

The French Connection: An Evening at Essential by Christophe

Christophe Bellanca brings classical French technique, Japanese flourishes, and a little Upper West Side serenity to one of New York's most quietly spectacular tasting menus.

By Johnny Motley Sep 29, 2026 1:00 PM



Essential by Christophe

As a booze writer in New York, I occasionally get invited to lavish media events hosted by French wineries. I learned the hard way not to bullshit sommeliers and importers about my knowledge of appellations and grands crus; instead, I steer the conversation toward my métier: New York restaurants. I keep one question in my hip pocket that has proven catnip to Francophiles: “Have you been to Essential by Christophe?” Wine-glazed eyes light up, Champagne flutes lower, and then comes the outpouring of superlatives. “Ah, Christophe! Oui. *Magnifique!*” Even Julius Caesar never conquered the Gauls so handily.

**“The discovery of a new dish does more for the happiness of mankind than the discovery of a star.”
— Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin. Bless the French.**



Essential by Christophe

After building a glittering CV as executive chef of Le Cirque and culinary director for Joël Robuchon USA, chef Christophe Bellanca opened his eponymous restaurant in 2022 on a quiet street in the Upper West Side. Like Jimi Hendrix playing the blues, Bellanca's mastery of classical technique allows him to pare French cuisine down to flawlessly executed fundamentals—or, rather, essentials. The fare is as gloriously Gallic as Brigitte Bardot topless in Saint-Tropez, but Bellanca is fond of playing with Japanese ingredients. His dégustation might include fukushu kumquat and madai alongside foie gras and truffles. It's the sort of restaurant you discover after venturing beyond the marquee names of New York fine dining—a bit like finding your way to A. Lange & Söhne after Rolex, or Springbank after Macallan.

When I went to dine at Essential by Christophe last August, I was mortified upon entering the small, hushed dining room. My girlfriend and I were late for our reservation due to an unforeseen MTA shitshow. Not ten or fifteen minutes tardy—like, *wtf-is-wrong-with-you* late. Most Michelin-starred French restaurants would have cancelled on us, but with the gentle benevolence of Florence Nightingale, the hostess reassured us that she understood the vicissitudes of New York City's public transit. She sent over two glasses of Champagne to emphasize the point.

We settled on the seven-course Chef's Tasting Menu, the signature expression of Bellanca's cooking. Each course offered two options, so dining à deux meant we could taste the entire menu. We resisted splurging on the wine pairing since we were already deep into cocktail country—Jackie with an Old Fashioned garnished with candied griottes, tart French cherries, and yours truly with a Martini laced with Norman apple eau-de-vie.

The opening number was a mushroom cappuccino amuse-bouche—a tiny cup of funky fungi foam atop a Madeira-infused sweet potato purée. From there, dinner was like a Stones concert: every minute pure gold. The first set included scallops crowned with Ossetra caviar and garnished tableside with a Champagne-hazelnut sauce, and sea bream atop a tricolor banner of sauces infused with turmeric, satsuma, and fresh herbs. As the dishes grew heavier, out came an Iberian pork cutlet in cherry sauce and squab cloaked in a velvety, burgundy-hued sauce diable. At some point, I tasted the richest mashed potatoes of my life.

Sufi mystics describe ascending through seven layers of heaven before beholding the face of God. By the seventh course—a chocolate tart à la mode rich enough to induce a seizure and a strawberry vacherin as ornate as a Rococo figurine—I was probably as close to religious ecstasy as such a coarse soul can get.

An espresso doppio with a tray of mignardises ushered us back to the earthly plane. The subway was still a fiasco on the way back to Brooklyn, but by that point, we were too blissed out to care.