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Scandinavian restaurant Aquavit has a beautiful new home on East 55th Street — and food to match from chef Marcus Samuelsson.

Toast to Aquavit: How Swede it is

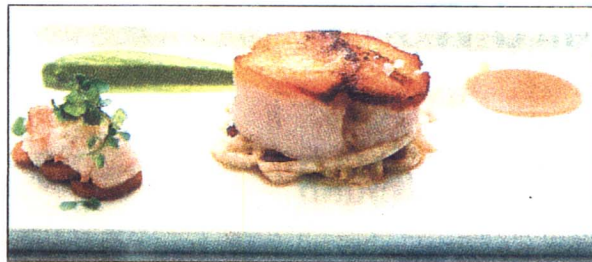
By STEVE CUOZZO

AQUAVIT'S move to a sleek new home will make New Yorkers fall in love with it all over again. Or maybe fall for the first time: For all the fame of Marcus Samuelsson's stylized take on Scandinavian cooking, foodies hardly knew the place. Myself among them. My last visit was 13 years ago, maybe because the subterranean void, with its distracting waterfall, had "concierge-driven tourist destination" stamped all over it.

But the new home's cleaner lines put the focus on the work of chef Samuelsson and his executive chef, Nils Loren. It's something to behold, on plate and palate alike — a kaleidoscopic fantasia of Nordic skies and seas, deliciously transmuted through a modern-Manhattan prism.

Aquavit is in three parts, all on the ground floor: a café with a pricey a la carte menu; a long, tall lounge; and the mid-century-Scandinavian dining room, with its three-course, \$75 prix-fixe menu. In the dining room, light from three giant round ceiling recessions bathes a neutral palette of oak, walnut and Ultra-seude; intimate, pale-green booths soften the corporate edges.

Ethiopian-born, Swedish-reared Samuelsson is widely celebrated for adapting the Scandinavian pickling-and-preserving playbook to local



Aquavit's sautéed hake and langoustine with "Napa sour kraut."

Restaurant Review

Aquavit

★★★★ 1/2

65 E. 55th St.;
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taste. What's revelatory is the shimmering, concentrated flavor intensity of most every element, down to a tiny, citrus-glazed baby carrot.

Aquavit's flavor constellations are truly different. A mellifluous, sweet-sour dialogue lilts like a violin-violola duet. In lesser hands, so many contrapuntal notes would be all over the map; at Aquavit, they are the map, framing the main elements with an artist's

intuitive sense of when to stop.

Those main elements typically command the center of the plate, flanked by a painterly flourish of color. Saffron dill broth, built on mussel stock, is poured over lobster, shrimp and smoked salmon, casting the seafood in a vivid northern light.

One starter pairs tandoori-spiced, smoked salmon with a sensuous slab of seared gravlax; the contrasting acidities vibrate to the tart, tantalizing whim of espresso mustard sauce. A salmon entrée is wound in brioche and tweaked with highly spiced porcini "ketchup." Like many dishes, it conceals a surprise: lush gravlax embedded deep inside the filet.

Or take sautéed hake and langoustine with "Napa sour kraut." The shredded cabbage looks so like pasta, you're tickled when it crunches on the tongue. Its slight tartness, derived from Swedish vinegar,

parries the subdued sweetness of diced chorizo; the effect is compelling enough to squelch nitpicking over why cod-like fish and crustacean belong together.

Some combinations are mischievously punctuated by slivers of ultra-unctuous delicacies — duck pastrami with foie gras ganache, delicately pickled duck tongue with yellowtail tartare. Amidst tender poached lamb loin, smoked lamb tongue butts in, rich and musky as wild game.

A few choices disappoint. Tiny Taylor Bay scallops are overcome by yuzu. Oddly dry beef short ribs recalled burnt hot dogs on the grill. But Samuelsson's desserts bat near 1,000 — like "Arctic Circle," which mounts the best blueberry sorbet I've ever had atop a spire of ethereal goat cheese parfait.

Aquavit's service is not fully up to speed. The crew is more polished than in its first weeks, when our reserved table wasn't ready for 45 minutes. More recently, "You are the missing link" did not amuse me when I arrived minutes after my friends. But the captains have the dining room under control.

Some restaurants, like Le Cirque, move and lose their original spirit. Others, like La Goulué, flourish in a new home. Aquavit took a long time to find its natural habitat, but it was worth the wait.

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