

# Artsy Fine Dining for Midtown Suits and Millennials

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It is often said that a diner's last bite at a restaurant, commonly a sweet or dessert, determines that person's judgement of a restaurant's food, and is the freshest memory of his or her dining experience. Fortunately, that is not the case at The Modern at MoMA. My last bite was a dark chocolate truffle, dusted with powdered sugar, filled with the most horrific, cold, watery caramel sauce I have ever experienced. There were two chocolate truffles presented to me, and I just happened to save the worst for last: a truly disappointing last bite that also made me feel guilty, since I had twice met pastry chef Jiho Kim, first when he so kindly brought a dessert to my table, and again during my quick "tour" of the kitchen. Despite this, however, the Modern excels at being the contemporary American restaurant it aspires to be, a fact that shines through the food, decor, and dining room staff.

The Modern had been on my restaurant bucket list for a couple of years. I could never quite pinpoint why. Was it the food? Decor? Menu? The fact that it was a fancy restaurant in a museum that I had never been to? Instagram? To this day, I still do not know. But I have always wondered when I would finally have a chance to visit. I had made the decision to dine at this restaurant instead of Le Bernardin, another restaurant on my bucket list, despite the dinner menu being eight dollars more expensive. As a lover of seafood, I knew that I would never be able to make a decision for any course at Le Bernardin, so I knew The Modern would be the better option this time. I have also previously dined at Daniel, and was curious about the difference between French fine dining and contemporary American cuisine.

The Modern is conveniently located near the 5th Avenue/ 53rd Street station, with an entrance outside right next to MoMA. I chose to go through this entrance so that I would be able to see it unaffected by its museum neighbor's decoration. Upon entry, I felt as if I was about to enter a fashion show. Bright white lights above and beside me, polished black tile floor below, upbeat music from the museum faint in my ears, a fashionable young woman in front of me walking through the second door, not holding the door for a second. Ah yes, elitist midtown Fifth Avenue, here I am! I continued my way to the maitre d'; who greeted me

enthusiastically, and offered to take my coat. I was then led to my table by another young lady, not as enthusiastic in demeanor as the maitre d' but still pleasant. On the way to my table, I observed a sea of people dressed in dark clothes, probably the after-work crowd, in the Bar Room, the Modern's more casual dining setting that offers an a la carte menu. The host and maitre d' would easily pass as one of them, as they too, wore simple black attire. This pattern of black and white kept reminding me that I was indeed in midtown Manhattan. This was emphasized even further in the dining room, where most guests are invited to sit in black desk chairs—just without the wheels. Fortunately, my dining setting was less corporate, and more spacious, since I was dining solo. My host kindly invited me to sit down on a black leather seat with a dark blue square cushion. She accommodated my request to sit next to the window overlooking the museum sculpture garden: finally, a real indicator that I was in a fine dining restaurant. She then awkwardly proceeded to pull out the white tablecloth covered oval table, so that I could enter the bench. After I sat down, she then, even more awkwardly, pushed the table back in, forever trapping me at my table. I thought, “This is it. No getting up, no bathroom breaks. The experience is about to begin.”

In addition to having a nice view of the sculpture garden, my seat in the dining room gave me the best view of the whole dining room. I was peacefully secluded in my own corner, admiring the decorative cherry blossom trees displayed at each of the three server stations at the center of the room. It was a nice break from the almost drab black and white, dark color scheme that the restaurant and all its patrons had somehow coordinated with each other. (I had joined the black clothes club, too, just in case). Across from me on the table, one candle and a single checker lily made up my date for the evening. Before having another interaction with anyone else, I had some time to take in the sights and sounds of The Modern's dining room. Other diners were either in groups or on dates. Group tables, situated in the middle of the dining room, were mostly surrounded by older diners, while tables for two and singles, around the perimeter, were mostly younger-looking guests. I was the only one sitting alone. It was loud, but not so much that I felt like I was lost in a crowd. I felt calm in my little corner by the window, observing the staff, listening to the fashion show/shopping music playing in the museum next door.

