

"All the News
That's Fit to Print"

The New York Times

Late Edition
Today, clouds breaking for some
sunshine, a few morning showers,
windy, high 60. Tonight, clear, low
50. Tomorrow, plenty of sunshine,
high 60. Weather map, Page B12.

VOL. CLXXI . . . No. 59,224

© 2021 The New York Times Company

NEW YORK, WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 27, 2021

\$3.00

RESTAURANTS | RECIPES | WINE | SPIRITS

Food The New York Times

WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 27, 2021 D1

CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK | PETE WELLS



PHOTOGRAPH BY ADAM FRIEDLANDER FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES



Top, guests dancing with Rosanna Scotto, left, and her family at Fresco by Scotto. Above, from left: a message at Benihana; French cooking at La Bonne Soupe; and Frank Sinatra at Patsy's Italian Restaurant.

New York Is Served Here

ONCE, WHEN A FRIEND who lives in a small town had an overnight layover at Kennedy International Airport, I came up with what I thought was a cool idea: I would pick him up and drive 20 minutes or so to a waterfront bar in the Rockaways for cold beer. After hemming and hawing, he admitted that he had been hoping for a martini at the King Cole Bar in Midtown Manhattan. He had just one night, and he wanted to see the city. There are many New Yorks, but Midtown

Midtown, an often-maligned neighborhood, is pulsing again with a variety, energy and deep history that are the city's essence.

is the place to go when you want to eat and drink in New York, New York. Tourists understand this better than locals, who love to complain about Midtown. One of their complaints used to be that it was full of tourists. Now it's half-full. People who worked there before the age of Zoom meetings tended to see it as a necessary evil to be endured only

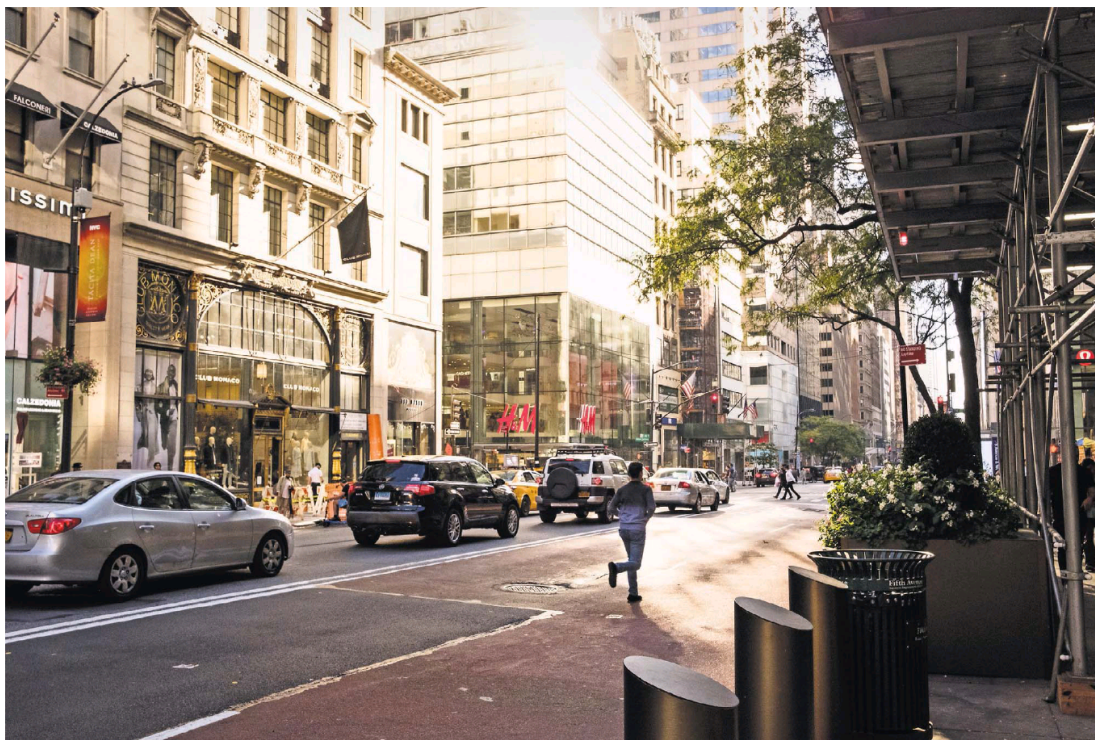
until the end of the business day. In their eyes, Midtown was business and downtown was pleasure.

