



lardy tsunami looms over the Manhattan restaurant scene like a brooding omnipresence, pre-paid, pre-planned, pre-promoted, a collection of grand openings whose aggregate quality is without precedent in the history of human commerce. And still we wait.

Seven of the greatest chefs working in America will soon have new

restaurants here. The justly celebrated Thomas Keller will temporarily close his French Laundry in Yountville, California, in the Napa Valley, while he readies a New York City presence in the sleek and shining Time Warner Center rising at Columbus Circle. Masa Takayama, whose tiny Ginza Sushiko has been among the four or five finest places (and most expensive) to dine in the entire country, has permanently closed his Beverly Hills headquarters and is waiting to move into Columbus Circle. Christian Delouvrier, the accomplished chef at recently closed Lespinasse in the St. Regis Hotel, will soon have an haute-cuisine restaurant of his own, probably to be called Delouvrier. Gray Kunz, the master at Lespinasse before Christian, will open his grand European café in the Time Warner Center when the building is ready, plus a place called the Spice Market in the old Meatpacking District in partnership with Jean-Georges Vongerichten, who will also open a steakhouse at Columbus Circle.

Confirmed rumor now has Chicago's Charlie Trotter joining the Columbus Circle crowd, but not until later next year; the themes will be seafood, informal, and light. And the great French chef Alain Ducasse has just opened his new place, called Mix, on nearby Fifty-eighth Street, where I ate twice recently and which I'll tell you about later.

While we wait, we can happily feast on the fabulous bounty already around us. Take last night. There we sat, enjoying the best steak dinner in town—the meat could not have been more flavorful, tender, or juicy, and grilled to that precise point of perfection between rare and medium rare—while a beautiful young dancer just eight feet away moved with energy and originality. Only through a series of coincidences did I discover that the finest beef in New York—a city once justly fabled for the greatness of its prime-grade, dry-aged steak—could be had only at the Penthouse Executive Club Featuring Robert's Steakhouse, a newly built establishment on Forty-fifth Street just west of Eleventh Avenue, until now a forlorn and forgotten neighborhood. The Penthouse is a high-end version of what you might recognize from the movies and television as a strip joint, a topless club—high-end but not quite genteel and still very sexy. This was *my* first experience in the flesh. Unlike the strip clubs I have seen depicted, the Penthouse Executive Club is not at all threatening or tawdry, unless you view all instances of women getting paid to dance in public while wearing very little as tawdry, which until a few days ago I did as well, though only in a mild sort of way. The remarkable thing is how nicely topless dancing enhances the eating of good food, and the other way round.

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The chef is Adam Perry Lang, whose résumé (University of Wisconsin, Culinary Institute of America, Le Cirque, and Daniel) would be the envy of any young cook; Adam recently opened a barbecue place nearby, Daisy May's. Manhattanites are starved for barbecue: My friend and former TV cohost Edward Levine met Adam while enjoying a massive smoked short rib. With the same uncanny and exhaustive reporting skills he shows whenever readers of *The New York Times* need to know where to find the best hamburger or how to untangle the mysteries of pastrami, Ed soon discovered that Adam knows lots about beef (only lack of space here will spare you from having to read another of my ceaseless sermonettes about the nature of great steak: that it must be selected from within the top third of USDA's prime grade and dry-aged in massive primal cuts, not wet-aged, for a minimum of six weeks and as much as ten) and that he ages, cooks, and serves it at the excellent Penthouse Executive Club, steps from the Hudson River. (In a comprehensive telephone and dining survey undertaken several years ago in these pages, I found just one restaurant in this country that still offered steak of this quality—Bern's Steak House, in Tampa.) My only criticism, which I generously shared with Adam and his chef, Jayson Margulies, is that they char the meat too deeply, then pour herb butter over it, two techniques used by cooks who serve inferior beef that has little taste and richness of its own. Prospective diners should call in advance to make sure that the longest-aged beef is perfectly ready.