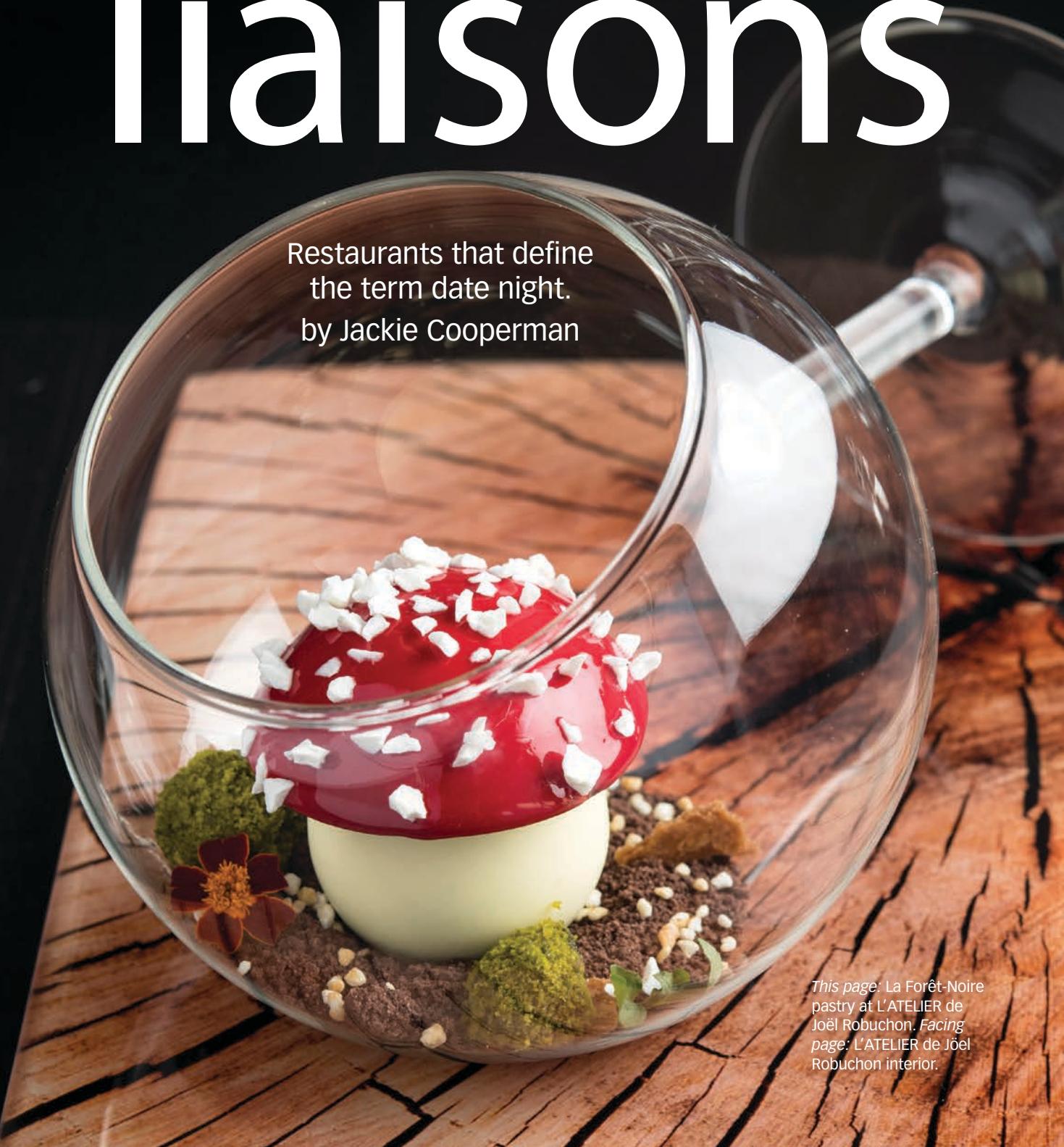


# .delectable liaisons

Restaurants that define  
the term date night.  
by Jackie Cooperman



This page: La Forêt-Noire pastry at L'ATELIER de Joël Robuchon. Facing page: L'ATELIER de Joël Robuchon interior.



PHOTOS: LA FORÊT NOIRE; EVAN SUNG; INTERIOR OF L'ATELIER DE JOËL ROBUCHON, COURTESY OF L'ATELIER DE JOËL ROBUCHON



For Valentine's Day dinner, you can easily find the tried-and-true triad of Champagne, oysters and chocolates, but the city's most romantic restaurants offer so much more. Some of this year's most alluring options include vegetarian tasting menus composed by a French Michelin chef; classic new American cuisine with sweeping views of the city skyline; truffle pasta in a room full of original Andy Warhol paintings; caviar service alongside Philip Johnson's iconic Seagram Building pool; handmade dumplings in a glammed-up Chinatown hot spot; and a customizable tasting menu in a West Village hideaway modeled on a Provençal farmhouse. Book a table at any of the boîtes below, and be all but guaranteed to fall in love with your date—and New York City—all over again.

Tucked into a quiet West Village street, **Mas** (39 Downing St., 212.255.1790), which means farmhouse in Old French, manages to be both extremely romantic—with low lighting, small vases of fresh flowers, quiet music—and downtown cool. James Beard Award-winning chef Galen Zamarra, a disciple of David Bouley, brings both extraordinary technique and generosity of spirit to his food, allowing diners to customize tasting menus. Zamarra, a devotee of local farms, changes his menus frequently, but among the must-try dishes, if they are available: wild American Hackleback caviar with crème fraîche panna cotta Champagne gelée; poached lobster with Kuri squash butter and preserved lemon; and braised pork belly with carrot puree, roasted baby squash and pickled mustard seeds. **Mas'** kind and quietly enthusiastic waitstaff is also excellent at guiding



Braised pork belly with  
carrot puree at Mas.

diners, even suggesting off-the-menu options.

