

Ivy Lane Restaurant Brings Downtown Vibrancy To The Upper East Side

With its proximity to luxe shopping and its regal, ivy-covered facade, new restaurant Ivy Lane might appear, from the outside at least, to be true to the feel of its Upper East Side location. Step inside, however, and Ivy Lane looks nothing like its posh neighbors, such as the more buttoned-up Hutong and Regency Bar & Grill.

But its divergence from UES norm is Ivy Lane's charm. Colorful murals and artwork cover nearly every bit of wallspace, ranging from a pair of luminous eyes painted above the bar to lovely red clouds frothing around Ivy Lane's third level. Brooklyn-based artist N. Carlos J. was called upon to design all the interiors and says he wanted guests to feel as if they were leaving the high echelons of the neighborhood. "When you walk in, [I wanted it to be like] you were leaving yourself and entering into a new world," he says. "There's nothing like this on the Upper East Side."

Despite N. Carlos J.'s downtown-comes-uptown vibe, chef Sung Park keeps with his history of fine dining from Brasserie Seoul and Bistro Petit. The modern American fare contains flavors from his global travels and techniques from his French training. He prefers seasonal ingredients that feel light and aren't clogged with fat and butter.

Start, for example, with tuna and hamachi, deepened by a chilled yuzu broth, nori and wasabi olive oil. The wagyu beef tartare contains none of the traditional ketchup or breading but rather Asian pear and crispy rice paper.

During our interview, Park couldn't wait to describe the squid ink gnocchi, which he calls "an elevated mac and cheese." The squid ink, usually reserved for long noodles such as fettuccine or tagliatelle, is the perfect background for a French Mornay cheese sauce, panko and chile powder, then elevated even further with a truffle add-on.

Park's menu includes a strong list of small plates, including bone marrow two ways (roasted marrow and as a croquette with preserved lemon) and baby octopus with sea bean, caper berry, chile puree and a saffron aioli. A burrata goes beyond the ordinary with a luscious ball of mozzarella and fig, but the best dish in this category has to be the seared Hudson Valley foie gras with cherry puree, roasted grape and brioche toast.

For the mains, a Colorado leg of lamb is unctuous with fresh pappardelle, an almond pesto and pecorino Romano. Cornish hen is perfectly roasted in bacon, alongside carrots and a poached egg, but the sauces, a sunchoke puree and chicken jus, are what really give this dish life.

Although the menu is heavy on the red meat, Sung puts just as much attention into his fish dishes. Fluke comes with crab brandade, a technique that usually is made with dried cod, and Park serves his Arctic char with four types of seasonal steamed mushrooms and a sake ginger Champagne sauce. He says, "It's a clear, consommé-type of saucy broth and then it also has mint in it. So it's pungent, light and sour."

His plating is meticulous with pops of color—the yellow of an egg yolk, the red of chile sauce—that mirror the street-art-style aesthetic of Ivy Lane. N. Carlos J. started designing the restaurant before Sung came onto the project, so the artwork might have influenced the cuisine. The artist, whom Park describes as a "modern-day Michelangelo," was given a lot of trust and freedom for the space after he designed a hotel that parent company Merchant Hospitality Group adored.

"People think of me as a muralist, painter or graphic designer, but designing spaces is the thing that I love the most," N. Carlos J. says. "I've never been given full control before this, so I've been waiting for this moment. I was ready."

