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A Simple Feast

Kate Bolick
Colby College

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A SIMPLE FEAST
Wylie Dufresne and His Recipe for Success

There are more than 20,000 restaurants in New York City. Rumor has it that, given the rate at which they open and close, you could spend a lifetime eating out three times a day and still not visit all of them. The likelihood that any new restaurant will survive is slim. The likelihood that a tiny restaurant with an unknown chef in an unfashionable neighborhood will survive is slimmer still.

And rave reviews from the city's most renowned restaurant critics? Dream on.

But Wylie Dufresne '92 has beaten the odds—and then some. Two years ago he opened his own restaurant, 71 Clinton Fresh Food. Before he could even finish tweaking the wine list, the reviewers began waxing enthusiastic. Five months later, New York magazine put him on the cover and named him one of the 10 best young chefs in town. Not long after, The New York Times commissioned him to write a series of food columns.

The rush of attention was truly unprecedented. "I don't think anyone has had the kind of success that Wylie Dufresne has had," said Gillian Duffy, food editor of New York. "It's an entirely unique situation."

Not bad for a guy who once tended the salad bar at Dana.

New York City's Lower East Side is an unlikely spot for a fine-dining establishment. Crowded with bodegas and beauty parlors, store-front palm readers and 99-cent emporiums, the neighborhood, though vibrant, is hardly glamorous. But six days a week discerning New Yorkers take the F train to the Delancey stop, then turn and walk up Clinton Street. There they find a 30-seat restaurant so narrow that when a fire engine roars by it fills the entire front window.

Inside, the restaurant's one room is shadowy and serene. Tiny votive candles flicker on each small table, softening the clean lines of the modern decor. The waiters, dressed in black, gather at the back beside a window through which the kitchen is visible, bright as a white dinner napkin. Every so often Dufresne, an unassuming fellow with wire-rimmed glasses and shoulder-length hair, appears briefly at the window to confer with a waiter, then retreats into the clamor of the kitchen. Spotless, gleaming, the kitchen has the focused intensity of a laboratory.

This is Dufresne's world, a newly named pinnacle in the mountain range of New York's finest restaurants. To those in the food business, his ascent has been unprecedented. For those who knew him in past lives, Dufresne's success is almost entirely unexpected. But not quite.

By Kate Bolick '95 • Photos by Arthur Cohen
DINNER AT WYLIE’S

6:00 p.m. Arrive to empty restaurant. Sit at bar. Quickly peruse menu; decide to try two most popular items. Order a glass of Bairrada Vinho Tinto, 1998, $9.50.

6:05 Wine, along with a small baguette, a large triangle of butter and a tiny butter knife arrives. Two tables filled.

First appetizer—marinated Scottish salmon wrapped in avocado with pickled horseradish oil, $10—arrives. Six tables filled.

6:15 Plate cleared.

6:25 Second appetizer—lamb shank dumplings, shiso leaf and pistachios in black cumin consomme, $11—arrives. Only four tables left.

6:30 Plate cleared. Order second glass of wine, this time the Gigondas Domaine du Grapillon d’Or, 1998, $12. Only one table left.


7:00 Main course arrives.

7:15 Dessert—tiny chocolate cake with peanut center and vanilla ice cream with peanut crunch on top—arrives, “compliments of the kitchen.”

Dufresne didn’t always know that he wanted to be a chef, despite growing up in the restaurant business. His father, Dewey, owned restaurants in Providence, R.I., where the family lived until moving to Greenwich Village when Dufresne was 7; today Dewey Dufresne is a co-owner of 71 Clinton Fresh Food. The roots of that successful enterprise go back to the summer before the younger Dufresne’s senior year at Colby, when something in the incipient chef clicked.

He was working at one of the best restaurants in New England—Alforno, in Providence—owned by family friends who were kind enough to give the inexpert cook a summer job. “I’d worked at other restaurants before,” Dufresne said, “but never in one as legitimately high-end as this.” He absolutely loved the experience: “The work, the camaraderie—I enjoyed all of it.”

Back at Colby there was little inkling that this philosophy major would one day become a near-celebrity chef. His role as student manager at the Spa had its perks, but flipping burgers isn’t exactly cooking. And though he lived off campus, he didn’t cook much at home. Instead, he frequented the usual spots—weekend breakfasts at Bonnies Diner, sandwiches at Big G’s, a special dinner at Slate’s or The Last Unicorn. “We used to make grilled cheese sandwiches and sell them for a buck apiece out of the back of a van at Grateful Dead concerts,” recalled Bill Michelis ’93.

But there were hints of what was to come. Dufresne’s former roommate David Leavy ’92 still remembers a Thanksgiving feast Dufresne prepared for 10 friends their senior year. “It was amazing,” Leavy said. “Better than what anyone’s grandmother could come up with. The turkey, corn, squash—everything was delicious and fresh.”

Six weeks after graduation, Dufresne enrolled in the French Culinary Institute in Manhattan. The schedule for the six-month program was arduous. From 8 a.m. until 2 p.m. he attended classes; from 2:30 p.m. to 1 a.m. he made pastries at Alfred Portalli’s Gotham Bar & Grill. Dufresne continued working for Portalli after getting his degree, and then, after another six months had passed, decided to move on. There were six restaurants he wouldn’t mind working at, he concluded, and dropped his résumé off at each one.

