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FOR PEOPLE WHO LOVE TO *read*, LOVE TO *eat*, AND LOVE TO *travel*

DINING

The Resurgence of Hotel Restaurants

USA

New York City The Resurgence of Hotel Restaurants



by MELISSA WEINER

PHOTOS THIS SPREAD Florian Wehrle in his rooftop garden; Hotel Belleclaire lobby bar area.



USA

New York City

WHERE ON EARTH



*...This was the meal I
had been waiting for...*

A THICK FOG LAY OVER TORONTO'S ISLAND AIRPORT. My first flight was delayed. My second flight, delayed again. Finally, cancelled completely. The next flight to New York City left the following morning. A whole day and night lost to the airport left me with only 33 hours, time enough for barely four meals in a city paving the culinary world.

With meetings booked and people to see, I'd have to match New York's naturally fast pace to enjoy its brazen insanity and fit in some fun.

Cruising through the Lincoln Tunnel, I planned my lunch. I was staying midtown — not usually my favourite place but highly convenient for business travellers. The Iroquois Hotel, built in 1901, recently joined a boutique hotel group called Triumph Hotels. This four-star, 117-room hotel served my one-night stay perfectly, but the attached restaurant interested me more.

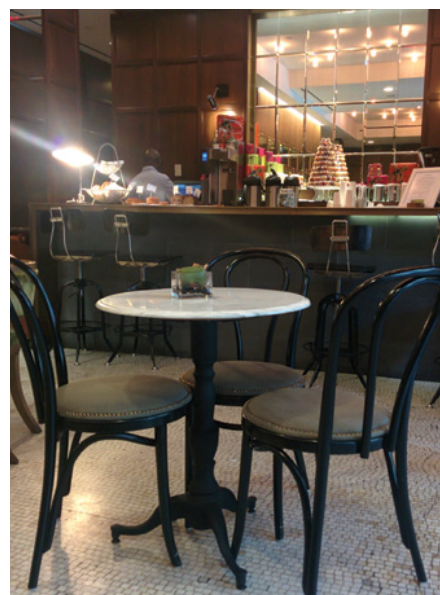
Run by Chef Florian Wehrli, the quiet, unassuming restaurant looked like a fairly typical hotel eatery but Triomphe had amassed terrific reviews. From the seasonal, French-inspired menu I sampled the beet and fresh pea soup. The vibrant colours matched the bright, sweet, fresh taste. Next, a canapé of bison carpaccio with a carefully selected cheese from Wehrli's homeland, Switzerland — one of few things not produced in the surrounding area. The cheese was curled into the shape of a flower and complemented the bison beautifully.

The whole meal at Triomphe was lovely but it was the chef more than the food that stayed on my mind. Chef Wehrli is passionate, lively and vibrating with energy. I was instantly drawn in and made at ease, even while he wore his proper chef jacket.

He spoke of his charity, A meal for Amiel, in memory of his late son. The charity brings children and celebrated chefs together to learn about food from

the ground to the table. Last February, they hosted a five-course meal to fund building a greenhouse and interactive classroom for a New Jersey school.

His passion for teaching about food extends to the Iroquois Hotel's roof. It didn't take long before he was bounding up the stairs to show me the rooftop garden where he has built wooden plant boxes of all sizes, a full irrigation system and even (for women in heels) a small stair platform. There must have been a dozen large planters overflowing with cheerful flowers and herbs.



PHOTOS THIS SPREAD CLOCKWISE FROM BOTTOM LEFT Chef Florian Wehrli; Iroquois Hotel; Lantern's Keep mixology; A New York City nightcap; Levain Bakery; Shaving Swiss cheese at Triomphe; Cafe corner at Hotel Belleclaire; Triomphe scallops.



On another part of the roof are two bee hives. Once the bees have settled in, Wehrli plans to use their honey, along with his herbs and flowers, at Triomphe. Eventually he'd like to host private parties in the rooftop garden (more women in heels!). I could already picture the event.

