

Opinionated About Dining

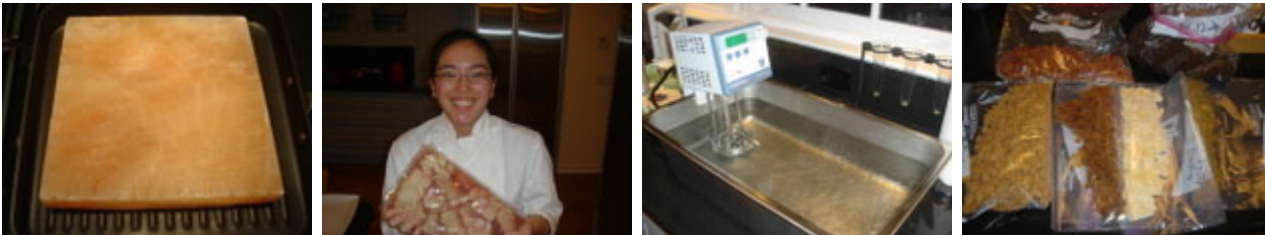
a guide to where to eat and why you should eat there

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At Home with Ideas in Food

I always found New Years to be a funny occasion to celebrate. Unlike other holidays, it isn't associated with a singular person like George Washington or Martin Luther King's birthday where it makes sense to close our schools and offices in order to recognize their profound contribution to society. Nor does it celebrate the result of a historical or social event like Independence or Labor Day. It simply celebrates the turning of a page of a calendar that was artificially constructed by a bunch of Romans a few thousand years ago. And updated, arbitrarily, we might add, over the centuries. In fact to show you how lacking in reason the whole thing is, it doesn't even take place on what would be the logical date for the beginning of the new year which would be the first day after the Winter solstice.

Making matters worse, is that it costs more to celebrate this non-holiday/holiday than celebrations on other dates which can stake a better claim to adding value to a night out. For some reason that escapes me it costs more to go out to dinner or a concert on New Years Eve than it costs on other more important nights, like my birthday. For example, if I wanted to hire the private dining room at Per Se for New Years Eve, it would cost more than it would on my birthday, a clear example of how society has gotten their priorities all mixed up.



At the heart of the New Years Eve dilemma is the simple problem of what one should do to celebrate such an odd occasion. Over the years, Mrs. P and I, along with various friends, have done a myriad of activities, including going to see concerts and movies, cooking at home, and trying a slew of different restaurants. Off the top of my head I can recall eating in Craft and Blue Hill in the city or Nick & Toni's and Allison's at the Beach in the Hamptons. But the problem with restaurants is that they typically have a set menu at a fixed price for the "occasion," which makes the experience less enjoyable than a regular meal. Now the fated day was upon us again and from the beginning of November on, there was a steady chorus of people singing "what to do, what to do" until we came upon a decision.

But an email from my friend Chuck of [Chuckeats](#) fame changed the nature of our evening. Chuck and his girlfriend Leslie were going to be in NYC the weekend after New Years and the four of us typically enjoy a meal together when they are in town. Chuck was suggesting that instead of going out to dinner, we eat in and have the subjects of his email, the chefs, [Alex Talbot](#) and [Aki Kamoza](#), prepare a meal for us at home. I have to admit that it sounded great to me. Except after I discussed it with Mrs. P., we decided that it was a perfect way to spend New Years and we quickly proceeded to throw Chuck and Lesley under a bus while I organized a New Years Eve dinner at our home in Easthampton.

Despite all of my food adventures, somehow Mrs P and I have managed to miss out on having a chef coming to our home and cook dinner for us. And I mean a serious chef or chefs as we've had experiences like our local seafood shop cook a clambake for a houseful of guests in the summertime. But a serious, sit-down meal with courses and someone serving it, this was a first for us. All I can tell you is it's a lifestyle I could get used to living. Alex and Aki arrived around 4:30 and began setting up in the kitchen. Usually prepping a meal means that I am looking over Mrs. P's shoulder telling her she's chopping the onions the wrong way, but this was easy going and Alex and Aki brought everything from zip lock bags

of weird powders to their own water circulator. It's the first time we sous vide at home. In fact I think I'm going to get rid of my Jacuzzi and bathe in a water circulator from now on. Especially when the server we hired showed up at around 7:30 and the six of us retired to the living room with a bottle of Billecart-Salmon Rose, some caviar that one of our guests brought, and played Foodie Fight until dinner was ready.

