

NEW YORK CORNER

by John Mariani

AQUAVIT

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Up through the 1950s NYC had a pretty fair representation of Scandinavian restaurants, the way it once did German and Czech. There was Gripsholm, Red Brick, Wivel, Finland House, Three Crowns, Castlehom, and Swedish Rathskeller. By the 1970s only Copenhagen and Stockholm were left, and they too closed. But for more than two decades now, Aquavit, under owner Håkan Swahn, has held high the banner for Scandinavian haute cuisine. It would be easy enough to say Aquavit's success is due to default, drawing lovers of Scandinavian food because there is nowhere else to go. But the fact is that Aquavit, with a line of celebrated chefs that includes Christer Larson and Marcus Samuelsson, since its inception in other quarters in Nelson Rockefeller's former townhouse across from the MOMA, and for the last several years in its present location between Madison and Park, has been ranked among the top restaurants in the city in any category.

Its design alone, by Arne Jacobsen, Paul Kjaerholm and Verner Panton, is exemplary of the evolution of Scandinavian design, which, rather than dating, has only become more handsome, from its swank bar-lounge to its bistro and main dining rooms.

The annual Herring Festival just ended, but in the fall will come the crayfish festival and holiday specials, all handled with finesse by young Chef Marcus Jernmark, who has simplified the cuisine while making it entirely his. In the casual Bistro you can have a menu of traditional Scandinavian favorites such as Swedish meatballs, gravlax and herring. In the dining room there is a 3-course fixed price dinner menu at \$78 and a 7-course tasting menu at \$105 (with wine pairing, \$105). There is also "Mamma Mia!" package: Aquavit has partnered with the hit show with a three-course dinner then an evening on Broadway, starting at \$139 per person.

Recently my wife and I pretty much allowed Jernmark to choose some of his current favorites along with items we could not resist ordering from the menu. Since the Herring Festival was still in full swing, we were presented with six types, along with vasterbotten cheese and the traditional boiled potatoes. One could easily make a meal of these well-fatted, pickled fish, but we were also eager to try the butter-poached brook trout with ramps, smoked mussels, trout roe, and cucumber, a dish whose light smokiness played off the green freshness of the cucumbers and the saline roe. A chilled Maine lobster came with pickled baby tomato, Belgian endive, asparagus, and celery, while sweetbreads were smoked over hay very gently, then served with sweep parsnip purée, fava beans, grilled bread, and a lashing of apple cider. Of the second courses, I was particularly happy with the lustrous seared scallops with butter poached lobster, sauerkraut and quinoa for textural contrast and an oyster vinaigrette. Silky Arctic char came with fennel cured char, cauliflower, salted hazelnuts, horseradish emulsion-- a dish that reads a little complex but so little is done to each ingredient that they are all simple complements to one another, not a conflict.

If you prefer game, the duck breast roulade-- wonderfully pink and juicy--came with hearty bacon-onion dumplings called *kroppkakor*, rainbow swiss chard, English peas, and a light lingonberry jus. Aquavit's lamb comes from Valhalla Farm (in Washington, not Viking paradise) and is served cooked just to a turn, with flavorful mustard greens, artichoke *barigoule*, and garlic scapes.

The winelist at Aquavit is long, deep, and priced in every category, and of course there are good beers and a superb selection of aquavits that go especially well with the pickled herring and other seafood dishes.

Desserts are as beautiful as they are well married to the kind of creativity and presentation as what precedes them.

If Aquavit did not exist, NYC would simply not be the same. Not to have a serious Scandinavian restaurant would be a major lapse; not to have one as superb and even trail-blazing as Aquavit would be terrible loss. Fortunately, Aquavit's success promises that it will continue to be both a beacon and a reminder of how unusual this food and drink is.



Aquavit is open for lunch Mon.-Fri, for brunch Sun., and for dinner nightly.