After several minutes of people watching, I was finally greeted by the Captain. He said good evening, made room for an unusually long pause after I replied, and handed me a menu. The whole process of him greeting me and handing me the menu seemed unnecessarily long, but I guess this was a part of the service. He proceeded to acknowledge the requests I had made on my reservation—pescatarian, no alcohol—and offered me non-alcoholic cocktails, which my college student self sadly declined. After this, he filled my water glass, and left me to make my selections from each course and do more people watching. The entrée was a simple choice for

me, because there was only one fish option, which was slow cooked sea bass with celtuce ribbons and horseradish. The others were not so easy, but I was intent on trying new foods free of alcohol and red meat. For the cold appetizer, I decided on the tuna tartare marinated in dashi vinaigrette. I have only ever eaten and prepared hot foods with dashi, so this made me curious. For the warm appetizer, I had cauliflower roasted in crab butter. I wanted to know how well the chefs could make this vegetable the star of the dish, because American cuisine often focuses on meat as the main focus of a plate. For dessert, the apple crème fraiche with sage ice cream. Although I am not a fan of apples or apple flavored anything, I found this to be the most creative, seasonal, and interesting of the other desserts, which were more on the traditional side (chocolate mousse, Mont blanc, bread pudding). After what seemed like much more than enough time to choose, the captain finally came to take my order, and assured me that the chefs would be informed about my pescatarian and non-alcoholic requests.

Shortly after, the meal commenced with the amuse bouche: a celeriac tasting, presented to me by a different dining room Captain, assisted by one of the food runners. The Captain was very enthusiastic in his greeting and presentation, and his attitude was contagious. I watched in anticipation as he laid down a matte white mini platform, with a mini tart sitting atop, and a cone shaped cup filled with some black powder onto the blue and white preset plate. He then presented it as a mini cheddar cheese tart with fresh celeriac, which was to be eaten after the celeriac soup, which was accented with black truffle powder. As he poured, the black truffle powder dispersed throughout the soup, and towards the end of the pour, the most vibrant color of green I had ever seen rose to the surface, adding a beautiful, fresh contrast to the creamy white celeriac soup. It reminded me of spring, even though celeriac and the whole menu was still focused on winter. I was so in awe that I forgot to ask what the green liquid was. It was clear, but too dark to be olive oil. He then explained in a calming British accent that I should wait a few moments for the flavors to marry, and that it was to be drunk like tea, and then followed by the tart. It feels weird to have other people to tell you how to eat, but I followed his instructions.

Shortly after the plates were cleared, the main food runner that was serving me brought out my bread and butter plate and appetizer silverware. The butter plate was formed in a ring, decorated with meticulously picked leaves of different herbs, such as rosemary, thyme, and chervil, and sprinkled with salt. I opted for multigrain and caraway bread, after which the cold appetizer arrived, tartare of tuna with dashi flavored vinaigrette. Unlike traditional tartare, this dish lacked a breaded or crunchy vehicle. Instead, very thinly sliced, translucent discs of daikon radish topped green and red jewels underneath. Before leaving, the food runner made sure to inform me that there was no alcohol in this dish. I then lifted a piece of daikon to reveal the tartare, studded with refreshing diced citrus supremes and parsley. The dashi flavor was prominent, but not overly fishy, and the

bursts of citrus were enjoyable. The slight bitterness of the daikon was a nice addition, to balance all the flavors. The serving size was a little disappointing, considering the price of the whole meal, but it was delicious and a well-thought-out dish. After I finished eating, my food runner, who I was assuming to be the equivalent of a back server, cleared the table except for the bread and butter plates and water glass, swiftly crumbed the table and put down the silverware for the next course, the hot appetizer.

The cauliflower roasted with crab butter was my favorite dish of the night. The plate boasted a brilliant and simple gold and white color scheme, garnished with golden toasted sliced almonds and fresh tarragon leaves being the finishing pop of green. While the cauliflower was roasted to unreal golden perfection, with a strong brown butter flavor, the crab did not shine through. This was a bit of a letdown, because I was expecting that they would utilize the delicious crab fat. They could have elevated the crab flavor in this dish, and perhaps didn't because consuming crab fat in American cuisine is uncommon. Still, the beauty of the presentation was captivating and made me ease up on the criticism. I cleaned the plate, mopping up every bit of buttery goodness with pieces of cauliflower and also using it to breathe life back into my now cold and tough caraway bread. I made sure to make my last bite one with the flavors of the main dish in front of me. After clearing the dish, the main food runner did not crumb the table, but did reposit it for the entrée. This part of the service seemed rushed but did not take away from me enjoying the experience.

