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Where Art and Haute Cuisine Meet in Paris



Laurent Grasso

Nomiya, a temporary rooftop dining room at the contemporary-art museum Palais de Tokyo, one of several high-end restaurants installed at cultural institutions in Paris. [More Photos »](#)

By SETH SHERWOOD

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THE rectangular white box beckoned from the exhibition room, mysterious and inscrutable. As winter clouds rolled across the Parisian sky, I watched as visitors to the Palais de Tokyo contemporary-art museum paused before the work — “Untitled (A Curse),” by the American conceptual artist Tom Friedman — and puzzled over its significance. Were we staring at something groundbreaking or derivative? Would this provocative creation be remembered as genius or bunk?

Later, on the museum’s roof, similar questions filled my mind as a guide ushered me and 11 others into another much-hyped rectangular construction with avant-garde ambitions: the Nomiya restaurant. Designed by Laurent Grasso — a winner of France’s prestigious Marcel Duchamp Prize — the minimalist glass box is a temporary installation, and like an exhibition, it has a corporate sponsor (Electrolux) and a limited run, ending in December. Floating over the skyline, the translucent structure certainly dazzled the eye. But would this grand intersection of art and gastronomy turn out to be sublime or a sham?

For years, Paris museums have mostly offered charmless dining rooms and cafeterias serving uninspired food, at odds with their institutions’ cutting-edge agendas and masterpiece-filled exhibition halls. But in the last few years there has been a notable shift. From bold experiments

to understated havens of cool, a clutch of new restaurants has sprung up in museums and other cultural institutions all over the city.

Brand-name cooks have been courted by hot spots like Nomiya and Mini Palais, in the venerable Grand Palais, where an expanded and remodeled restaurant is expected to reopen this summer with the Michelin-starred chef Eric Fréchon overseeing the menu.

Celebrity architects have further raised the bar at restaurants like the glassy, postmodern Les Ombres in the Musée du Quai Branly (the restaurant, like the museum, was designed by the Pritzker Prize-winning architect Jean Nouvel), and the belle époque dining room at the Musée d'Orsay, which was given a few modern touches by Jean-Michel Wilmotte, a museum specialist. And nearly the whole fledgling crop is pairing ambitious dishes and décor with panoramic views.

Nomiya

Up at Nomiya, the host seated us around a communal table and lifted floor-to-ceiling blinds to reveal a dramatic vista. Across the Seine, the gold dome of L'Hôtel des Invalides sparkled over the rooftops. Nearby, the Eiffel Tower stood like a Beaux-Arts Champagne glass — our welcome aperitif.

“You’re really like an art object because people pass below and see you,” said the host as he poured us real glasses of Champagne and explained that the chef Gilles Stassart’s menu changes frequently.

Soon the food began to arrive from the busy kitchen island next to our table. A lush yellow cream of pumpkin soup came topped with flying fish roe for an unctuous sweet-salty version of surf and turf. With a new round of wine — a crisp white from Languedoc — we tucked into guinea fowl tortellini in a vegetable broth with oysters and green radish, a sophisticated marriage of sea and sky best mopped up with crispy sourdough bread from Paris’s Poujauran bakery. The last of the entrees, a juicy veal filet mignon, featured the nice salty crunch of a green sage and breadcrumb crust and the lathery sweetness of a parsnip-hazelnut purée.

Thanks to flowing wine, now a florid Languedoc red, and the shared table, the various, international diners were chatting amiably about esoteric topics: the best hotel in Tunisia, a good local address for tailored shirts.

The coup de grâce, fat slices of chocolate-chestnut cake with gingerbread ice cream, had most of us bursting from our shirts. Surrounded by the glass walls of Nomiya’s Zen-smooth space, I felt like a puffer fish in a Japanese aquarium.

Nomiya, Palais de Tokyo, 13, avenue du Président Wilson, 75116; (33-1) 47-23-54-01; art-home-electrolux.com/en/. Reservations must be made through the Web site, exactly one month before the desired date. A three-course lunch is 60 euros, or about \$80 at \$1.33 to the euro, without drinks or tip.

Ozu

That feeling was amplified at Ozu, a Japanese restaurant that is inside a real aquarium, Cinéaqua. Like Nomiya, the décor is minimalist and angular: blond wood, smooth surfaces, clean lines. And as at Nomiya, the dining room’s vast window offers a remarkable view. But

instead of the Paris cityscape, my friend Cecile and I found ourselves staring at sharks and exotic fish in an enormous two-story tank.

Placing an upscale sushi restaurant in a huge aquarium may sound perverse — like plunking down a burger joint in a field of grazing cattle. But the diners around us (mostly young French couples) seemed charmed by the undersea scene, as though watching a wall-size television beaming Jacques Cousteau footage.

You might also expect a menu created with help from Thierry Marx — a fairly experimental Michelin-starred chef who until recently consulted at Ozu — to showcase elaborate juxtapositions. But in fact, the kitchen, now run by Renaud Dufresne, turns out restrained Japanese classics along with a smattering of creative gambits, all in small tapas-like portions.

