 about McNally's second French restaurant; almost too perfect, he qualified. “To one side of the bar there's an inspired touch, a little room stacked from floor to ceiling with bottles of Ricard.” The press also favorably greeted the bottles on the walls at Schiller's Liqueur Bar, McNally's American eatery on the Lower East Side. In the same *New York Times* profile that credited McNally with creating the vibe that has come to mean downtown New York, the reporter used the care with which McNally prepared those bottles as evidence of his attention to detail.

With bottles on their way to becoming something of a McNally signature — and taking up more space in this review than they ought to — he chose them again at Morandi. But the critical response was different. Bruni scoffed at Morandi's *fiaschi*, attributing the restaurant's “odd tone” in part to “row upon row of straw-bottomed Chianti bottles lining

the walls.” Granted, these might fall into the category of too-obvious, but McNally avoided candle-wax drips and instead transformed the bottles into a somewhat humorous decorative flourish by making them generic, uniform, and repetitive. “Is this tribute or burlesque?” Bruni asked. Like the bottles at Pastis and Schiller's, I think it's intentionally both.

In New York any French or Italian restaurant is essentially a theme restaurant, a dirty designation in fine dining circles, but an appropriate one in assessing McNally's gift. He's better than Disney at theme environments, for he not only recreates emblematic details — ceilings purposefully stained to approximate years of exposure to cigarette smoke, telephone greetings recorded by appropriately accented individuals — with the zeal of a perfectionist, but he also manages to poke a little contemporary fun in the process. Fish and chips and shepherd's pie on a brasserie menu in France? *Jamais!* Chianti flasks on the walls of a serious restaurant in Italy? *Mai!* (Though on second thought, I have seen them there.) The Italians I've taken to Morandi and the French visitors I've taken to Balthazar have had similar reactions: they laugh at the restaurants; they love them. But they certainly wouldn't mistake McNally's two restaurants for French or Italian ones. Balthazar is such a good theme restaurant that it makes Parisians I know wistful for the glory days of the brasserie, long gone now that the chain operator Flo has edited out their historic charm. In Italy, the generic style of trattoria that Morandi evokes still exists, which is perhaps another reason for the restaurant's chilly critical reception — the historic antecedent is too much with us, the memories evoked are too recent.

Taking orders at Balthazar



Décor aside, how does the food compare? I kept trying until I got both lunch and dinner reservations at Balthazar. I am a breakfast regular (few people know the restaurant serves the best donuts in town), but it had been some time since I had experienced a serious meal.

Both dining experiences began at a high level. The wide selection of chilled

seafood on the *plateau de fruits de mer* was impeccably fresh, the periwinkles a special treat. An appetizer of *brandade* was creamy and light, though the high proportion of potato muted the salt cod too much for my taste. Salads of smoked trout and spinach, of roasted beet and haricots verts with Fourme d'Ambert, and of *frisée aux lardons* were all rendered with care.

Second courses, however, were disappointing. The seared salmon (served over cauliflower, called *purée* on the menu but not puréed when it arrived) was so past its prime that you could smell it before it was set down on the table. The restaurant's signature duck shepherd's pie was underwhelming: a thick blanket of mashed potato over a runny stew of stringy duck. *Steak frites* would have been fine had the french fries been fried a minute or two longer; the hanger steak had a nice, beefy flavor. The best main course was a lamb mixed grill that included a tender chop, a spicy merguez, some pieces of braised shank, and a grilled piece of tenderloin, all tender and flavorful. The bread, as always, was excellent, as were the desserts. Since the restaurant opened, the wine list has evolved into a serious selection of medium-priced French bottles. The very drinkable 2003 Madiran by Montus recommended by the sommelier went well with our diverse dishes.

All in all, in terms of quality of ingredients, taste, and skill of execution, in my opinion the food at Morandi and Balthazar is about equal. Yet critics hold up Balthazar as a beacon of culinary excellence while they dismiss Morandi as contrived. And my double-standard theories may be beside the point. You could make a case that the most important difference between the two restaurants is the height of their ceilings. As with a Gothic French cathedral, the soaring proportions of the Balthazar space are humbling; in a downtown restaurant such luxury of height is unexpected and impressive. The low Morandi ceiling forces you into a more intimate relationship with the dining room and its decora-

tive details, perhaps revealing too much of the theatrics behind them. It just might make critics wonder if there isn't some more grandiose place where they ought to be spending their time. That both restaurants are busy regardless of the reviews may be fodder for yet one more theory: fewer diners now care what the established critics think. I for one am happy Keith McNally makes New York City his home. His carefully crafted theme restaurants are always welcome additions to our dining scene.

— *Mitchell Davis*