Helmed by two chefs who trained at London's esteemed River Café, downtown newcomer King (18 King St., 917.825.1618) is the apotheosis of French-Italian simple chic. With a daily changing menu and large picture windows, the small restaurant feels particularly fresh and lends itself to leisurely dining. Request table 45, nestled in a cozy nook in the dining room, and share a first course of whole lobster over the restaurant's own tagliarini pasta, followed by a T-bone steak for two sourced from a Pennsylvania farm. Pair your dinner with one of the single-estate French or Italian vineyards featured on King's well-considered wine list.

The ultimate in glammed-up Asian fusion, Chinese Tuxedo (5 Doyers St., 646.895.9301) unites a Scottish

chef with Chinese-American and Australian owners, and the result is deliciously reimagined Chinese food in a dramatic bi-level space (corner booths provide intimate seating, so request one when you make your reservation). Named for Chinatown's first fine dining restaurant and set in a candlelit former opera house on the Lower East Side, Chinese Tuxedo has a menu that ranges from appealingly vegetable-forward—like the salad of chilled Shanghai pak choi, cucumber, avocado and bean shoots in a white soy dressing—to old school carnivorous roasted duck with Chinese celery, basil, lychees and Chinkiang dressing. This month, chef Paul Donnelly will be studding his menu with romantic ingredients like oysters, uni and abalone, and adding cocktails like Joy Love Club, a champagne cocktail with Peychaud

bitters and oleo saccharum, and My Sherry Amour with Grand Marnier, manzanilla sherry and an orange twist on the rocks. If you feel like celebrating with a crowd, note that the restaurant holds its Chinese New Year banquet dinner on Feb. 17.

One of the hottest new Manhattan restaurant openings, L'ATELIER Joël Robuchon welcomes the esteemed French chef back to New York in a sleek Chelsea dining room. Since his last Manhattan stint five years ago, Chef Robuchon has lost 60 pounds and embraced more organic, healthful cuisine, and his new restaurant offers a rare luxury: a sophisticated vegetarian tasting menu that's just as considered as his carnivore and pescatarian options. Among the tempting choices: Maine lobster with black pepper and bok choy; caramelized free-range quail with foie gras, potato puree or eggplant confit, with fine herbs and a vegetable curry. Do not leave without ordering dessert, but dining on Valentine's Day

yields its own rewards: All diners will leave with a box of artisanal chocolates.

Led by Chef Rich Torrisi, *The Pool* (99 E. 52nd St, 212.375.9001) opened last summer in one of the city's most spectacular dining rooms, replacing the legendary Philip Johnson-designed Four Seasons restaurant (which is reopening this spring a few blocks south). The Pool's menu focuses on fresh raw and grilled seafood, decadent steaks and cocktails. Start with Santa Barbara sea urchin toast or foie gras, follow with scampi ravioli or one of the menu's caviars, and continue with the classics—a whole grilled Dover sole or rack of lamb for two. Conclude your meal with one of the city's best light desserts: a bowl of silky, housemade frozen yogurt with seasonal toppings like plum marmalade, strawberry crumble, yuzu curd or tomato honey. If you can't get reservations, try *The Pool Lounge*, which offers small plates, Champagne by the glass and cocktails.



The dining room at Chinese Tuxedo.



An interior shot at  
Casa Lever.

The ideal restaurant for Italophiles and art lovers, **Casa Lever** (390 Park Ave., 212.888.2700) has one of the world's largest collection of Andy Warhol portraits and a menu and wine list full of Italian delights. Located in Midtown's landmarked Lever House, the restaurant offers elegant but accessible service, and food options that range from the very light—perfectly dressed arugula salads and raw hamachi—to hearty prime beef served with red corn polenta. Reserve one of the leather banquette booths that frame the dining room (or for even more privacy, book the back private room, with its own Warhol gallery), and begin the meal with a glass of Franciacorta before tucking into Chef Domenico Natale's potato gnocchi with Maine lobster, roasted cherry tomato and fresh basil or classic Milanese osso buco, a slow-braised veal shank, served with seared saffron risotto and bone marrow. To finish, another Northern Italian treat: the multilevel gianduia cake, with choco-

late and hazelnut in mousse, cream and crunch.

With its sweeping views of both the Manhattan skyline and the Statue of Liberty, **The River Café** (1 Water St., DUMBO, Brooklyn, 718.522.5200) is the archetypal romantic treat, making it a popular destination for proposals and weddings. A pioneer when it opened under the Brooklyn Bridge 40 years ago, the restaurant launched some of the country's best-known chefs, including Larry Forgione and Charlie Palmer.

Start with East Coast Wellfleet and West Coast Kumamoto oysters, chilled on the half shell with lemon pepper granité, followed by crispy duck breast, its skin scented in lavender and crusted in spices, or black sea bass sautéed with lobster brown butter, served with grilled artichoke ravioli and fresh artichoke. Expect elegant service, and dress accordingly: The River Café may be the only Brooklyn restaurant requiring men to wear jackets. But that is pretty darn romantic, isn't it?



Ribbons of foie gras  
from The Pool.