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FOOD & DRINK

A Grown-Up's Guide to 'Fast-Fine' Dining

Two non-millennials navigate an emerging dining trend: high-end cuisine combined with minimal service and tempting prices.



CLICK MEAL | A customer orders from a server equipped with iPad at Made Nice in Manhattan PHOTO: DAVID CHOW FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

By Jane Black

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MY DAD does not have bad taste in restaurants—far from it. But even he will admit he’s a little old fashioned. He likes his dining rooms quiet and the service leisurely. The response to his order of a gimlet should be, “Yes, of course,” not a series of follow-up questions about newfangled brands of gin. For Dad, the food matters, but dining out is more about the occasion, the experience of sitting down and enjoying the meal.

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Which makes my father both the best and the worst person I could have invited to Made Nice, in Manhattan, the new “fast-fine” restaurant from Will Guidara and Daniel Humm. The pair has pedigree: Their flagship, Eleven Madison Park, widely celebrated for cossetting its customers, won the number one spot on this year’s World’s 50 Best Restaurants list, the influential annual ranking published by UK-based William Reed Media Group. In contrast, the service at Made Nice is purposefully quick, and the ambience is decidedly casual (read: noisy). The food is on trend, though thankfully not “vegetable-forward,” a buzzword that would send Dad’s eyes rolling dangerously far into the back of his head.



The chicken and rice with a cran fizz with ginger at Made Nice. PHOTO: DAVID CHOW FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

This is not just a tale of a pushy food writer and her father. It is a story that plays out over and over as long-held notions of what it means to dine out are challenged by a new breed of restaurants. Called “fast-fine” or “fine-casual”—no one in the industry can even agree on the jargon—these places are a hybrid of the assembly-line fast-casual format pioneered by Chipotle and the traditional fine-dining restaurant, where waiters deliver artfully arranged plates to your table.

Service models vary, but at most fast-fine restaurants you order at a counter, then waiters bring the food to your table and let you order more drinks or dessert without queuing up again. So it goes at Souvla, Barzotto and Corridor in San Francisco; Destroyer and burgeoning franchise MidiCi in Los Angeles; and Chop Shop in Denver.

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The concept is shaped by mighty cultural and economic winds. Millennials crave value but demand sophisticated flavors, too, while restaurants seek to balance labor costs driven up by rising minimum wages and health-care costs.

Dad and I arrived at Made Nice at 1:10 p.m., soon after its April 24 opening, and saw a line stretching out the door. The customers in front of us were hunched over their

cellphones checking the menu; at a table nearby, another was eagerly photographing a dish of a daffodil-colored cauliflower curry. “I’m the oldest person here by 40 years,” Dad shouted over the din. Then, looking at me, he conceded: “Well, at least 27 years.”

As we approached the front of the line, an open kitchen showcasing the restaurant’s main selling point—the top-level culinary talent and technique behind its dishes—came into view. An affable young woman with an iPad took our order. Five minutes later, they called our name, and we carried our dishes from the counter to a table. Our food came chicly presented on what looked like slate trays (they are actually made out of old skateboards); our servings of New York state-made Cabernet Franc came in rather elegant but plastic tumblers. Dad tried the confit pork (\$14), surrounded by a wreath of salad greens and orange and purple carrots, followed by that emphatically Instagrammable cauliflower curry (\$11). “This food is too good for a place like this,” Dad said. “It deserves to be appreciated.”

The same features that cause my father to raise an eyebrow appeal to 20- and 30-somethings, who eat out, research shows, once, sometimes twice a day. At fast-fine restaurants, you get a proper meal, made to order, that allows you to sit down, briefly, then get back to work. The menus are modern and generally healthy-ish.

HAVE IT YOUR WAY //

A Taxonomy of Contemporary Dining



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Will Guidara, who is 37, said Made Nice represents his attempt to create the restaurant he would want to go to every day: “My life is not one where I can sit down [for long], especially during the day. What that means is that a few times a week I eat well and the rest of the time it’s salads or burgers or tacos. This is our way of saying you can have restaurant-quality food without having to linger.”

The goal’s the same at Barzotto in San Francisco’s Mission. Diners order big bowls of pasta ranging from \$10 (paccheri with pecorino and black pepper) to \$17 (pappardelle with braised beef, mushrooms and Parmesan). Compare that to much-

lauded full-service SPQR over in Pacific Heights, where a plate of bucatini with blue cheese, walnut, kale and brown butter goes for an eye-popping \$31.

At L.A.’s Destroyer, a \$13 plate of rice porridge, caramelized broccoli and puffed rice looks like a work of art, but the set-up and no-reservations policy require guests to jockey for the rickety tables. Service, comfort and—especially important to Angelenos—parking are all sacrificed to offer extraordinary food for an affordable price.

To date, millennials have favored fast-casual restaurants; 67% of them eat at them at least once a week compared to 59% of Gen-Xers and 45% of baby boomers, according to research firm Technomic. But fast-fine is “going to hit an all-new sweet spot,” said Eve Turow, author of “A Taste of Generation Yum: How the Millennial Generation’s Love for Organic Fare, Celebrity Chefs and Microbrews Will Make or Break the Future of Food.” To this younger demographic, she added, “it feels like an attainable, rational indulgence.”

Meanwhile, major cities have seen a recent spate of high-profile, fine-dining closings: Annisa and Da Silvano in New York; Bon Marché and Volta in San Francisco. The economics, restaurateurs say, no longer work. Rents are astronomical and minimum wages are gradually edging up to \$15 an hour. This means that the lowest-paid employee will get \$15 while managers are paid as much as \$30 per hour. To cover those costs, restaurants will have to raise prices. And there are only so many people who are willing to shell out \$18 for a green salad and \$6 for an after-dinner cup of coffee.

For Charles Bililies, CEO of San Francisco fast-fine chainlet Souvla, the question was, “How do we operate a profitable business in a very challenging environment?” The number-one way: Reduce staff. From outside, Souvla looks a lot like a standard sit-down restaurant. There is no oversize menu board, no line of trash cans where guests bus their own plates. The food, a mix of rotisserie meats and vegetables, is served on sleek white-and-blue enamel trays, while the all-Greek wines are poured into elegant stemware. Each evening candles are lit on every table.

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But Souvla has no hostess, no sommelier and fewer servers than even a casual-dining restaurant. Its first location, a 42-seat space in Hayes Valley, serves, on average, 400 meals per service between sit-down, takeout and delivery, and has only two food runners delivering meals to tables. (A full-service restaurant of comparable size might be able to sell 100 meals in the same period, with a staff of about eight.) Mr. Bililies estimates his labor costs are as much as 15% lower than a traditional restaurant’s, even though he provides medical benefits, paid vacation and a 401(k) plan to his 125 employees.

“You’ll see more and more of this out of need in expensive cities, and it will proliferate across the country,” said Mr. Bililies. “I firmly believe this is how people want to eat in 2017. They want quality, but they don’t want to pay an arm and a leg for it.”

At Made Nice, my father grasped this argument, though I could tell it challenged everything he believes about dining out. An artful bowl of porridge like those at Destroyer was not something he’d want for breakfast, or maybe ever. But he couldn’t deny the appeal of paying just a few bucks more than you would for a sandwich for a chef-worthy meal.

In some quarters, change comes slowly. For my birthday last month, Dad took me to one of his favorite restaurants, La Chaumière, in Washington, D.C. At his urging, I ordered the Grand Marnier soufflé, tall and golden brown. The solicitous waiter presented it with a flourish. It isn’t how I want to eat most of the time. But more than ever, it felt like a special occasion.

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