

NEW YORK POST

WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 27, 2006

Mr. Met

Picholine revamps for opera crowd

THE Metropolitan Opera is working hard to draw a wider and younger audience, and so is Picholine — which makes sense given its longtime reign as the favorite eating option of “Fledermaus”-bound foodies.

You won't find chef/owner Terrance Brennan handing out nibbles in Times Square — but like the Met's new boss, Peter Gelb (who's a regular customer), he knew it was time to lure a new generation of devotees.

“Everything's gotten so much more competitive,” Brennan says of the city's tumultuous dining scene.

When he opened his Mediterranean-accented jewel box on the barren culinary landscape of the Upper West Side 10 years ago, it became the place for well-heeled Met-goers. Old World elegance, plush banquettes and crystal chandeliers echoed the eras of Verdi and Wagner. Regulars counted on maitre'd Sean McAlinney to alert them to curtain times and cast changes.

Picholine scored with the dining millions, too. It's long been on the Zagat Survey's “most popular” roster, partly because its \$78, three-course prix-fixe dinner menu was cheaper than most anything in its class.

But by last winter it was wheezing like an over-the-hill tenor. The brown-and-green dining rooms had faded. House classics like olive-crust lamb saddle sometimes missed the high notes, and desserts leaned toward misbegotten savories like celery meringue.

So Brennan closed for five weeks over the summer. The dark old palette and gloomy tapestries were tossed for gleaming shades of gray and lavender. Chandeliers took on a silvery finish that evoke the opera house's famous Austrian crystal.

The menu has been reorganized, too. Brennan hasn't changed his vibrant,

Mediterranean-modern American playbook. But you can now have just two courses for \$64; each third course (dessert or cheese) is an additional \$14. The \$78 total for three dishes is the same as the old three-course-only prix-fixe.

Today's diners definitely want more flexibility, Brennan says. “Some people think they'll have a sugar course and then they'll fall asleep,” he chuckles. “Over the years, we lost some of the Lincoln Center post-performance business. Who wants a full-blown meal at 11 o'clock?”

So at the bar, Brennan now offers inexpensive options, including a “tasting flight” of three small items (like luscious paella spring rolls) for \$15 and larger plates (including licorice-lacquered squab and grilled pompano) for \$18 each.

A friend who's a longtime customer told me, “The thing that would keep me away some nights was, ‘I want to go to Picholine, but it's just a bit much’ — so being able to sit at the bar might be the thing.”

Yet the spiffed-up dining rooms remain as elegant as ever, boldly flying against the prevailing wind. Although there's no jacket rule, there are more suits and ties in the house than I've seen most anywhere.

The best news is that Brennan (who also owns popular cheese-heaven Artisanal) is devoting himself to the kitchen again, working closely with chef de cuisine Craig Hopson as they gradually roll out the new fall menu.

Having grumbled last spring about Picholine's weird desserts, I was delighted to see more accessible sweets from pastry chef Zachary Miller like cheesecake ice cream sandwiches and “symphony of chocolate.”

But, “I'm keeping the fennel ice cream,” Brennan grins.

steve.cuozzo@nypost.com

Picholine lightened its decor and polished its chandeliers to retain its Met Opera diners.



Zandy Mangold



Steve Cuozzo

Free Range