

# Pioneer's kitchen blazes, but ambience no happy trail

Top-line wild game, meats win the West; circle the wagons against wildness of bar

BY BOB LAPE

PIONEER IS ALL YOU'D EXPECT in a Western-themed Upper East Side watering hole, and more.

The sun bleached steer skull, antelope antlers and mini wagon wheels are standard issue. Rough-sawn wood details and old Western movie posters add to the informal ambience. Hilarity from a 20-seat bar near the door occasionally recalls *Blazing Saddles*—no, not that scene.

What comes from Pioneer's

kitchen puts chuck wagon triangle-ringers to shame. The Western that owner Brad Tobin has in mind is not so much Death Valley as Sun Valley.

Happily, trail boss Tobin nailed another Brad in chef Brad Gates, from Union Square Café, where he was chef de cuisine. He brings depth and finesse to a larder stocked with bison, caribou, elk, venison, wild boar, antelope, pheasant, quail, ostrich and line-caught fish. There are also steaks, chicken and both beef (10-ounce) and bison (9-ounce) burgers.

The dining room accommodates 50 guests, who are seen to by a friendly and efficient wait staff. They may invite patrons to sample cocktails such as the Red Eye or Rusty Nail, try the short menu of malty microbrew beers made in New York, or choose from an all-American wine list.

Chef Gates opens the game with grilled quail brushed with molasses, barbecue sauce and tomato jam, and bedded on slices of foie gras sausage. He combines smoked trout and hric on grilled rosemary bread with lemon and herbs.

The Pioneer house salad is a colorful and generous affair replete with tomato, onion, cucumber, croutons and a choice of dressings, such as maple-ginger or bacon-sherry. A salad of crumbled Alaskan salmon wedges humble watercress with apple, orange and pistachios.

Top-of-the-line ingredients are in use throughout the menu, from the 12 ounces of freshwater shrimp—four 3-ouncers in a cocktail—to the carefully sourced wild game items and meats from the prestigious Niman Ranch. The positive nutritional profile of game, with its minimal fat and cholesterol, is winning a growing audience.

Fajita-style venison flank steak is grilled in strips for wrapping in warm, large tortillas, with a toss of diced avocado, tomato, onions and peppers. To spread over that mélange is a trio of toppings—lemon-thyme vinaigrette, herb butter and a crème fraîche tartar sauce. Barbecued wild boar spare-ribs are marinated and braised in red wine, then basted with sweet or fiery BBQ sauce.

I'm getting in over my head on ostrich, having eaten it often on a gastronomic tour of South Africa

earlier this month. The farmed birds produce extremely lean red meat akin to beef in taste and texture. Two 5-ounce medallions are pan-seared to rare in a lemon-thyme reduction. Grilled elk tenderloin is a 12-ounce cut, napped in maple-ginger vinaigrette. Fresh Idaho trout is sautéed whole, then filleted. Naturally fed, hormone-free chicken is roasted with a mustard-chicken jus.

Each main course comes with appropriate "fixins," plus a choice of a side dish that is quite ample for two. The mac-and-cheese has that little something extra. It's one-third béchamel sauce and two-thirds very sharp cheddar cheese. Twice-baked potato is rich in Niman Ranch bacon, the coleslaw is fennel-focused, and butternut squash purée is just that—honest and tasty.

The West gets wild when the house cheesecake arrives. The star dessert, it's fortified with dark rum and molasses, presented over a crosshatch of caramel and under a coating of crushed walnuts and whipped cream. Less elaborate but equally satisfying is an apple betty à la mode. Pecan pie, Mississippi mud cake and a herd of Ciao Bella ice creams and sorbets complete the picture.

Opened during the dog days of summer, Pioneer has had to win over the neighborhood a table at a time. The noteworthy food is proving just the draw to overcome the rather limited etab at décor and the overflowing din from the bar.

## BITS & BITES

▼ **Newcomers:** Opened Friday, Jan. 322 E. 86th St., marks the return to New York of talented chef Ian Russo after his second tour of duty in Hawaii. The Brooklyn-born star-catcher is doing "nouveau New York cuisine." **West 79 Restaurant**, 222 W. 79th St., unites personable host Howard Neckin and chef Norvil McKenzie. The handsome London townhouse setting features upscale contemporary American fare with strength in steaks.

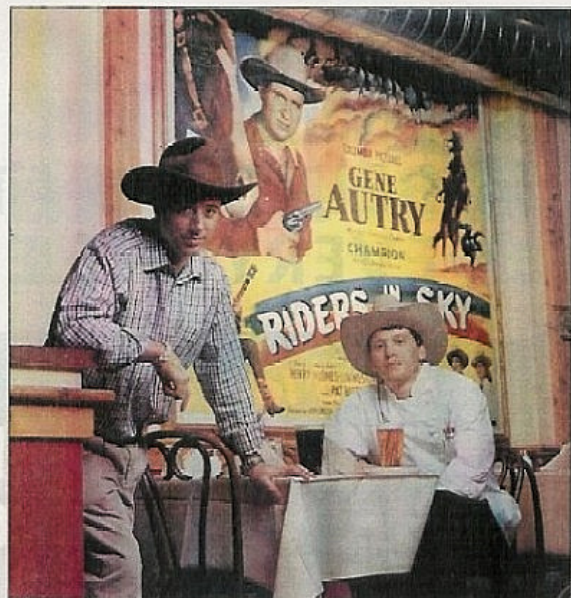
▼ **West Side story:** O'Neals' plans a soft reopening Thanksgiving Day, after 21 months of down time during construction at the Liberty Warehouse on West 64th Street. Owners Mike O'Neal and Jim Enzel will be joined by other frontmen from the storied restaurant's 40-year run.

