

## NEW YORK CORNER

# ARABELLE

Hotel Plaza-Athénée

37 East 64th Street

212-606-4647

[www.plazaathenee.com](http://www.plazaathenee.com)



**T**he onus of being a restaurant in a hotel has, among those who know better, pretty much

been dissipated in the last decade by the appearance of so many fine restaurants that just happen to reside in hotels around the world. Indeed, in New York you'll find a stellar number, including Jean-Georges, Joël Robuchon L'Atelier, Gilt, The Dining Room at the Carlyle, Peacock Alley, Gordon Ramsay at The London, and Hakubai. Still, some people's eyes cloud over when you mention a hotel restaurant without a big name chef, especially if it is not located on the avenue, with its own separate entrance.

This may well be the case with Arabelle, sequestered in the posh Plaza-Athénée Hotel, whose own occupancy, despite room prices of \$695 and up, is near full most nights of the year. Despite Arabelle's being very fine and French, the new *Michelin Guide 2008* to NYC doesn't even include it. Yet Arabelle is one of the loveliest restaurants in New York, with a very talented young chef doing splendid, quite personalized work with admirable finesse.

The decor was changed a while back from a rococo Valerian Rybar flamboyance, complete with painted cloudy skies, to a warm setting of fin-de-siècle moldings and arched columns that provide cozy banquette seating. That ceiling is now a glowing silvery-gold reflecting the light of glass chandeliers. The tables are impeccably, richly set with heavy linens and fine glass and silverware, fresh flowers and candles, and the tables themselves are wonderfully spacious.

Before you ever get to the dining room, however, you must pass from the hotel lobby through the Bar Seine (*left*), a sexy, shadowy place that begs the word *soigné*. The night I visited the place was hopping—or seated—with a bevy of people who might very well have been just off the plane from Charles de Gaulle or whipped in from St. Bart's.

At Arabelle Chef Ike Koutrakos works his menu to please but not to pander. It is just as American as it is French, as are most deluxe menus, even in Paris, these days. I suppose if you asked him for a filet mignon well done, he'd do it, but that would be a wave-off to one of the most interesting young chefs in New York right now.

We began with a glass of Ruinart Brut Rosé, chosen by food and beverage director Martin Magdeburg, to go with a trio of ahi tuna bites—sashimi with yuzu vinaigrette and daikon, a tartare with luscious avocado mousse and a dot of osiètra caviar, and seared, rare tuna with a sesame seaweed salad. Butter poached lobster came with white corn grits (no Franglais here), shavings of truffles, and smoked paprika-scented "Niblets," with tidbits of seared pork belly and a chicken *jus*, all of which added up to a very impressive starter. Sea scallops were gently roasted and served with a cranberry purée with tomato confit and dressed with a vinaigrette, a dish of tangy-sweet notes to cuddle the creamy flavor of the scallops. Seared foie gras with a pear roasted with vanilla and served with a brandied pear coulis was a delightful dish, and a ragoût of rabbit was braised with citrus and accompanied by wheat germ pasta with a pecorino gremolata. With these starters we drank a fine Franciscan Cuvée Sauvage Chardonnay 2005.

A Hamilton Russell Pinot Noir 2004 from Walker Bay, South Africa, was a complete surprise to me, and it alerted me to just how well that varietal is doing in that up-and-coming region. It went exceptionally well with maple-glazed duck breast with roasted yams, okra spiked with cayenne pepper, and a red wine sauce, as well as with a terrifically flavorful rack of lamb, perfectly fatted around the edge, served with a fricassée of wild mushroom and roasted tomato, sautéed sunchokes, and truffled *persillade*. The red wine also went well with juicy pan-seared Chatham cod with roasted asparagus, sautéed chanterelles, a celeriac purée, and lobster emulsion.

Desserts, by Lauren Ragone, were every bit as inventive as the other courses and included an "Autumn Trio Tasting Plate" composed of walnut sticky toffee pudding with butterscotch sauce, rum raisin rice pudding with cinnamon, and sweet potato brioche pudding with marshmallow *crème anglaise*. There is also a welcome cheese cart with every selection in peak condition.

Arabelle's winelist, overseen by maître d' and sommelier Romano Chiazzo, holds 231 selections and 850 bottles.

Dining in a room as lovely as this on cuisine prepared with obvious care and respect for ingredients by a young chef determined to make his mark through due diligence rather than spectacle means that you will have a civilized meal, good conversation with your friends, deftly poured wines, and be reminded that the antiquated frou-frou that once marked hotel dining rooms was never actually a true mark of elegance. Arabelle sets the proper tone for a modern hotel restaurant where you will feel just as cosmopolitan as you fancy yourself to be