But Midtown has pleasures of its own, no less real for being widely overlooked. This may be easier to see now that the area is finally getting some relief from a pandemic pummeling that hit its restaurants harder

and longer than those in just about any other part of town. When the outdoor dining program turned most of the city into a street party in the summer of 2020, Midtown was apocalyptically quiet. A few landmarks, like the "21" Club and Shan Lee Palace, are still dark. The Grand Central Oyster Bar didn't reopen for good until last month. The Grill, the Lobster Club and Empellón waited until this month.

To see what shape the pandemic had left

CONTINUED ON PAGE D4



PHOTOGRAPHS BY ADAM FRIEDLANDER FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

New York Is Served Here

CONTINUED FROM PAGE D1

the area's restaurants in, I've spent a good part of October eating in Midtown above 42nd Street. My idea was to treat the neighborhood as a destination.

Just as there are many New Yorks, there are many Midtowns, too, all on top of one another, each with its own restaurant scene. The one I knew best is king-of-the-hill, top-of-the-heap Midtown, where chefs perform on grand stages that will never be mistaken for neighborhood joints. This is the realm of Le Bernardin, Aquavit, Gabriel Kreuther and Empellón.

But I knew what those places can do. Instead, I explored Japanese Midtown, an extensive network that stretches almost from river to river. I checked in on Steakhouse Midtown, flourishing, or at least surviving. I looked for the Midtown where workers on hourly wages stand in line at Margon for Cuban ropa vieja stewed so long it practically turns into marmalade, and the one where on any given night three or four millionaires will spend thousands of dollars on wine and pasta without looking at the menu.

It all goes on at once, often on the same block. I know native New Yorkers who eat, ardently and faithfully, at long-established Midtown restaurants that are barely on most people's radar. They were introduced



ro's front door that it looks as if it belongs in the house of the world's most fertile grandmother. New generations are always being inducted into the cult of Shell's a la Nax, a gratinéed pasta in bone-marrow sauce that is unique to Pietro's.

PROWLING THE NEIGHBORHOOD, I was relieved to see yellow cabs again after many months when they seemed to have gone the way of working pay phones. Weekday traffic, according to the city's Department of Transportation, has not quite come back to its prepandemic crawl, but it now moves on average at half the speed it did during the ghost-town weeks of the lockdown—a good thing, unless you happen to be driving through Times Square at night.

Tourists are filtering back; the city's tourism agency is expecting nearly 35 million out-of-town visitors this year. That current may still be at half-tide: Almost twice as many people came through in 2019. But places that cater to the city's permanent dining class are overflowing, and not metaphorically. To hold all the regulars who rely on its lasagna, its exceptional eggplant-and-zucchini parmigiana, grilled pizza and party-size fritto misto, Fresco by Scotto has built an outdoor pavilion that may need its own ZIP code. Tables are jammed in along the sidewalk and under an in-street shelter cascading with lemon branches and grapevines, looking better than they would in nature. Music blasts,



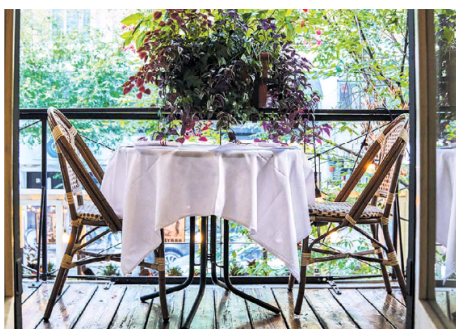
to these places by their parents, who have been regulars since Greenwich Village was bohemian, SoHo was called Hell's Hundred Acres and TriBeCa wasn't called anything. For serious restaurants in those days, you went to the 30s, 40s and 50s.

