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Restaurant Review: Gabriel Kreuther in Midtown

Gabriel Kreuther

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By PETE WELLS

When the chef **Gabriel Kreuther** left the Modern in 2014, he seems to have packed up virtually everything except Picasso's goat in the sculpture garden. He named the place he opened in June, across 42nd Street from Bryant Park, after himself, but it could just as easily be called the Modern in Exile.

He took along the Modern's pastry chef, Marc Aumont, a virtuoso of desserts and breads who worked at his side for the restaurant's first nine years. He replicated its two-in-one structure, too. In the bar, where gooseneck streetlamps crane out over low tables, he has an approachable menu, some of it Alsatian, like rustic tartes flambées and the greatest liverwurst in the five boroughs. Things get far more elaborate once you enter the dining room, behind a ring of rough timber beams pulled from a Vermont barn.

In that space, Mr. Kreuther imported the four-course \$98 prix fixe format that was in place when I gave the Modern's dining room operation three stars in 2013. He has reproduced much of his last restaurant's tone, too, with formal but cheerful servers raising bell-shaped glass lids from main courses in synchrony and quickly running a silver sweeper over every crumb that falls on the white tablecloths.

Mr. Kreuther did not make off with the Modern's wine cellar, but he charged Emilie Perrier with building a new one that is only slightly less impressive. There are treats from all over, but the excellent bottles from Alsace are a special pleasure.

And of course, Mr. Kreuther brought his recipes.

Here is the palm-size tart of smoked sturgeon and sauerkraut under a dandelion-colored mousseline with a gleaming black eye of caviar. There is the cushion of foie gras between two firm pieces of squab breast, trickling with red juices, all bundled up inside savoy cabbage and a papery shell of brik pastry. Both are as marvelous as I remembered. Like much of the cooking at this new restaurant, these dishes make an irresistible case for the power of classical European

techniques, all the blade-flicking and stock-skimming tricks that Mr. Kreuther swings around so easily.

A native of Alsace, his skills forged by the martial discipline of French, German and Swiss restaurants, Mr. Kreuther makes no effort to hide his old-school training.

Rising up from a pool of cantaloupe sauce (an idea as cool as the chilled sauce itself) was a foie gras terrine. Any foie gras from Mr. Kreuther's kitchen is pretty much guaranteed to be wonderful; this one was molded into a dome studded all over with purplish cubes of duck prosciutto, each no bigger than a pinhead. A smaller brunoise may be technically possible, but it would require lasers.

Fried frog meat in the lightest sheath of batter was bunched up at the end of a leg bone pared as clean as a toothpick; you dunk these drumsticks in a lemony garlic bouillon so bright and focused that you can almost see the worried face of the cook who watched the pot.

Two things about this fine-grained precision.

First, it is about as fashionable as acid-washed jeans. Younger chefs are scattering ashes over whole leaves, splashing buttermilk in a bowl and calling it a sauce, and trying to hide signs of human manipulation. Mr. Kreuther's dishes look as unmistakably man-made as a skyscraper, and his sauces were obviously produced in a stockpot, not an udder.

Second, Mr. Kreuther uses technique with purpose. The point of cutting duck ham into microcubes is that you taste some with every bite of foie gras smashed on toasted brioche. So before dismissing this grand Midtown dining room as a horse-drawn carriage in the age of Uber, sit down and see how exciting a little knifework can be.

Notionally, dinner is made up of four courses. In reality, new things stream out of the kitchen in an endless slot-machine cascade. Before the first course, three miniature dishes arrive at once. Each is a distinct event. The last time I camped out at a table, I wanted to pocket my guests' cracker-and-sweet-potato sandwiches.

I don't think Mr. Aumont can make a dessert I wouldn't like. He is always toying around with forms and shapes; the high point, so to speak, of his great chocolate-and-cherry dessert is a towering dark-chocolate cone that melts while you watch. But his games never interfere with the flavors, which stay clear and direct. Pineapple carpaccio is hidden under a tuile and a spoonful of herb sorbet (lime leaf, Thai basil), but you're never in doubt that the fruit is carrying the melody.

The savory courses don't always have the same focus. Mr. Kreuther has a lot to say, but at times you wish he wouldn't say it all at once. A sweet, charred whole tomato was overcome by its seasonings, especially garlic and black pepper, and by the cup of dark gazpacho that tasted like an unspicy virgin Mary and didn't add any clarity.

At first the interior, designed by **Glen Coben**, also struck me as too frantic. Mr. Coben juxtaposes those barn pillars with copper panels, glazed tiles and wallcoverings boldly printed with storks and flowers. It's a little loony, but somehow all these elements together bring warmth and energy to a room that has at its core a deeply comfortable and rewarding white-tablecloth restaurant.