For the entrée, the food runner put the plate in front of me and took a deep breath, as if she was about to give a very important speech, automatically telling me she was nervous. Maybe a new server? She then explained each component of the plate—the sea bass, celtuce ribbons, grated horseradish, horseradish cream—and cautiously poured a “minestrone broth” into the shallow bowl, taking care not to drown the horseradish cream. The first thought that popped into my mind? This is not minestrone broth; it's basically a cream soup! So far, only one dish I had tasted so far did not have copious amounts of dairy products. And, I had chosen the crème fraiche and ice cream for dessert. Oops. I was, however, excited for the horseradish, which I anticipated to be a nice break from the mild flavors of the other dishes. The fish was cooked nicely, but didn't wow me in terms of texture, and it was missing the finesse that one would expect from such a high-end restaurant. The celtuce ribbons were warm but still crunchy, but also did not wow me. And the horseradish cream? Sadly, it did not have the spicy kick I was hoping for. This, along with the minestrone broth, made the dish too rich for my liking. Usually, when I eat and think of fish, I prefer it with something cool, crisp and light on the side. The flavors were good, but did not complement each other well, and seemed thrown together rather than carefully considered.

Before dessert, the food runner cleared and crumbed my table, and offered coffee and tea, which I declined. The dining room captain who

served me made a request to the executive pastry chef, Jiho Kim, to serve a small “dessert appetizer” as I like to think of it, and it was presented to me by the chef himself. It was a simple quenelle of yuzu ice cream with a wedge of mandarin orange and extremely thin choux pastry shaped like a leaf. I believe the captain provided the complimentary dessert because I told him I was a hospitality student. He was the one to present me with the last course—apple crème fraiche with sage ice cream. The crème fraiche actually tasted like apple, nearing apple Jolly Rancher flavor, but not cloyingly sweet. It was served over a thin almond cake, and a refreshing pile of granny smith apples and celeriac brunoise—a clever allusion to the amuse bouche from the start of the whole meal. The sage ice cream was my favorite part, even though I was dreading constantly having cream being a constant part of each course. The savory flavor of sage somehow provided a warm depth of flavor to the dessert, and I finished it quickly so as not to let it melt and make the almond cake soggy.

After the table was cleared, I was left alone for a very long time. I was tired of people watching at this point, and I felt trapped from the host pushing the table so close to me. Where are my server friends? Where is the Captain? Are they waiting for me to leave and do I have to pay at the entrance? This was the first time in the evening that I felt uncomfortable. But finally, the Captain came to check on me, and I asked if I could pay, which turned out to be one of the reasons why he finally came back to my table. He then surprised me by offering to show me the kitchen. The wait was so long that I thought it was not going to happen. I felt like I had burdened the staff with my dietary restrictions and questions, but they continued showing exceptional hospitality. I had called a week before and asked a reservationist about seeing the kitchen, but I do not know if this is the reason he offered, or if it was because I told him I am a student. Regardless, I was ecstatic, so much so that I asked, “Right now?!” when he turned around to get my bill. After the check was paid, he promptly led me to the kitchen, and expertly explained each station, as well as the names of the chefs working, while still keeping the information concise. It was the perfect end to the meal, and it compensated for the terrible chocolate that I had as my final bite of the night.

Surprisingly, it was the service and hospitality that made the experience memorable for me. The food was good overall. I did have some expectations that were left unmet as far as food and culinary arts are concerned, but I was very happy that the restaurant accommodated every request I made—pescatarian, no alcohol, seat by the window, tour of the kitchen. Furthermore, they even gave me a free dessert, and I met the executive pastry chef. The atmosphere is appropriate for business meetings and more special occasions, and the Bar Room is a nice setting for meeting up with friends in a more upscale setting than the usual bar or café. I was nervous that I would be rushed through the meal as a solo diner, but after visiting The Modern, I think they go above and beyond for each guest.

## Bibliography

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