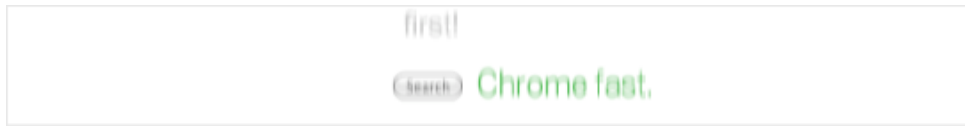


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## Many Happy Returns

**Becoming a regular at a restaurant is like falling in love, the delight of discovery over time becoming something deeper.**

By **Monique Truong**

In New York City trying out new restaurants is like riding in a fleet of unreliable taxis—transporting one night, an ordeal of wrong turns the next. Most places just thankfully disappear into the darkness, never to be seen again: About 70 percent of restaurants close or change hands within five years of opening. When checking out a new spot, I've found it best to keep my expectations low. I've broken this rule only once: From my first visit, I've been devoted to Bar Pitti, a Tuscan place in Greenwich Village.

My first meal there, crostini with chicken liver pâté, was really more of a snack, albeit the kind usually consumed with a glass of Chianti Classico by those lucky enough to be whiling away an afternoon in Florence. The bread, with a chewy, almost malty crust, was grilled and topped with a generous spread of house-made pâté, which was seasoned in a way that didn't mask the mineral flavor of the liver. Before I even took a bite, I was impressed. On my plate were no pedestrian parsley sprigs or crisscrossing lines of sauce from a squeeze bottle. I had ordered crostini with chicken liver pâté, which is exactly what I was served.

That was in 1992. I had moved to New York City the previous fall to live with a boyfriend whom I had been dating for about a year (my prudent rule about restaurants never applied to men). It was late summer, but I remember little or no humidity that day. The weather was what I would call forthright—lots of sunshine and not a cloud in sight. The boyfriend and I were making the rounds of his favorite Village haunts, mostly comic book shops and record stores. We found ourselves hungry in the limbo hours between lunch and dinner, when a good meal is especially hard to find. That's when I saw Bar Pitti—it was new, though I didn't know it at the time—with its glass doors opening onto a block of Sixth Avenue where the sidewalk is unusually wide and there's plenty of space for *all'aperto* dining. Eating outdoors seemed particularly appropriate given the weather and the context of romance. I was 24, and as I sat there looking at this young man, backlit by the sun, I was hoping I'd made the right decision.

When we next returned to Bar Pitti, the weather had turned cool, and we sat inside for dinner. Bar Pitti's two small rooms, painted a lemon yellow, had as their only decorations a band of mirrors and several black-and-white photographs. The largest one was of Florence as glimpsed from one of the surrounding hills, with the Duomo rising like a hot-air balloon from among the city's rooftops. My boyfriend and I looked at that image and imagined traveling there together. We were at Bar Pitti that night to celebrate the start of my first year in law school and his first fall free from classes. We tore pieces of bread and dipped them into a plate of olive oil, a way to begin a meal that now seems almost too banal to mention, but it was at Bar Pitti that we were first introduced to this worthwhile ritual.

That night my boyfriend and I ignored Bar Pitti's list of specials written in Italian on a chalkboard, which was brought to the table and recited at varying speeds and levels of descriptiveness by a member of the waitstaff. The reason was purely financial: The specials cost more than the regular dishes. We were content, though, with our *taglierini all'Empolese*, a fragrant tangle of fresh pasta, artichoke hearts, leeks and just enough tomato to give it a bit of color and a pleasing tang.

During the next three years, Bar Pitti, which took cash only, became my carefully-saved-for reward, my gold star for surviving moot court, a civil procedure exam or an especially demoralizing week of the Socratic method. My boyfriend, who had begun architecture school in 1993, saved his money for new CDs and concert tickets. A pattern of consumption therapy was emerging: I took us out for dinner, and he kept us rocking. Though we were living together, we still kept our money separate. We began, nonetheless, to use the word *partner* when introducing each other to friends and acquaintances. We thought about using the word *lover*, but that just made us laugh. We knew, though, that we should say it because we meant it. We were changing in ways that frightened us, and a meal at Bar Pitti was the reassuring constant that reminded us of our first summer together in the city, of sunlight and no fussy clouds.

