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F. HARPER

Food & Drink

Critics' choice: Places to be seen, when you're not staring too**Polo Bar** *New York City*

At a certain point, any visit to Ralph Lauren's subterranean new midtown restaurant "starts to get a bit weird," said Tejal Rao in *Bloomberg.com*. With horse paintings everywhere you look, saddle leather covering every cushion, and tiny polo mallets dropped in every mixed drink, you might feel as if you've been "trapped, *Inception*-style, in the dreams of a deranged billionaire equine fetishist." At Polo Bar, the fetishist himself might walk through at any moment, stopping to give Christie Brinkley a hug. "But hey, it's not so bad in here!" The staff is impossibly good-looking, and you bask in the same golden light and in the thirsty stares of diners who know you must be somebody, since Rihanna or Woody Allen has been put at a table next to yours. There's food, too, as solidly clubby as the designer's green plaids—roast chicken; a \$52 strip steak; and a photo-ready cheeseburger. Avoid the soggy crabcakes and you should be fine. But plan ahead, because if you don't have a reservation, "you aren't getting in, even for a peek or a drink at the bar." 1 E. 55th St., (212) 207-8562

Bistro Menil *Houston*

"In a city of exuberant excess, the campus surrounding the Menil Collection has always been an anomalous island of



Ralph Lauren's new equine shrine

serene good taste," said Alison Cook in the *Houston Chronicle*. The world-class art museum, established by John and Dominique de Menil, finally has a companion restaurant, where a visitor can stop to enjoy a view of art lovers strolling past or lounging on the lawn. Housed in a sleek contemporary structure, Bistro Menil is a good place to refuel. It's also quite the scene. "This is where you'll see that prominent architect whose name is on the tip of your tongue," or that artist you read about years ago. As much as these folks enjoy eyeing one another, "they are all eating pretty well" too. The entrées are inconsistent, but chef Greg Martin seems to put his heart into tapas-style dishes like the eggplant fries with anchovy aioli, and he serves "beauti-

fully seared" scallops in a "lilting" beurre blanc. Try it at midafternoon with a selection from the bistro's excellent wine list. 1513 W. Alabama St., (713) 904-3537

Atlas *Atlanta*

A titan has arrived in Buckhead, said John Kessler in *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*. The neighborhood's St. Regis hotel gave its main restaurant a complete makeover recently, and the result is "the city's first grand post-recession dining room." Part hunt club and part art gallery, it crowds masterworks by Pablo Picasso, Lucien Freud, and Marc Chagall onto the dark-paneled walls that rise above its banquettes. Chef Christopher Grossman and his team meanwhile rise to the occasion by infusing every dish with "complex layers of flavor and visual intrigue." Start, perhaps, with a "stunning" assemblage of cured hiramasa kingfish in a chile, pomegranate and pineapple consommé. The entrées pair fish or meat with interesting vegetables and garnishes that change regularly and never demand that you pay attention. "Atlas reminds us of that rarest of culinary ideals: subtlety." If you look around, "you may notice grateful diners throughout the dining room quietly murmuring 'Hallelujah.'" 88 W. Paces Ferry Road NW, (404) 600-6471

Recipe of the week

"Steak au poivre is an easy way to impress guests any night of the week," said David Tanis in *The New York Times*. For this version, try to find Sichuan peppercorns, though doubling up on black pepper will do just fine. Serve it with scallion mashed potatoes and your home-cooked version "will put the best neighborhood bistro to shame."

Simple steak au poivre

4 beef tenderloin steaks, 6 oz each, cut 1 inch thick • salt • 1 tbsp coarsely crushed black pepper • 1 tsp coarsely crushed Sichuan pepper • 2 tbsp unsalted butter • 2 large shallots, finely diced • 1½ cups rich beef or chicken broth • 1 tbsp cognac or bourbon • ¼ cup crème fraîche • 1 bunch watercress, for garnish

• In a shallow dish, season steaks well on both sides with salt, then sprinkle each side with black and Sichuan pepper; press pepper in with hands. Let meat rest 10 minutes.

• Place a large cast-iron skillet over high heat. When surface is nearly smoking, swirl in 1 tbsp butter. Add steaks, adjusting heat to keep them sizzling briskly. Cook on first side 2 minutes, or until nicely browned. Flip and cook 2 minutes more. Transfer steaks to a warm platter.



• Add remaining tbsp butter to pan. Add shallots and sauté 1 minute, stirring, until they begin to brown. Add broth and bring to a brisk simmer. Add cognac; simmer until liquid is reduced by half, 3 to 4 minutes. Stir

in crème fraîche and cook until sauce is lightly thickened. Return steaks to pan. Spoon sauce over them, turning once. Transfer steaks to plates and top with more sauce. Garnish with watercress bouquets. Serves 4.

Wine: Viognier's revival

No other white grape has ever enjoyed a surge like viognier's, said Bill St. John in the *Chicago Tribune*. A half century ago, viognier vines covered just 35 acres worldwide; now there are 11,000 acres in France alone. "What happened?" When the "anything but chardonnay" movement took hold, the world rediscovered that viognier produced wine with "gobs of taste" and "a finish like crème fraîche." Below, three California examples worth seeking out. **2013 Calera Central Coast** (\$15). Some of the West Coast's oldest viognier vines produce this "gorgeously balanced" wine. **2013 Justin Vineyards** (\$23). Acidity gives this "super fresh" viognier from Paso Robles a "riesling-like" edge and vivacity. **2013 Emanuel Tres** (\$25). This Santa Ynez wine delivers the peach and apricot flavors that viognier is known for.