**Pioneer**  
1303 Third Ave.  
(212) 717-6600

★ 1/2

**Cuisine:** Nouvelle American West  
**Wines:** 30 choices  
**Dress:** Casual  
**Noise Level:** Loud  
**Price Range:** \$15-\$38  
**Wine Markup:** 100%-250%  
**Credit Cards:** All major  
**Reservations:** Suggested  
**Hours:** Lunch, seven days, 11:30 a.m.-4 p.m.; Dinner, seven days, 5-11 p.m.

★★★★ Outstanding  
★★★★ Excellent  
★★★ Very good  
★ Good



TALL ORDERS: Owner Brad Tobin (left) and chef Brad Gates aren't slinging any standard hash; they import their ingredients from the Niman Ranch.

▼ **One for the money:** **One Restaurant & Lounge** is counting down to a debut next week in a multimillion-dollar, bi-level space at 1 Little W. 12th St. Owners Celeste Fierro and Erica Cohen can entertain up to 350 guests in five areas. Innovative sharing platters are only one facet of chef Gavin Citron's modern American menu.

▼ **Davidburke & Donatella** is on track for a Dec. 10 opening at 133 E. 61st St. The superchef will cook and Donatella Arpaia of Bellini fame will fan the hospitality fire.

▼ **Everything's coming up dandy** for Rande: Bar-raiser Rande Gerber's **Midnight Oil Co.** continues pouring out new properties, 20 in all. Tuning up for its February 2004

opening of **The Whiskey** in the Time Warner Center, it's rolling out the bar/lounge concept to the W Mexico City this month and Houston's Hotel Icon in December.

▼ **Olica:** It's lights out for the three star collaboration of chef Jean-Yves Schillinger and Christophe Lhopitault at 145 E. 50th St.

▼ **Chef shifts:** **Richard Farnabe** is helping perfect the Grecian formula at Estiatorio Milos. There's a whole new team at AZ, with executive chef **Christian Lomas**, sous chefs **Steven Morino** and **Marc Forgiene** (there's a familiar name!), and pastry chef **Larissa Raphael**. At **Tocqueville**, **Michael Finelshir** returns to take up the pastry toque. ■

## THE BEST OF BOB LAPE

### Stresa East ★★★

7940 Jericho Turnpike, Woodbury, L.I. (516) 364-1565. Long Island's top Italian hosts make everyone feel special, serving classic cuisine in elegant surroundings, with a side order of real value to go with the quality.

### Fascino ★★★

331 Bloomfield Ave., Montclair, N.J. (973) 233-0350. Bring your own wine and revel in the food and hospitality of this outstanding, family driven contemporary Italian newcomer to downtown Montclair. From first course to last, good taste and delicacy shine.

### Sette ★★ 1/2

191 Seventh Ave. (between West 21st and 22nd streets), Manhattan. (212) 675-5935. Everyone has fun when the whimsical, gifted chef Donato Deserio cooks Italian food past, present and future at this hot new trattoria.

### Fleur de Sel ★★★ 1/2

5 E. 30th St. (between Broadway and Fifth Avenue), Manhattan. (212) 460-9200. The most charming and skilled of the city's intimate, informal modern French restaurants.

Chef-owner Cyril Renaud cooks with verve and delicacy, and did the watercolors that decorate this Flatiron district gem.

### Mix in New York ★★

68 W. 58th St. (between Sixth and Fifth avenues), Manhattan. (212) 583-0300. Alain Ducasse's new restaurant and lounge is one block and a casual world away from his posh Essex House sumptuary. The menu mixes macaroni and cheese with bison in pot-au-feu broth.

### Lever House Restaurant ★★

390 Park Ave. (on East 53rd Street between Park and Madison avenues), Manhattan. (212) 888-2700. Designer Marc Newson's "retro futuristic" showplace is as visually edgy as chef Dan Silverman's contemporary American cuisine is smooth and fine.

### City Lobster & Crab Co. ★★

121 W. 49th St. (between Sixth and Seventh avenues), Manhattan. (212) 351-1717. Plenty to grab on to at this big, new midtown seafood emporium. Up to 7-pound lobsters; Dungeness, soft shell and stone crabs; plus other fresh-from-the-sea goodies. Steaks, too.

Be sure to read Bob Lape's reviews at [www.craigslist.com](http://www.craigslist.com)

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