Before showing up for dinner at Patsy's, the Neapolitan restaurant that gave Frank Sinatra not just his own table but his own entrance, I asked somebody who has eaten there all his life what to get. He had no idea; his father, who goes once a week, always does the ordering. So he asked his father, who named two dishes that aren't on the menu. It's that kind of place.

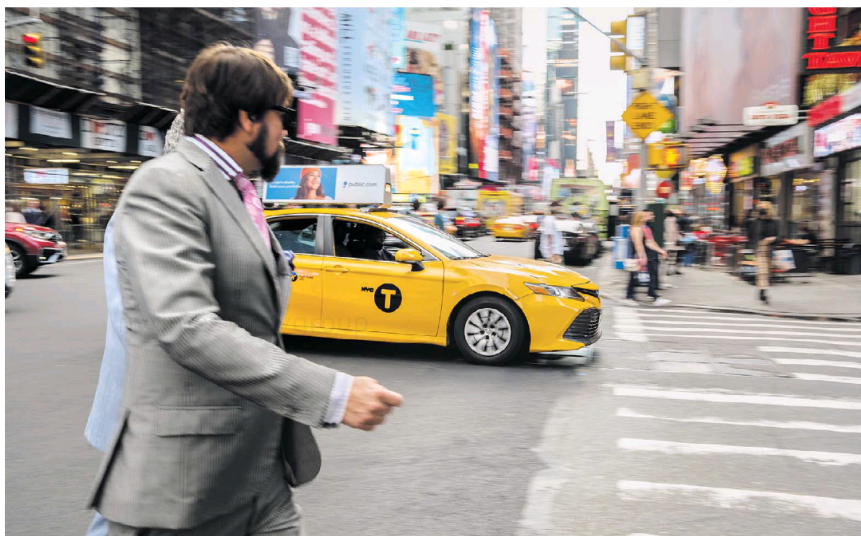
Even without an inside tip, you can put together a meal at Patsy's — rigatoni fra diavolo, say, or fennel sausages in marinara with a heap of sweet peppers that reminds you just how good Southern Italian food refracted through a New York lens can be. Decades of shortcuts, cheap-outs, infidelities and distortions gave red-sauce cuisine a reputation as a debased, degraded creature. None of that happened at Patsy's.

I wouldn't say this if Sinatra were around, but Patsy's does not make my favorite veal Parm in Midtown. For that, I go to Pietro's, where tomatoes, cheese, bread crumbs and a thin cutlet — pounded until it covers the oval serving platter like a quilt on a featherbed — fuses into one sublime entity that could be eaten with a spoon, like pudding.

Pietro's has been on East 63rd Street since 1984, and in the neighborhood since 1932. So many New York children have had their heights marked off on the wall by Piet-



Top, there's a measure of activity in Midtown again along Fifth Avenue. Second row, Fresco by Scotto draws a largely local crowd with its exuberant arbor built on the pavement of East 52nd Street. Third row, from left: the food, the décor and the sign out front all say Patsy's Italian Restaurant. Left, La Bonne Soupe embraced outdoor dining with a street enclosure and a second-story balcony.



giving rise to dance parties that are immediately posted on Instagram. Every night looks like a casting call for "The Real Housewives of East 52nd Street."

Steakhouses are so numerous in Midtown that the area may be the world capital of creamed spinach. Wolfgang's now carries off the Germanic bluntness it cribbed from Peter Luger more convincingly than Luger itself. For a certain kind of window shopper, the glass meat locker inside Callaghers gives off a luster that makes the displays at Cartier look rinky-dink. Sparks, grand without being beautiful, has one of the few steakhouse wine lists that don't try to strong-arm you into getting an expensive, jackbooted red.