Dufresne’s first choice was Jean George, owned by Jean-Georges Vongerichten, one of the most respected chefs in New York City. Vongerichten’s restaurants—Jo-Jo’s, Vong, Mercer Kitchen, and the eponymous four-star outpost, Jean George—are among the best in town. As luck would have it, Jean George was the only restaurant that called the young cooking school graduate back. Dufresne returned the favor with loyalty, sticking with Vongerichten for six years, first working as a sous chef at his New York restaurants and finally, in 1997, moving up to the position of chef when Vongerichten opened up Prime in Las Vegas. “Suddenly I was put in a role that was bigger than I was,” Dufresne said. “I was in charge of twenty cooks. It was very exciting, very daunting.”

After six months in Las Vegas Dufresne returned to New York and worked at Jean Louie Pallatin’s restaurant, Pallatin. Meanwhile, his father was opening a restaurant with a few other investors on the Lower East Side. They asked Dufresne to help as a consultant and soon invited him to be the chef. “It was clear to us that Wylie didn’t need to continue cooking under other people and that he was ready to express his own voice,” Dewey Dufresne said.

Wiley Dufresne was understandably nervous. “It’s one thing to be a chef in Las
Vegas; another thing altogether to be a chef in New York," he said. But he was willing to take the leap. And what a leap it was.

Six months after 71 Clinton Fresh Food opened, the eminent New York Times restaurant critic William Grimes wrote a rare glowing review, adding that "it would be hard to exaggerate Mr. Dufresne's virtues." Daniel Young, restaurant critic for The New York Daily News, wrote that it seemed as though Dufresne "was operating his dishes by remote control, ensuring you experience their interplay of flavors and textures in exactly the right sequence and proportion." Today, Citysearch.com's restaurant editor, Daniel McAlvanah, remembers the dinner he ate two years ago at 71 Clinton Fresh Food as one of the best he's ever had anywhere.

So how is it that 71 Clinton Fresh Food not only survived but the chef needs a press kit? New York magazine's Gillian Duffy summed it up: "Basically, Wylie is a brilliant chef. He simply has an amazing understanding of food."

Dufresne's understanding of food comes down to two words: fresh and simple. He uses only locally grown ingredients, and he tries to keep his dishes as uncomplicated as possible. "If there are more than three or four elements to a plate," he explained, "your palate gets muddled and confused." Keeping things simple, however, means that there's nowhere to hide. "A huge, overwrought dish can mask the not-so-well-executed elements, but because it's so complex you don't notice. But when you're offering only four elements, you're really sticking your neck out, because each one has to be excellent." This doesn't mean that complicated techniques aren't employed, but, as Grimes pointed out in the Times, Dufresne "produces the maximum effect with minimal visible effort."

The same could be said, perhaps, for Dufresne's wild success story. But the life of a chef is a grueling one. "Cooking is about cutting your fingers, burning your hands, losing your girlfriend, missing your best friend's wedding, and never having weekends off, or even vacations," Dufresne said.

In fact, if he didn't live with his girlfriend, a wine expert—the two met last year when she came into the restaurant on business—and a former Colby roommate, Josh Steinberger '92, it's likely Dufresne would never see them at all.

Most mornings Dufresne can be found at the year-round Union Square Greenmarket choosing his vegetables for the evening menu. By noon he's at the restaurant, checking on food deliveries and prepping for the night. At 5 p.m. the entire staff—there are five working in the kitchen and five out on the floor on any given night—sits down to share a "family meal" prepared by one of the cooks. At precisely 6 p.m. the restaurant opens for business; seven hours later Dufresne locks the door and heads home. "It's the nature of the beast, and I wouldn't change it for anything. I love what I do," Dufresne said.

And of course, so do patrons and critics. Asked if he was surprised by his ascent, Dufresne flushed and nodded. "I haven't completely adjusted to seeing my name in the paper on a regular basis," he admitted.

Soft-spoken and direct, Dufresne does seem an unlikely celebrity. In fact, that day, dressed in brown boots and a tan hunting jacket, he looked more like a member of Colby's woodsmen's team (he was, his first year) than one of the hottest chefs in New York. "But at the end of the day it is only food," the former philosophy major said philosophically. "You can't take it too seriously."

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**White Gazpacho with Steamed Littleneck Clams**

Makes a half gallon

**Soup**

- 2 1/2 cups of almonds
- 1/4 cup of breadcrumbs
- 2 cups of water
- 1 cucumber
- 3/4 cup of olive oil
- 2 cloves of garlic
- 2 tablespoons of sugar
- 1 tablespoon of salt
- 3 tablespoons of sherry vinegar
- 1/2 cup of carbonated grape juice
- Sparkling water

**Clams**

- 16 littleneck clams, white wine, red grapes, scallions

1. Lightly roast the skinned and sliced almonds. Peel and chop cucumber.
2. Add all of ingredients, except sparkling water, to blender and blend. Let ingredients sit overnight. Pass through fine chinois twice and thin as necessary with sparkling water.
3. Steam littlenecks (four per person) in white wine until opened.
4. Divide soup among four bowls. Place clams in middle of soup creating a line. Garnish with chive oil, sliced red grapes and diced cucumber. Slice scallions thin and soak in iced water to curl, place on top of clams.