

CUCKOO FOR LE COUCOU

BY DANIEL CAPPELLO



IT'S NOT EVERY American chef who makes his debut with a French restaurant—and a Parisian restaurant at that. But when you're as good as Chicago-born Daniel Rose, you're able to bypass the hurdle of being an American in the epicenter of *grande cuisine*: Paris. Some 10 years ago, Rose opened the 16-seat restaurant Spring in the heart of the French capital, and though skill had never eluded him before, Spring sprang him to the center of the world's culinary stage. Last year, he opened a second Parisian restaurant, La Bourse et La Vie. For 2016, a third Parisian boîte is on the way, and—*enfin!*—New York has been anointed as the city for Rose's American debut, with the highly anticipated Le Coucou, which recently opened in conjunction with Stephen

Starr of the Starr Restaurants enterprise.

Le Coucou marks Rose and Starr's take on a classic French restaurant set here in SoHo, at 138 Lafayette Street. The menu is a streamlined vision of Rose's personal belief in simple yet refined French cuisine, which means you'll see him paying tribute to classic French technique and dishes, but with a distinctly local perspective. For starters, the *terrinerie de veau* might be as French as you can get, but the added flavor of pickled milkweed—an indigenously American herbal perennial—gives it a unique New World flair. The last time I saw *quenelles* on a menu in New York was when La Côte Basque was still in business, but these rare Gallic concoctions of creamed fish bound with eggs into a rugby

ball-shaped mold are back at Le Coucou, made here with pike and served over *sauce américaine*, which in this case means lobster sauce. You'll feel deep in the French Dordogne when you spot rabbit on the menu, but be sure to note it's *tout le lapin*—or the whole rabbit. The *canard et cerises*, a main dish of duck, cherries, and black olives, calls to mind something you might imagine at a Hudson Valley inn operated by an expat French chef.

Rose and Starr have indulged their every whim and fantasy with the atmosphere—no stone has been left unturned, no expense spared. The design firm Roman and Williams conceived the space to match the purity of the cuisine. It's a clean, uplifting ambiance; the main dining room is a box within a box, with sets of

different heights, similar to the Hagia Sophia, to create interest. Aimed lights go further to create minimal glare on diners (*merci, Monsieur Descottes*) and on the restaurant staff.

Stained white oak tables with linen tablecloths are intended to provide a canvas for the presentation of the meal. Speaking of canvases, a hand-painted mural inspired by the works of 18th-century French landscape artist Hubert Robert covers the ceiling and walls with foliage and a verdant palette that invokes nature. The space is meant to call to mind an atelier or loft, but with fine linens you might choose for your home. An open kitchen features a custom European Athanor cooking suite of green porcelainized steel with brass fittings and a custom hood



triple-hung glass windows forming a secondary façade within the space. At the room's crown, a procession of pewtered-steel chandeliers hang from the exposed concrete, illuminating the room with a glow from hand-blown glass shades. Hervé Descottes, of the renowned lighting firm L'Observatoire International, whose projects include everything from the Fondation Louis Vuitton in Paris to 2 World Trade Center in New York, was called in to calibrate the lighting. He and Artemis Papadatou, who led the project for L'Observatoire, shared with me that the Hagia Sophia in Istanbul was the inspiration: in response to the high ceilings, Descottes wanted to use chandeliers to bring the light level down into the restaurant. The fixtures were suspended at

to match. Descottes installed a light under the decorative hood to make the chef's table a focal point, and it most certainly is: anyone with even the slightest home-design or culinary fetish won't be able to sleep at night; instead, they'll be bouncing in dreams of the gorgeous green ensemble. As if the food weren't enough, you'll be back to ogle the accouterments, *sans doute*. ♦

This page, clockwise from top left: Canard et cerises; the dining room; the enviable Athanor kitchen; chiboust à la vanille; the front bar; chef and restaurateur Daniel Rose; a settee at the bar. Opposite page: The dining room. Le Coucou: 138 Lafayette St. Open daily for breakfast, lunch, and dinner: 212.271.4252 or lecoucou.com.