

Bad timing, good dining

3 shining new spots might beat the odds

JUST in time for the End of Eating As We Know It, along come three — count 'em, three — big, new restaurants sporting unfamiliar, lofty “concepts.” All were set in motion at least a year ago; all opened after the fall of Lehman Bros. None has a chef many New Yorkers have heard of. They're dead meat, right?

Don't count on it. Some of our greatest restaurants were born out of the blue in the worst of times. Le Cirque opened in 1974, less than a year before the city almost went bankrupt. Nobu bowed in 1994, when there were 1,561 murders in the five boroughs — compare that to 501 last year.



Steve Cuozzo
Free Range

Our three brave new pioneers — at Vermilion, Shang and Rouge Tomate — might not prove as enduring. But like the original Le Cirque and Nobu, they are true departures from everything else around. In a town where much of even the finest food tastes alike, the adventurous offerings at our pioneering trio taste different — for better or worse.

Except for a few dishes, they're not that pricey by Manhattan standards and much cheaper than steakhouses, to which diners are inexplicably flocking. In tough times, it seems, some people mistake familiarity for frugality. The trio here offer adventure for a relative pittance. Get it while it lasts.

AT VERMILION

480 Lexington Ave. (46th Street)
212-871-6600

■ **Cuisine claim:** Indian-Latin fusion.

■ **What it really is:** Indian-Latin fusion and Indian.

■ **Crowd:** Well-dressed business types, busier at lunch than dinner.

■ **Goofiest p.r. statement:** The career of gorgeous owner Rohini Dey (PhD) “spans four legs.” (Funny, she looked fine on the mere two she was sporting the day we met her.)

■ **Price range:** Small plates, \$8-\$20; main dishes, \$24-\$34.

The 200-seat, two-level eatery's liabilities start with a stark, colorless design (without a trace of red) and a moronic name (why not just call it “Vermilion” like the celebrated Chicago original)? The Times seems intent on putting it out of business; it ran a wicked review by a

writer who is not the paper's actual critic and a hard-times “news” story built around a dining room that was, unsurprisingly, empty at 5:37 p.m.

But if Double Crown managed to marry the wildly disparate tastes of colonial Britain and its Asian subjects, At Vermilion deserves a chance with two cuisines that actually have a limited affinity through shared use of spices and starches.

In a town full of Indian and Nuevo Latino joints serving bad meat and fish, At Vermilion uses top-flight raw materials appropriate to both cuisines.

Tandoori-baked, churrasco-style skirt steak lit my fire on a bitter night. And it's at least interesting to experience shredded, Indian-spiced crabmeat inside a crepe made with huitlacoche, the Mexican fungus with a flavor between corn and mushroom.

Chef Maneet Chauhan



Tandoori skirt steak

ROUGE TOMATE

10 E. 60th St.
646-237-8977

■ **Cuisine claim:** SPE (*sanitas per escam*), Latin for “health through food,” or short for “sourcing, preparation, enhancing” — or something.

■ **What it really is:** Creative, organically focused modern American with tons of woodsy-earthly elements.

■ **Crowd:** Strange mix of East Side fashionistas and frumpy foodies.

■ **Goofiest p.r. statement:** “Venison is served with dried fruit chutney to balance pH levels in the blood.”

■ **Price range:** In the cafe: appetizers, \$8-\$17, entrees, \$16-\$29; in the dining room: appetizers, \$12-\$19, entrees, \$21-\$39.

On paper, Rouge Tomate — inspired by a Belgian namesake — looked like a howler. It boasts an on-site “culinary nutritionist.” Nothing is grilled or deep fried. The place is so full of itself, it employs two different p.r. companies — one to promote the SPE shtick, one the actual restaurant.

Nor did the location on the old Nicole Fahri store/cafe site in the heart of East Side shopping country bode well for an adventurous launch.

Yet, Rouge Tomate has its act

shockingly together. It's gorgeous, with acres of light wood, luxurious seating and a Scandinavian-inspired mood on two levels. In the main dining room downstairs, a glass-walled kitchen presides over the scene like the bridge of a friendly flying saucer.

The owners smartly dropped a \$72-plus prix-fixe-only menu downstairs a week after the opening. Both floors have buzzed ever since.

Holding it all together is executive chef Jeremy Bearman, who was executive sous-chef at DB