Which you prefer is personal and beyond rationality, but in many ways Wolensky's Grill is ideal. It's essentially a Third Avenue saloon constructed, in 1980, out of the best parts of a steakhouse. Without the rituals and chest-thumping you might encounter next door at Smith & Wolensky, you get the meat (including prime rib on its own, in a sandwich or, its highest and best use, in a prime rib hash from out of the past). You get the potatoes (the waffle fries are cooked to a burnished, crisp medium-well). You get the shrimp cocktail (or better still, a whole chilled lobster). And you get the martinis, stirred by bartenders who would laugh in your face if you called them mixologists. They are, for many loyalists, the whole point of the place.

AS IF A CURFEW were still in effect, many restaurants in Midtown close early these days. It was 7:30 on a Tuesday night when I strolled into Aburiya Kinnozuke, on East 45th Street.

Conversations took place behind sliding wooden doors in half-private rooms over a

Places that cater to the city's permanent dining class are overflowing, and not metaphorically.

steady current of vintage hard pop. A table was free, but the kitchen was closing in 15 minutes. What to order? Obviously something from the robata grill that sets this irakaya apart, maybe the koji-marinated chicken, or a mackerel, or yellowtail, still tenuously and gelatinously attached to the collar bone.

Midtown is full of places like Aburiya Kinnozuke, where you can fly from New York to Tokyo in under five minutes. You could slip into a counter seat at Katsu-hama and start pulverizing sesame seeds with a mortar and pestle to thicken the dipping sauce for a pork cutlet that arrives on a wire cage just above the plate, to keep it from steaming the crunch of its deeply craggy shell. Or climb the stairs to Hide-Chan for a bowl of Hakata-style ramen, the pork-bone soup cloudy under a black pool of charred garlic oil.

A separate tour could take in restaurants that together form a kind of living museum of the history of Japanese food in New York. There is Nippon, the stage where, since 1963, soba, fugu and other things have danced into the city's consciousness. There is Hatsuhana, the sushi-ya that in 1983 became the first Japanese restaurant to get a four-star review in The New York Times.

And there is Benihana, the 1964 original, its flying knives and the rest of the action framed by a midcentury picture window hovering above West 56th Street. How many Americans learned to hold chopsticks at a Benihana? How many tried their first cup of sake at one, and noticed that the drink was taken with a seriousness you wouldn't necessarily expect from a chain whose teppanyaki chefs flip shrimp tails into their toques?

Sake may be the only thing at Benihana you'll want to finish, although the \blacktriangledown U fried rice isn't terrible. That's not the point. You'll sit around the table with strangers, as if you were playing blackjack, laugh in spite of yourself at jokes and tricks that are almost 60 years old, and watch as all your notions of tradition and authenticity are, like the eggs in the fried rice, tossed into the air, cracked open and scrambled.

The haute-cuisine Midtown of Lutèce and La Côte Basque is just a ghost now. I can't quite believe I'm saying this, but its spirit of French cooking may be strongest at La Bonne Soupe on West 55th Street. For most of its 48-year run, the compact zinc bar and exposed ceiling beams conjured Paris more



More pedestrians in Midtown, whether for business or tourism, is a good sign for restaurants in the neighborhood. Left, Pomput Suwanrat, a hibachi chef at Benihana, showed off his cooking skills tableside.



faithfully than the menu, where "Les Burgers" were a mainstay.

Recently, though, the kitchen was handed to Nicolas Prezal, who helped revive a Right Bank bistro called Astier after being in time at the Ritz. He gave the menu a haircut, and brought on new dishes like a house-made terrine with bread from Poilâne, hard-cooked eggs whose yolks are whipped

with puréed mushrooms, and beef bourguignon exactly the way I always hope it will be made, down to the nest of fresh egg noodles. I like it even better than the motto in the restaurant's window: "Ici pas de chichi."

