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TRAVEL BITES

a DELICIOUS *secret* at MACY'S

Women's coats, bathing suits and duck pot au feu

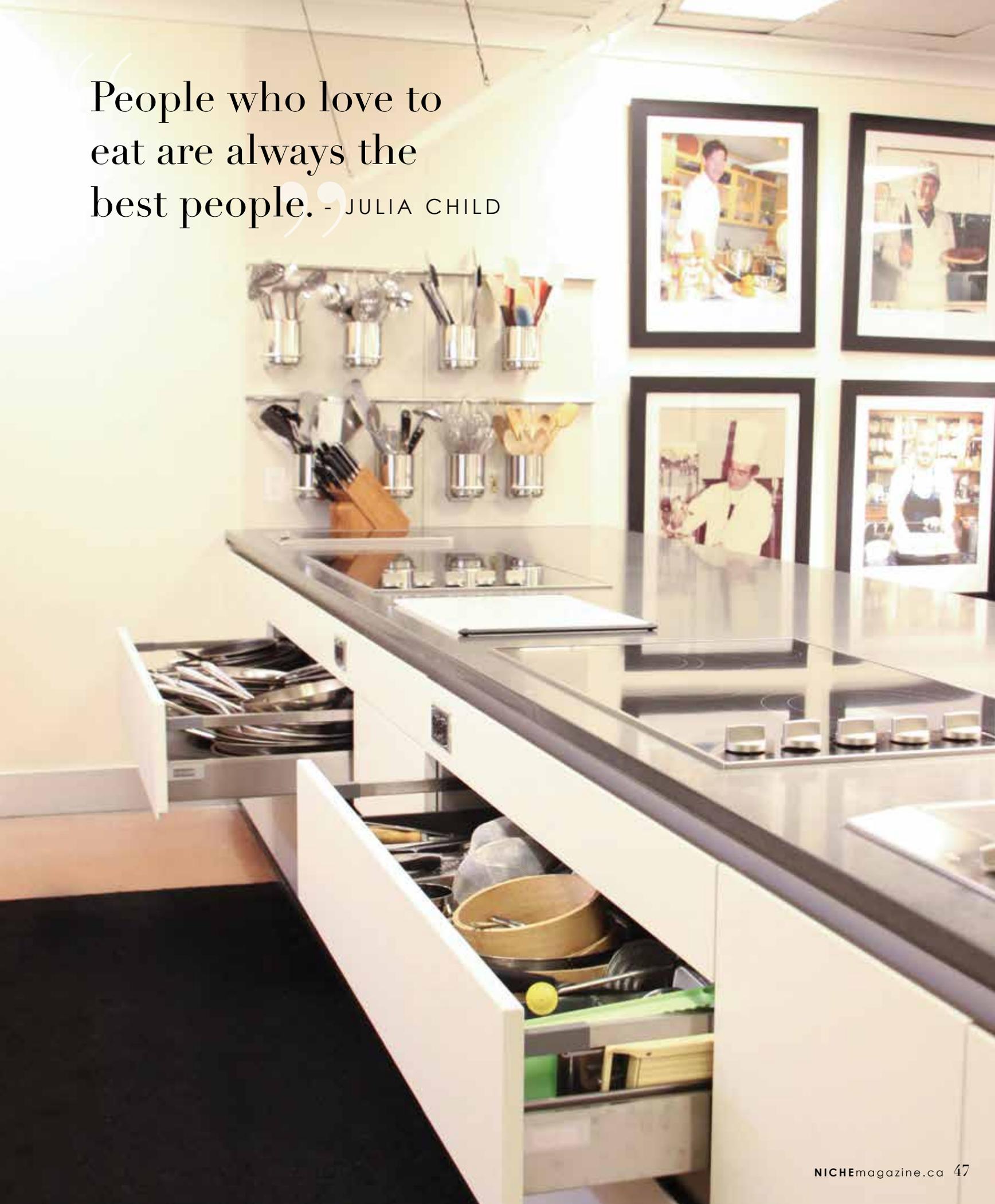
by John Grossmann | travel columnist

The champagne has been poured. Waiters pass platters of lobster-filled daikon rolls, mozzarella with black olives on toast, and homemade liverwurst canapés. Executive Chef Gabriel Kreuther of New York's The Modern is at the stove, about to cook a five-course dinner.

New York is awash in tasting meals, but none boasts the pedigree, the revolving roster of star chefs, the sense of theater, the unfashionable nightly seating time of 5:30 pm, or anything remotely like the out-of-the-way, out-of-the-ordinary location of the \$95 dining experience named after the start of a Latin phrase for 'Of taste there is no dispute.'

To claim your seat you must enter Macy's flagship store and make your way to the eighth floor. Proceed past the women's coats (or bathing suits, depending on the season) to a security guard manning a drab workers' corridor. Your password: De Gustibus.

