

RESTAURANTS

Restaurant Review: Dirty French on the Lower East Side

By [Pete Wells](#)

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A new restaurant from the chefs Rich Torrisi and Mario Carbone and their partner Jeff Zalaznick tiptoed onto the Lower East Side in September, demurely announcing its name with two eight-foot-high neon signs in peep-show pink. DIRTY, says one. FRENCH, reads the other.

Diners who have reservations for [Dirty French](#), secured with a credit card and a gentle warning of a modest \$50-a-person cancellation fee, will find a dining room inside the Ludlow hotel that is decorated with a few shoestring-budget items, like a wall-length antique carnival mirror shipped from France. A few weeks ago, the partners had the artist Rashid Johnson, a frequent guest, throw oozing slicks of wax blended with West African black soap against the mirror's glass. (Around the same time, one of Mr. Johnson's wax-and-soap works sold at auction for just under \$200,000.) Across from the mirror, over the bar, is a wide French flag that Julian Schnabel splotted with ink. Down on the tiled floor, in another humble little gesture, servers lope around in squeaky-fresh limited edition Air Jordans from the '80s, some of which probably cost more than I paid for my first car.

Ever since [Carbone](#) and its neighbor, ZZ's Clam Bar, came along, [swagger and money](#) have been to Torrisi-Carbone-Zalaznick establishments what blinking lights and sitars are to Sixth Street's Curry Row. If the word for flaunting cash and art-world connections like this doesn't occur to you immediately, look at the strutting crowd of ceramic roosters that Mr. Zalaznick spray-painted in screaming pink: Dirty French is one cocky restaurant.

It can also be an immensely enjoyable one. That sounds contradictory, but the same self-confidence that can get on your nerves also allows this crew to mess around with French cuisine with a hugely energizing lack of respect. In unnatural crossbreeding experiments, they force bistro cooking to mate with haute cuisine. To make dinner less stuffy and formal, they bring back stuffy formalities like cut-glass wine carafes and frilly oyster plates. They smudge the pages of Escoffier with strange foreign spices. It may sound like run-of-the-mill fusion, but it is a top-to-bottom remix, and nearly every weird mongrel idea leads in the direction of more flavor or more fun.

Chefs more deferential to custom may not have ditched the hallowed basket of levain or baguette à l'ancienne in favor of a flatbread inspired by the mahjeb Mr. Torrisi ate, one loaf after another, in a North African neighborhood of Paris. It's no innovation, this

bread, just pita dough griddled in plenty of olive oil, buried under Provençal herbs and sent out with a snowbank of fromage blanc, but people tore it up with greedy, greasy fingers at every table, mine included.

Not that the chefs hide their training. (Mr. Torrisi worked for years under Daniel Boulud and takes the lead in this kitchen.) The mille-feuille is a technical showstopper, an accordion of ribbon-thin king trumpet mushroom stems folded over and over. It looks like pastry but pulls apart like buttered noodles, and when you drag them through a pool of green curry, the scene shifts to Thailand. It's a disorienting dish, and makes your head spin in a wonderful way.

The restaurant creates a parallel world where French pastry turns into Thai curry; it's as if the chefs have imagined an alternative history in which the leading kitchens of France turned left instead of right several decades ago. What if nouvelle cuisine had embraced maximalism instead of minimalism, full-frontal abandon instead of lean precision? And what if, instead of teaching Americans to make puff pastry, the country's chefs had taken cooking lessons from the rest of the French-speaking world?

For one thing, they might have come up with Dirty French's glorious lamb carpaccio. Brushed with a slow-burning raz al hanout oil, sprinkled with tart sumac powder and fresh herbs, dotted with sheep's milk yogurt and preserved lemon and wheels of roasted eggplant, the slices of lamb loin are saddled with as much flavor as they can reasonably be asked to carry.

Or, though this probably needed a push from the roast-chicken gold rush started at [the NoMad](#), they might have hit upon Dirty French's \$72 poultry feast. First to arrive is the sneakily rich (translation: you can't see the foie gras) white meat in mustard-herb sauce. Then the bird's hindquarters show up on a cutting board. They've been soaked in a Vietnamese marinade of soy, fish sauce and lemon grass, slowly cooked in melted chicken fat (oh yes they have), then grilled and freshened up with lime zest. The chicken comes with crepes, irrelevantly; just pick up a drumstick and get to work on that burnished skin.

The chefs have an instinct for the right kind of too much, but some dishes trip into the wrong kind. A deeply aromatic and fairly traditional bouillabaisse was thick with octopus, mussels, monkfish and one small, whole, wonderful red mullet. Cuttlefish ink took the broth to the outer edge of intensity, but the medicinal taste of fresh marjoram in some spoonfuls went beyond it. And while duck heart kebabs unloaded at the table added brawn to a frisée and lardons salad, the blast of mustard in the dressing was an excessive use of force.

A programmatic rollout of the formula — Something Clearly French Under Heaps of Post-Colonial Exotica — doesn't guarantee a sprinkling of magical pixie dust on every plate. Baked clams seemed perplexed by their thick jackets of almonds and Ethiopian spices, and so was I. A beautifully cooked trout meunière was speckled with sesame seeds and herbs, a mix that came across as an oddly neutered za'atar.

Peep-show pink neon makes the restaurant hard to miss.
Credit...Daniel Krieger for The New York Times



At Dirty French, the ledges hold a strutting crowd of ceramic roosters that Jeff Zalaznick spray-painted in screaming pink. Mr. Zalaznick opened the restaurant in September with the chefs Rich Torrisi and Mario Carbone.
Credit...Daniel Krieger for The New York Times



Peep-show pink neon makes the restaurant hard to miss.
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The wine list is all French, and fun for all kinds of budgets.
Credit...Daniel Krieger for The New York Times



Even the bartenders have swagger.
Credit...Daniel Krieger for The New York Times



To make dinner less stuffy and formal, Dirty French brings back stuffy formalities like cut-glass wine carafes and frilly oyster plates.
Credit...Daniel Krieger for The New York Times



Inside the Ludlow hotel, the Dirty French dining room is decorated with a few shoestring-budget items, like a wall-length antique carnival mirror shipped from France.

Credit...Daniel Krieger for The New York Times



Even the wine decanter is a thrill.
Credit...Daniel Krieger for The New York Times



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Ceramics by the Bruce High Quality Foundation, an arts collective in Brooklyn.
Credit...Daniel Krieger for The New York Times



Vintage oyster plates line the walls.
Credit...Daniel Krieger for The New York Times



• The mille-feuille is a technical showstopper, an accordion of ribbon-thin king trumpet mushroom stems folded over and over.
Credit...Daniel Krieger for The New York Times



Porc aux moutardes.

Credit...Daniel Krieger for The New York Times



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