After lunch, with a few hours to spare, I was directed to a sister property for a walking tour of the Upper West Side. Walking tours depart from each Triumph hotel on different days of the week.

I walked into the Hotel Belleclaire's lobby. There's something about boutique hotel lobbies. Each offers its own unique invitation to guests. They seem to say "have a coffee and stay a while." I may have found a new hobby — lounging around these luxurious foyers.

The open and airy Belleclaire lobby offered plenty of comfortable places. The small area with bistro tables and chairs is a café run by Mille-feuille, a patisserie around the corner. The delicate and colourful macarons, more art than food, caught my eye. I couldn't help selecting a salted caramel one just before a young man bounded in and gathered the walking tour.

Andrew, who's working on his PhD, took us on a leisurely walk of the Upper West Side, pointing out everything from architecture and history to pop culture.

Walking tour guides often aren't just locals, they're passionate, intelligent people aiming to give tourists a true city experience. This particular tour was run by Streetwise New York — friends wanting to share their love for New York City with visitors.

Along the way, Andrew led us to the Levain Bakery, infamous — yes infamous — for its chocolate chip cookies. The tiny shop brimmed with people despite the well-known fact that these buttery, gooey, thick, chocolatey cookies pack 900 calories each. The story told is that these cookies are for marathon runners whose bodies need the high energy treat! After consuming the best part of one, I walked back to my hotel for good measure.

In the evening, I left for Michelin-star restaurant, Juni. This was the meal I had been waiting for. Chef Shaun Hergatt runs Juni like a well-coordinated dance. Located in Hotel Chandler (another win for hotel restaurants), Juni only offers tasting menus in its quiet, delicately lit space.


Before the first course reached the table I was already delighted by the experience. The canapés aimed to surprise with pure creativity and thoughtfulness. One was an apple-and-cranberry-flavoured bite presented as a glossy red stone and served on a bed of black stones. Another was a perfectly round charcoal sphere that, bitten into, exposed a creamy, truffled potato mash. Then came a crunchy granola bite hidden in a beautiful tree branch.

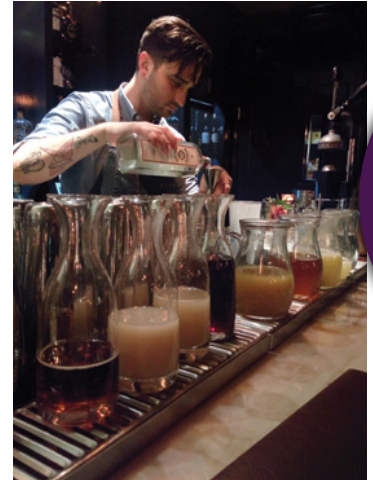
The canapés seemed to continue endlessly, always aiming to surprise. Four dinner courses followed, varying in taste, texture and creativity, each experimental but still approachable. I left the three-hour experience wide-eyed and thrilled. So thrilled, that I walked through the crowds and shining lights of Times Square, back to midtown and straight into the Iroquois Hotel's hidden cocktail bar, Lantern's Keep.

People of all ages crowded the 40-seat, windowless speakeasy. A free seat at the bar beckoned. The cocktail menu showcased twists on classics and I selected an Old Fashioned involving chocolate bitters. The rich, amber liquid went down easily.

Striking up a conversation with the person next to me I quickly learned that he was a local, waiting for a friend to finish her Broadway performance (only in New York!).

I slept well that night.

The next morning, leaving New York City, I reflected on the past 33 hours. Not long ago — always in search of local eateries — I would never have thought to dine in hotels. However, decades ago, hotel restaurants were the places to go and to be seen. Now hotels have re-embraced their dining glory years and that's a huge plus for travellers like me who are enthusiastic about food culture. 



Triumph Hotels
www.triumphhotels.com

Streetwise New York
www.streetwisenewyork.com

Levain Bakery
www.levainbakery.com

Toronto-based PR professional **MELISSA WEINER** is **TASTE & TRAVEL's** Communications Coordinator.