Our gradual exploration of Bar Pitti's chalkboard menu of specials began one night when *fegato di salvia*, calves' liver with sage, made an appearance. Bar Pitti's version was a generous but not-too-thick portion of liver pan-fried in olive oil with cloves of garlic and fresh sage leaves. I would eat almost anything prepared with those ingredients, but calves' liver cooked this way was economy in the best sense of the word.

What began as a splurge became a habit, especially once I became a practicing attorney. By 1996, my first full year of practice and our fifth year of living together, we were eating at Bar Pitti so often—an average of three times

a week—that one night the waiter came over to our table with the chalkboard, placed it on a nearby chair, said "You two know what these are" and immediately left to attend to another table. His statement was undeniably true. Between the two of us, we knew the items on the chalkboard by heart. That wasn't the remarkable thing. What really made me blink was that the waiter had noted our steady patronage and acknowledged it in a manner that was so essentially New York City. I'm not sure what the term for it would be. Convivial indifference? Friendly disregard? In any case, the significant thing was that we had been acknowledged as regulars. Sure it took half a decade, but I figured Bar Pitti, like me, also had the right to take a don't-expect-I'll-see-you-again attitude.

In all honesty, my partner and I truly became regulars at Bar Pitti when we started to have our fights there (me yelling, him silent), which also began, not surprisingly, in 1996. Being an attorney meant I was not only full of cash but also of misery. The cash I still kept in a separate account; the misery I shared completely. Bar Pitti had become our de facto home. It was cleaner than our apartment. It was always filled with the good smells of cooking, an act that, along with writing, I no longer had the time or the heart to do. In addition to the bread and the olive oil, we began our meals with a fight. Then we would glare at the photograph of the Duomo. Then the food, never disappointing, would arrive, and by dessert we were making up with a kiss—a cycle of fighting, eating and making up that took place in full view of the waitstaff, our fellow diners and Sixth Avenue.

In 1998 we came to Bar Pitti late one night with a group of friends—mostly writers, as I had begun joyfully to leave the legal profession behind, a change that also had a positive effect on our relationship. It was a mild fall night, and we sat at one of the outside tables. We were the largest party there and definitely the loudest. A waiter came by with the chalkboard and gave us a look that asked: Is this a table of slightly tipsy, good tippers or a nightmare of indecisiveness and wants? He recognized my face and delivered the now standard "You know what these are." Yes I did, and I proved it by reciting a near-perfect description of the specials that night. I remember a round of light applause. During the course of our meal, the temperature outside dropped, but we didn't want to leave. As a group, we were broke, spending anyway, and intent on enjoying ourselves. I was about to take a 180-degree turn in my life, and I knew, looking at the faces around me, including that of my fiancé, that I was making the right choices.

Those 16 or so dishes on Bar Pitti's chalkboard were always enticing and always a satisfying way to learn Italian. When we finally saw the Duomo in 1999, on our honeymoon, my husband and I knew that pappardelle *al coniglio* was wide strips of pasta with a sauce of rabbit, cooked slowly until the meat fell off the bones. We knew that *puntarelle* was a wild chicory—more white stalks than greens—served with an anchovy-and-garlic vinaigrette. We knew that *polpettine di vitello* was veal meatballs, tender and light.

Bar Pitti is once again a restaurant we save up for. Being cash poor comes with the writing life, and Bar Pitti, after all these years, still takes only cash. The food there has remained terrifically unchanged. What hasn't stayed the same is the reason we go there. These days, more often than not, it's to celebrate some small wonderful thing that life has offered up, like a favorite restaurant that's sticking around for the long haul, more of a friend with a car than a taxi for hire.

*Bar Pitti, 268 Avenue of the Americas, New York City; 212-982-3300.*

*Monique Truong, the author of The Book of Salt, won this year's New York Public Library Young Lions Fiction Award.*

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