

AIN'S

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RESTAURANT REVIEW

Brennan's guests just say cheese

Artisanal, his latest restaurant, a smash fromagerie, bistro, wine bar

BY BOB LAPE

WHEN HIS GUESTS COME to me to ask myself—just hypothetically, of course—what to eat, I always choose cheese, but only because a surfer of wine would dull my passion for cheese.

It's a lifelong addiction born of childhood visits to farms making cheese (and ice cream) in Ohio, nurtured in Pennsylvania and New York dairy country, and refined at Gorgonzola cooperatives in Italy and Shilton sources in England. While I once thought the best use of a steaky cheese such as Lomborg or was on the cold engine blocks of housemothers' getaway cars, I now last for an ostentatious relative.

I commemorated the passing of Purcell Remainsworth, which had the city's best cheese cart, until, happily, Terrace Brennan's Picholine ignited the Lincoln Center dining scene in 1993 and subsequently developed into our premier cheese-focused restaurant. Chef Brennan led the cheese cheese mania, and in so doing set the stage for the smash hit Artisanal, his new bistro, fromagerie and wine bar.

Artisanal, a term used to describe handcrafted, small-batch cheeses, is a large-batch restaurant, seating 190 in its main dining room and at its bar. Everything about it is on a grand scale.

Julie Brennan, the chef's charming wife and weekend hostess, says more than 200 cheeses are aged, washed, sliced, rotated and given moisture and predators in Artisanal's case, which has five temperature and climate zones.

The wine list is extensive, 175 are available by the glass. Even a mural-sized painting, *The Barber*, added by Adam Tshay in reference to his original painted barroom.

design of 1982, measures 18 feet by 9 feet. The noise is vast, too, so you'd better be near your companions when fondle-dipping or you won't be heard.

Then there are the flavors of Artisanal: big, bold and cheery. That's the idea. Start with gorgonzola, warm cheese pulls perfect with drinks. Segue to a petite fondue, fan for four as a first. Try English cheddar with bacon, shallots and hard cider. It's Balthazar Bakery whose splendid coarse bread chunks top up the creamy goodness. The best-seller among fondues is the all-Swiss model.

Other appetizers (\$7 to \$20) of singular appeal are a baccin, onion and cheese tart with a light, flaky crust, fresh and thoughtfully composed salads, and world-class onion soup with a three-cheese crust.

Salads such as a heaping ton of frites, green beans, tomato, olives and tuna *niçoise* are served in whopping big bowls. The cheese and onion tart comes with its own small salad. The high-end starter is half-four-grain cornmeal atop grilled country bread with grape chutney.

Mr. Brennan and Artisanal's executive chef, Peter Delalio (Picholine, Le Cirque 2000, Peacock Alley), do a nice job with non-cheese bistro fare. Grilled Dover sole is filleted tableside, and I heartily recommend tender rabbit in *Rosolio* (sog as *vin santo*, served with rutabaga posing as *marinier* and mustard-accented potato). Wild striped bass also gets the benefit of the kitchen's mulligatawny in a bordertone sauce with mussel oil. It did not thrill, nor did chicken roasted long under a brick, with lump french fries.

Beyond chocolate fondue for dessert, there's usually a plump apple tart with chocolate-baked oats in crust, crisp profiteroles containing pistachio ice cream, and rich chocolate meringue (meyer-creamed) cake. Bab-a-bum them out for more fun. It's fun.

The four-page cheese menu is overwhelming, but friendly staffers are ready with suggestions. You may use some suggestions and buy cheeses to go. They are wonderful. And Artisanal is irresistible.

Artisanal
175 W. 57th St.
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★★★

Cuisine: Bistro/fromagerie
Hours: 175 choices, all available by the glass
Dress: No code
Noise Level: Considerable
Price Range: \$17-\$36
Wine Marking: 150/60-240/6
Credit Cards: All major
Reservations: Recommended
Hours: Lunch, Mon.-Sat., 11 a.m.-3 p.m.; Dinner, Mon.-Thurs., 5 p.m.-midnight; Fri.-Sat., 5 p.m.-1 a.m.

★★★★ Outstanding
★★★★ Excellent
★★ Very good
★ Good



DAIRY-ING DUO: Chef Terrace Brennan and his wife, Julie, toast the success of Artisanal, where cheese dominates the menu.

PHOTO BY PHILIP