People who love to eat are always the best people. - JULIA CHILD





Before the term foodie worked its way into the lexicon, long before the Food Network was born, there was the De Gustibus Cooking School in Manhattan, which some have called The Miracle on 34th Street. Considering its humble origins 30 years ago, it is, indeed, a miracle the school survived its salad days. But survive it has, and more than 600 chefs later, offers a unique and rewarding dining experience some 130 nights a year.

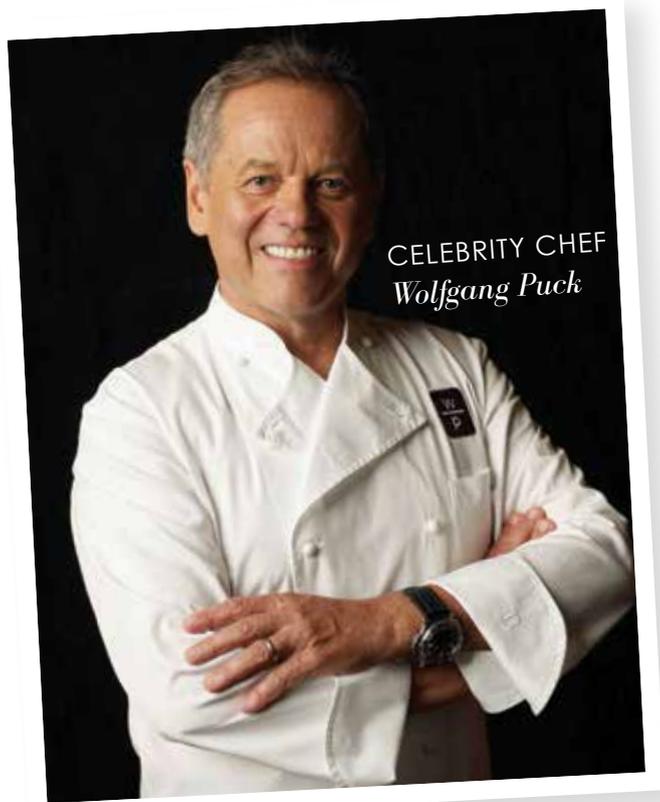
What it isn't: a white tablecloth, fine dining night on the town. The stemware and plates are stylish, but you get a paper placemat and paper napkin. What it is: a cooking show come to life, enlivened with questions from the audience, and offering not simply the sights and sounds of gourmet food preparation, but also the beguiling smells and, most importantly, the ability to taste the dishes, which are prepared en masse in a backstage prep kitchen by the chef's brigade and the De Gustibus staff.

This being a cooking school, you sit at one of eight long tables facing the stage-like kitchen set-up, which bears an overhead mirror that now shows Chef Kreuther stirring abalone mushrooms in a skillet with garlic and thyme. The take home booklet of tonight's recipes indicates the mushrooms will be combined with mussels, a paprika vinaigrette, toasted almonds, and shredded Iberico ham. Kreuther adds four of five tablespoons of water to a heating saucepan of grapeseed oil, explaining in his Alsatian accent, "When it gets to the right heat, 160, 170 degrees, you'll have the water bubbling, and that will tell you to put it on the side and let it steep. This way you won't burn the paprika. It will stay red and not turn brown." A dozen pens ink that tip in the margins of the recipe.

Who comes? Dedicated home cooks seeking just such expert advice. Jaded restaurant goers seeking something different. Moms and Dads bringing budding young chefs. Star-struck food lovers seeking a close encounter with a celebrity chef like Wolfgang Puck or Jean-Georges Vongerichten, Thomas Keller, Bobby Flay or Cat Cora, five of the many visiting chefs whose so-called Forever Young photos--most taken before they became mega celebrities--line three walls of the room. Dating couples come to De Gustibus. Some nights you'll see a creative business executive treating clients to a novel night on the town.

"How many of you have been to The Modern?" asks tonight's hostess, Arlene Feltman Sailhac, a last minute replacement for De Gustibus owner-director Sal Rizzo, who had emergency Achilles heel surgery earlier in the day. About one-third of the four-dozen in attendance raise a hand.

Feltman Sailhac, the co-founder and driving force behind De Gustibus, sold the cooking school to Rizzo in 2008, but has remained on board, offering with her husband, Chef Alain Sailhac, gastronomic vacations to such food havens as Provence and Sicily. Clearly, she could not make a complete break from her culinary offspring. Even today, she speaks of the school's early days like a proud, but once-embattled mother telling parenting war stories.



De Gustibus, Feltman Sailhac will tell you, was born of a visionary, but rather naive notion that she, then a supervisor of the speech clinic at City College, and an equally food-loving colleague shared: “Oh, wouldn’t it be fun to invite chefs to come and speak.” The two wrote such chefs as Perla Myers, Jacques Pepin, Paula Wolfert, and Giuliano Bugialli. All said yes. “Then,” recalls Feltman Sailhac, “we realized, oh my god, we need a space.”

