

## Bull's-eye at the Mark

### Jean-Georges' Upper East Side Pride



Steve Cuozzo

Free Range

THE MARK BY JEAN-GEORGES  
25 E. 77th St. 212-606-3030

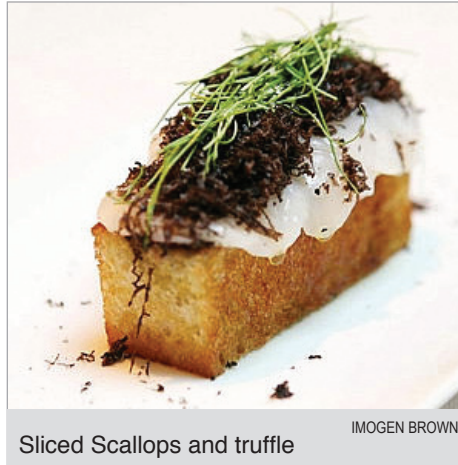
Post Rating: ★★☆☆

**T**he Mark by Jean-Georges came along just in time for the Upper East Side. It brings rare energy — even joy — to what was, for all its enduring pleasures, Manhattan's most demoralized dining scene.

High-priced places fell eerily quiet after the Lehman Bros.-Madoff massacre of 2008. Demolition doomed La Goulue. Lease expirations shuttered Payard Bistro and Coco Pazzo.

Enter Mr. Vongerichten. His new outpost at the Mark might be his most culinarily cautious — hell, it's a hotel in a ZIP code full of timid eaters. But it seems so attuned to its surroundings, it already feels like it's been there forever — an instant institution.

Vongerichten, prowling the floor in chef's whites that are more costume than working garb, sounds surprised by "how the neighborhood is supporting us." He chuckled, "We're trying to please everyone. We're waking up the whole area." (At least so far: Too many restaurants lose their juice once reviews



Sliced Scallops and truffle

IMOGEN BROWN

are in and the A-team moves on.)

Those three stars on top don't mean three-star originality. The menu is anything but cutting-edge. It's merely delicious and accessible. There's \$38 lobster and \$10 pizza. There's no minimum, no cover for a floor show sexier than anything nearby.

Real estate developer Izak Senbahar made the once-stodgy Mark stylish and buzzy. Maybe too buzzy: The restaurant does not yet have a street entrance (coming soon), so you enter via a meat-rack bar full of Brioni suits and mercenary-looking babes. "Repellent," a critic friend declared.

It's the way into a merry maze by designer Jacques Grange — around the corner past a wine wall into a more spacious lounge with tables and raw bar, thence into two connected, colorfully upholstered dining rooms.

The first is low-ceilinged, the second crowned by a high skylight. The carpet is striped, the furniture partly pink. Festive light poles of Venetian glass flatter every face and body — the latter at risk to chair-back cutouts that can put out your spine.

Chef de cuisine Pierre Schutz's menu does not have a "concept" like the farm-to-table shtick of Vongerichten's equally new ABC Kitchen. This is straightforward, high-end bistro cooking — "what those idiots at Le Caprice should

be doing," a friend said of the Pierre's feeble new joint.

A brie-burger (\$22) was richly flavored if a bit juice-shy, despite 40 percent chuck content. The cheap pizzas are a nice gesture, but the dough's clunky; avoid a smoked salmon number that works better as an ethnic joke. Pasta makes a stronger Italianesque case — especially ladylike ricotta ravioli prettily ornamented with pea shoots.

A sensational, caterpillar-like a composition of raw diver scallop slivers, sandwiched between warm black shaved truffles and truffle-buttered toast, made for a thrilling, earth-ocean dialogue. But, with the truffle season over, so's the dish. Pass up oily hamachi sashimi for crispy, tender calamari complexioned with basil and lemon dip.

The kitchen has tamed an early plague of undercooked vegetables and other rough edges. The usual seafood suspects arrived moist under crisp skin. Maine lobster was roasted, halved and simply seasoned with salt, pepper and olive oil; seaweed lent a gentle saline lilt.

Beef tenderloin, the menu's sneaky double agent, is so not your Sheraton ballroom article. The deftly seared cut looks ordinary. But it conceals a haunting whiff of Vongerichten's fabled Asian affinity. A marinade of lemongrass, lime leaf, soy and orange and lemon zest lightly caramelizes the beef. The round is plated with a rectangle of fava beans — forming an "O" and "I" like cyber-babble. Cute!

A trolley brings pastry chef Erik Hubert's marvelous desserts, including banana sponge cake layered feuillantine-style with thin pastry crust layers. If they don't send you out giddy, celebrity faces might — like that of Mick Jagger, who was ambling through when a staffer accidentally flooded the room with stadium-strength light.

Be careful, guys — this place has all the wattage it needs.

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