The meal, appropriately, began with an ocean plunge. The thin-sliced scallop sashimi, very fresh, practically dissolved on the tongue in a flavorful briny puddle, while our spicy tuna roll was straightforward if unexceptional. Moving from the raw to the cooked, we sampled strips of cherry-wood-smoked salmon that were unfortunately overpowered by the tubes of crunchy white radish surrounding them. But a thick slice of grilled grouper had a chunky firmness, like an undersea steak, with a light sweetness imparted by a miso basting.

A return to land followed. Thin slices of beef tongue — often a pedestrian meat — were suffused with a rich charcoal flavor from judicious grilling. Better still were disks of pork, marbled with fat and slow boiled in broth for exceptional succulence: pigs in a bath.

Some carefully prepared desserts, including a chocolate green-tea cake with roasted ground pistachio nuts — like toasty buckshot — formed the final splash of our dinner aquatic.

Ozu, Cinéaqua, Jardins du Trocadéro, 75016; (33-1) 40-69-23-90; ozurestaurants.com. A three-course meal is about 35 euros, not including drinks or tip.

Le Saut du Loup

The new wave of museum restaurants have not all been successes. The Café Carlu in the Cité de l'Architecture et du Patrimoine, a museum devoted to architectural history, is an airy white space whose lovely interior and view of the Eiffel Tower are betrayed by mediocre lunch-counter food: unimaginative sandwiches and dried-out brownies. It was a similar story at Le 51 restaurant in La Cinémathèque Française, a film museum and archive housed in a (relatively plain) Frank Gehry building. The sleek red-and-black dining room, designed by the New York-based architecture firm MUT, had style, but not much else. The confit de canard was scrawny. A warm chocolate cake was supposed to be drizzled with caramel. It accidentally came drizzled with barbecue sauce instead.

I also steeled myself for disappointment at Le Saut du Loup, a splashy space in the Louvre's Musée des Arts Décoratifs that had been savaged in online French foodie chat forums. On a weekday evening, the scene was as self-consciously cool as Philippe Boisselier's muted white, silver and black interiors. With the French indie band Phoenix providing the soundtrack, a crowd of 30-something creative types placed orders with tall and attractive servers clad elegantly in black. But would the steak match the sizzle?

The starter, cream of pumpkin soup, was warm, smooth and full of melting chestnuts that added woody flavor and texture. Of the main courses, a bass fillet was fresh and flavorful in its crispy-

salty skin and on its bed of black risotto, served al dente; a thick, succulent veal chop came sprinkled with grated Parmesan, which threw the robust flavor into relief and mingled with the juices to form a zesty paste. And contrary to those online reports, even the service was reasonably efficient and polite, possibly aided by our Tuesday-night timing. Perhaps that's the best advice: book for a weekday.

Le Saut du Loup, Musée des Arts Décoratifs, Palais du Louvre; 107, rue de Rivoli, 75001; (33-1) 42-25-49-55; lesautduloup.com. A three-course meal is about 50 euros, without drinks or tip.

Les Ombres

The Jean Nouvel-designed Les Ombres restaurant — a geometric glass enclosure with a latticework of metal girders perched like a futuristic greenhouse atop the Musée du Quai Branly, a huge, postmodern repository of global anthropological relics — is certainly the most visually striking of the new generation of museum restaurants.

Inside, the dimly lighted space was a lively buzz of spouses, boyfriends, girlfriends and lovers who canoodled in numerous languages while gazing rapturously at the glowing Eiffel Tower (yes, again) next door.

Given the museum's multicultural focus, Les Ombres's menu at first appears remarkably European (unlike the one at Le Zyriab by Noura, the panoramic restaurant atop Paris's other great Nouvel-designed international cultural center, L'Institut du Monde Arabe). The foie gras, for instance, wasn't paired with a tropical chutney or fig jam, but instead with Breton artichoke and a slice of smoked duck. The dish was earthy and robust and exuded Gallic pride, but it lacked warmth and pizzazz.

But there was some international flair to be found, starting with the scallops. Yielding easily under the fork, the tender cylinders were enlivened by a smooth cauliflower purée flavored with hazelnut, soy and ginger, giving it a lightly acidic Asian zing. The menu's most classically French item, fried veal sweetbreads, proved an even more unexpected global success. Lush and creamy within, like a warm savory pudding, the soft glands had a crispy golden exterior that was delicately sweet. The exotic zip and crunch came courtesy of endive flavored with orange and coffee. The combined taste suggested a Caribbean breeze blowing through a Normandy barnyard.

The breeze became a full wind with the arrival of dessert: a coconut foam "cloud" (as the menu put it) with fruit chunks and passion fruit sorbet on a spicy biscuit — a rather unwieldy mush, but colorful and redolent of the warmer latitudes. But the finale was yet to come. At precisely 11 p.m., the lights of the Eiffel Tower began blinking and scintillating wildly — as they do every hour for much of the night. No Cognac necessary: the stunning view was the perfect digestif.

Les Ombres, Musée du Quai Branly, 27 Quai Branly, 75007; (33-1) 47-53-68-00; lesombres-restaurant.com. A three-course meal comes to about 70 euros, without drinks or tip.