A Carnegie Hall annex, hurriedly rented on a dark Monday night, hosted the first class. Myers, the inaugural chef, effectively paved the way when she announced: “I’m not going to speak for three hours, I need to cook.” She made do with an extension cord and an electric frying pan. Afterwards, everybody left their auditorium seats and came on stage to pick at the chicken breasts she’d sauteed. A change of venue, to TOMI Hall at the Theatre Opera Music Institute, saw Julia Child, Marcella Hazan, and others on stage (again on a dark Monday night) cooking in front of whatever scenery would greet opera goers the following evening. Students ate off paper plates. Regulars, known affectionately as ‘the box people,’ improved their lot by improvising personal cardboard laptop tables.

When the school moved to Macy’s Herald Square store, initially in a different spot on the 8th floor, De Gustibus enjoyed its first proper cooking facilities. But it still shared space with the department store’s puppet theater and had to make way for the Easter Bunny and Santa Claus. In 1997, classes moved to the current location off the selling floor, where, as soon as the first sip of sparkling wine hits your lips, you forget all about the surrounding retailing hubbub.

Tonight’s food proves delicious, the dishes all menu favorites at The Modern and on a par with the platings there. After the mushroom and mussel appetizer, and basically in step with Chef Kreuther’s demonstrations, the De Gustibus waitstaff delivers: a chilled cucumber soup with white anchovies and manchego cheese; then roasted halibut with seasonal vegetables and a traditional Alsatian peasant burnt bread sauce; next the meat course, a playful duck ‘pot au feu’ two ways--the breast with seasonal vegetables and a basil emulsion, the foie gras on olive toast. Dessert is a light buttermilk panna cotta with concord grape marmalade and Aleppo pepper. After the champagne, a Tattinger brut, comes a dry white Meursault; then a premier cru red burgundy. Second pours are offered on all three wines.

THROUGHOUT, THE TONE IS CONVIVIAL, AND AS THE WINE FLOWS, SO DOES THE STREAM OF QUESTIONS TO THE CHEF.

“What temperature do you sweat vegetables?”

“MEDIUM, YOU WANT NO COLOUR. YOU’RE NOT CARAMELIZING THEM.”

“What kind of white wine do you use for cooking the mussels?”

“A CHEAP WHITE WINE,” says Chef Kreuther.

“NOT THE WHITE WINE WE’RE DRINKING,” jokes Feltman Sailhac.

Rizzo, buttonholed at a later date when he returned to work on crutches, tells of Becco Executive Chef William Gallagher making rice balls and a complementary ragu that several astute students did not feel was completely elucidated in the printed recipe. Someone pressured him. “What else is in there?” “Okay,” he said, “I’ll give you my secret.” You could hear a knife slice through pate. “A cinnamon stick.”

Even experienced cooks, like Linda Lewis, a retired New York City French and Spanish teacher who has been coming to five to eight De Gustibus classes annually for years, finds she’s always gleaning culinary tips. “I was going to buy a set of pans and so I asked Jacques Pepin for advice. He said never buy a complete set, because certain pans are better for certain tasks--stainless steel in some instances, non-stick in others. Lots of people make corn bread in a cast iron skillet.”

Even a food industry careerist like Rizzo, formerly director of operations and events at the James Beard House, finds he, too, learns things, as he did at the sparkling wine class taught by John Ragan, wine director and sommelier at Eleven Madison Park. “He included a \$20 sparkling wine from New Mexico [Gruet, Brut, Blanc de Noirs, Methode Champenoise] that was delicious,” says Rizzo. “That was an a-hah moment for everyone, including me.”



De Scoop on De Gustibus

1. Sign up early--Not just for the classes (www.degustibusnyc.com), which can sell out, but on the daily signup sheet by the 8th floor security guard. Regulars, aware that the room fills by the order of the names on the sheet, know to stop by at lunchtime to be high on the list.
2. Grab a second row seat--You want to be close to the chef and to the aromas, but not in the front row, where the mirror views are less than optimal.
3. Take the escalator-- Macy's elevators can be uncomfortably packed with heavily laden shoppers. Besides, the escalator is an old fashioned charmer.
4. Take notes--Annotate the recipes with the added chefs tips and your comments on the dishes. You'll do a better job of cooking them at home.

Rizzo encourages his students to visit the chef's restaurants, to mention De Gustibus when they make the reservations, and ask when they check in with the hostess, if the chef is in that night. Often, he says, the chef will make an appearance at the table, and maybe he or she will send out a special amuse or an extra dessert.

Michael Hill, a computer software exec and frequent denizen of the front of the room, has attended De Gustibus classes since the school's beginning. He and his partner Ron Bricke have 700 cookbooks in their Manhattan apartment. Even so, attending as many as a dozen classes a year, they find they often cook from De Gustibus recipes. The reason is simple. "De Gustibus gives you a chance to taste the recipe before you've invested all the time in cooking it," says Hill.

My only quibble, I share with Hill after the class has ended: no coffee with dessert.

"Remember," he says, "it's not a relaxing meal. It's a cooking class." Then he cites another distinguishing feature of De Gustibus. "I've just had a wonderful meal and it's now 8:30. I can still go out." ◆



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