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TIKKE

It's Been a Very Long Decade of Swiping

Tinder
Diaries

By
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Davis

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1,000-plus
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OPENINGS

A Basque Pioneer Comes Back

Txikito reopens with a fresh look and an updated menu.

BY CHARLOTTE DRUCKMAN

► IT HAS BEEN 28 months since anyone could stop in to Txikito—the small Chelsea restaurant run by chefs Eder Montero and Alex Rajj—for whole trout with serrano ham, tripe with bizkaína sauce, or salt cod with pil-pil. Pandemic or otherwise, a closure of more than two years would be the end of the road for most businesses. Not so for Txikito, which reopens this month.

Montero and Rajj still operate their Brooklyn restaurants, mere feet from each other in Cobble Hill. La Vara is focused on the Moorish and Jewish crosscurrents in southern-Spanish cooking, while Saint Julivert culls coastal cuisines from around the world for its wide-ranging seafood menu. And with Txikito, the couple now want to dive even further into the Basque traditions that have informed this restaurant since its debut in 2008 and which made it such a standout at a time when Spanish food in New York was largely defined by croquettes, paella, and flan.

"I've always wanted to respect the Basque repertoire, just how rich and subtle it is," Rajj says, "but I also feel that the way the Basque

people perceive themselves has changed in the last 15 years. I want to reflect on that."

That means evolving the menu in ways that may at first feel imperceptible to regulars—reworking the layered Russian salad, adding a section of pil-pils made with something other than the commonly used cod, and introducing a vegetarian dish Rajj auditioned just before the pandemic that features mushrooms sliced into bouncy strips that look almost like baby eels—as well as making the dining room brighter with surfaces that pick up natural light from outside, such as brass on the bar top, and warm maple panels that replace the rustic shingles originally chosen as a reference to the cider houses of Spain.

The goal is to help Txikito return not as a neighborhood "Basque" restaurant but as a neighborhood restaurant, full stop. "Like a Bar Pitti, Barbuto, or the Odeon," Rajj offers. "Fresh but still soulful. Classic yet current."

*Txikito, 240 Ninth Ave.,
nr. 25th St.; txikitonyc.com*

Another Martini?

This one is British, freezing, and particularly strong.

FOR ALL OF THE martinis currently splashing around New York—espresso martinis and dirty martinis, martinis garnished with anchovies and martinis mixed with MSG—one of the world's most revered renditions of the drink has remained absent.

The Dukes martini is a London classic, treated with equal parts respect and caution. *Dukes* refers to Dukes Bar, inside the posh Dukes hotel, located within the even posher St. James's neighborhood. That's where the drink was created back in the '80s by a bartender named Salvatore Calabrese. It is very cold because the gin and vodka are stored in a freezer. It is very dry because only the smallest amount of vermouth is used. And it is very lethal because it is neither stirred nor shaken. Instead, the undiluted spirit is poured directly into a chilled glass—a three-martini lunch taken in a few bracing gulps.

Brian Evans, the director of bars for the Sunday Hospitality group, first encountered the Dukes martini last summer. He did not finish it. "It was wonderful," he says, "but I had other destinations to get to."

Nevertheless, it left an impression, and when Evans put together his menu for the Hotel Chelsea's newly unveiled **Lobby Bar** (226 W. 23rd St.), it was the first drink he added to a section called "Tributes," tweaks of famous drinks invented by others.

As in its hometown, the drink at Lobby Bar is prepared tableside. Dukes Bar offers a choice of gins and vodkas; in New York, there isn't enough freezer space for that, so the gin is Tanqueray No. Ten and the vodka Ketel One—each encased in a block of ice.

So far, the drink has been a hit. "It definitely resonated with a lot more people than I expected," Evans says, recalling a group of eight that ordered a round of Dukes martinis for the entire table. "I was caught a bit off guard on that one."

It's easy for this \$26 cocktail to catch customers off guard, too, being that it is, in essence, a glass full of frozen liquor. For that reason, and for everyone's safety, Lobby Bar limits each guest to no more than two Dukes martinis per evening.

ROBERT SIMONSON



PHOTOGRAPH: LANNA APISUKH FOR NEW YORK MAGAZINE (FISH)