Dinner was scheduled for 9:00, and we sat down to dinner a few minutes beforehand. A printed menu was placed at each place setting with a menu that read as follows;

- *Diamond Creek Oyster, mastic, passion fruit bubbles
- *White Chocolate Ice Cream wild arctic char roe, blis elixir, coconut
- *Crabmeat marbles butternut squash, sheet, cylinder, yogurt
- *Mussel Soup crispy cuttlefish, hazelnuts, chartreuse
- *Lacquered carrots garam masala, date-yuzu, Benton's ham
- *Mozzarella Tagliatelle mushroom Bolognese
- *Kona Kampachi beets, pecorino foglio noche, eel sauce
- *Sea scallop, persimmon relish, vanilla bean, pistachio brittle
- *Nantucket Bay Scallops persimmon relish, vanilla bean, pistachio brittle
- *Maple Vinegar Glazed Sweetbreads pear dijonaise, pickled peanuts
- *Lamb white miso gnocchi, stewed rhubarb
- *Cheese
- *Chocolate Torchon olive pop rocks, Buddha's hand

Within moments the oyster dish was placed in front of us. The oyster was nice but I thought the dish was a bit heavy on the mastic. Which wasn't all bad since along with the citrus in the dish, it acted as both an amuse and a course and it kicked my palate into gear. The white chocolate ice cream with arctic char roe and blis elixir was quite another story. It was one of the perfect contrasts that modern cuisine has become known for with sweet and creamy ice cream, salty, and slightly fishy caviar, and sherry vinegar that has been aged in whiskey barrels. Truly delicious. Then the crab meat sphere which was good, but a bit more expected than the first two dishes. Then my dish of the night, an Mussel soup that had been reduced until the flavor was quite intense. But my favorite bit was this cuttlefish round on the side of the bowl. The texture reminded me of apricot shoe leather but this had a deep taste of cuttlefish, like eating a solidified version of the sauce in a squid ink risotto. Bravo.



Lacquered carrots with garam masala, lime pickle, Benton's ham was, well, first let's say they should have used smaller carrots rather than that one large one that looks like, well you know. It was tasty, but I never quite got over the plating. Then they prepared a wheat-free mozzarella tagliatelle with a mushroom Bolognese in my honor. It was quite tasty, and the tagliatelle was enjoyable, but like most wheat-free pastas that I sample, they wear on you over the duration of the course and you start noticing the difference in elasticity to the real thing. This was pretty good though and if Alex and Aki can get it a bit less gummy (which presented itself as being al dente with give to it,) they would have something really good. As for the Bolognese, let's call it a textbook

molecular pasta sauce. Kona Kampachi beets, pecorino foglio noche, eel sauce was good but stuck within the limitations that raw fish presents. Let's face it, raw fish has a very subtle flavor so it's difficult to pair it with intense flavors. Then what I thought was a contender for dish of the night, Scallops, persimmon relish, vanilla bean and pistachio brittle. Ah this is what we came for. It had everything one looks for in modern cuisine with that perfect balance of sweet, salty, acid, capped off by an array of textures.



Another excellent seafood dish next. Blue Shrimp that were seared on a slat slab and served with fingerling potatoes, natural jus, king trumpet mushrooms. Truly delicious, especially the jus which was a shrimp stock that was reduced to perfection. For some reason, maple vinegar glazed sweetbread, pear dijonaise and cilantro reminded me a bit of Indian food. Very good, the portion was gigantic and I was beginning to explode at this point. We ended the savory portion of the meal with lamb that had been sous vide, and served with white miso gnocchi and stewed rhubarb. The good news was that the lamb was perfectly cooked. But the bad news was that even though the texture of the lamb was perfect, it was too mild in flavor and it didn't have enough of a meaty or gamey flavor. We had Truffle Tremor from Cypress Grove as our cheese course, and then a chocolate torchon, olive pop rocks, Buddha's hand that reminded me of the chocolate desert they serve at the Fat Duck.



We drank fairly well, 1982 Bollinger RD Champagne, 1988 Von Schubert Herrenberg Auslese, 1995 Raveneau Valmur, and capped it off with an 1982 Aldo Conterno Gran Bussia that to our surprise can easily hold for another 20 years.

So a great night over all. It was fun meeting Alex and Aki and to be honest, being up close to chefs in this way has its fringe benefits. Like Alex calling me up a few weeks after the dinner telling me they made some wheat free gnocchi and they wanted to drop some off at my apartment. But more importantly, I'm looking forward to having them come out to those this summer and do it again. again this summertime. And we might even invite Chuck and Lesley to join us this time.