SOME MIDTOWN RESTAURANTS, like La Bonne Soupe, hide in plain sight. Others just hide. Tracking them down is one of the re-

A Menu Of Midtown Favorites



Beef bourguignon is served in a nest of fresh egg noodles at Le Bonne Soupe.

Here are some of Pete Wells's favorite restaurants in Midtown Manhattan:

ABURIYA KINNOZUKE 213 East 45th Street (Third Avenue); 212-867-3454

BENIHANA 47 West 56th Street (Avenue of the Americas); 212-581-0530; benihana.com

FRESCO BY SCOTTO 34 East 52nd Street (Fifth Avenue); 212-935-3434; frescobyscotto.com

GALLAGHERS STEAKHOUSE 228 West 52nd Street (Broadway); 212-586-5000; gallaghersteakhouse.com

GRAND CENTRAL OYSTER BAR & RESTAURANT Grand Central Terminal, lower level; 212-490-6650; oysterbarny.com

HATSUHANA 17 East 48th Street (Madison Avenue); 212-355-3345; hatsuhana.com

HIDE-CHAN RAMEN 248 East 52nd Street (Second Avenue), second floor; 212-813-1800; hidechanramen.nyc

KATSU-HAMA 11 East 47th Street (Fifth Avenue); 212-758-5909; katsuhama47.com

LA BONNE SOUPE 48 West 55th Street (Avenue of the Americas); 212-586-7650; labonnenyc.com

MARGON 136 West 46th Street (Seventh Avenue); 212-354-5013; ordermargon.com

NIPPON 155 East 52nd Street (Third Avenue); 212-688-5941; restaurantnipp.com

PATSY'S ITALIAN RESTAURANT 236 West 56th Street (Eighth Avenue); 212-247-3491; patsys.com

PIETRO'S 232 East 43rd Street (Second Avenue); 212-682-9760; pietros.com

SPARKS STEAK HOUSE 210 East 46th Street (Third Avenue); 212-687-4855

TAAM-TOV 41 West 47th Street (Avenue of the Americas), third floor; 212-768-8001; taamtoovny.com

WOLFGANG'S STEAKHOUSE 250 West 41st Street (Eighth Avenue); 212-921-3720 and 200 East 54th Street (Third Avenue); 212-588-9653; wolfgangsteakhouse.net

WOLLENSKY'S GRILL 201 East 49th Street (Third Avenue); 212-753-0444; smithandwolenskynyc.com



Above, the Central Park South cocktail (vodka, Singani 63, rosemary cordial and muddled cucumber) is served at Le Bonne Soupe. Above left and below left, kosher Bukharian cooking, including meat pies called samsa, is the specialty of Taam-Tov.

wards of hanging out in Midtown.

Three floors above the diamond district shops where customers trailed by camera crews sashay in for fresh jewels is Taam-Tov, a kosher Bukharian outpost of long standing.

Under pastel-colored murals of palms and cypresses, jewelers and other fans of Uzbek cuisine stop for round savory pastries called samsa, carefully pinched manti filled with beef and cumin, falafel balls that crackle between your teeth and green pilaf cooked with heaps of cilantro and other chopped herbs. Turkish coffee can pass for dessert. Then it's back to business.

They say Bukhara is nice this time of year. But if you want a lunch break in a place that leaves no doubt what city you're in, sit under the tiled ceiling vaults of the Grand Central Oyster Bar & Restaurant. Try to get a seat at the pink counter that faces the vintage steam-powered kettles all in a row.

Order a stew or pan roast, and watch as a cook who learned to do this decades ago drops butter and clam juice into the kettle, slips in some shellfish that is quickly drowned in half-and-half, and tilts it all into a bowl — your bowl. Either soup will be impressive if made with chewy, flat cherry-stones, and wonderful with scallops, but the union of oysters and cream casts an ancient Atlantic Coast spell that will protect you from nor'easters and missed trains.

The man on your left may be in from Dallas. The woman on your right has just enough time to make it back to the office before anyone notices she's gone. For now, all three of you are pinned like butterflies on a board labeled "New York, New York. Date unknown."