

THE NEW YORKER

TABLES FOR TWO

CASELLULA

401 W. 52nd St. (212-247-8137)

by Andrea Thompson

JULY 23, 2007

On a recent evening, a waiter took it upon himself to explain the restaurant's name: "It comes from the Latin diminutive for house, and it kind of sounds like the word for cheese, so we like to think of it as 'the little house of cheese.'" (Language mavens: that's *casula*, *-ae* in the first instance, *caseus*, *-i* in the second.) There's an obvious infatuation with whimsy. Dishes are given irreverent names, from the succulent pork sandwich (giving a server opportunity to announce, with relish, "Here's your Pig's Ass!") to flights of cheese ("Lady Sings the Blues," "Those Crazy Kids!"). It's a lighthearted approach backed by some serious credentials: Brian Keyser, a co-owner with Joe Farrell, has worked at the Union Square Café and Blue Hill at Stone Barns, and the *fromager*, Tia Keenan, comes from the Modern.

Casellula is not a place for the calorie- or fat-averse (though a waitress said, wonderingly, "We do get people who don't want any cheese at all"). Ordering your greens in the form of the endive salad? You'll get huge hunks of blue cheese, generously strewn macadamia nuts, a swathing of dressing—oh, and some crunchy leaves to scoop it all up. Many things are perfect in their excess; the macaroni and cheese, for instance, was a deliciously gooey combination of Fol Epi, Comté, and chèvre, chewy lardons, and sweet carmelized onions. Other dishes can suffer from indulgence. A fig flatbread was piled with prosciutto and thick shavings of Pecorino, and slathered with fig compote—all those vigorously competing elements end up underwhelming. And it's hard to imagine anything more obstreperous than the Sweet Action sundae, with beer ice cream, beer caramel, orange whipped cream, and, most egregiously, a sprinkling of barley that adds little flavor and the texture of wood shavings.

As for the place's *raison d'être*: the cheese selection is wide-ranging, laid out in easy-to-comprehend categories, and expertly garnished. A Hawthorne Valley Farm Bianca, with the fresh, tangy flavor of cottage cheese, arrived with a sweet lychee; a pungent Mecox Bay Dairy Atlantic Mist was tamed by a curried green tomato. "Working here has made me socially unacceptable," a waitress complained, "because my clothes all smell like cheese." Time to find some new friends. (Open weekdays for dinner, weekends for brunch and dinner. Entrées \$8-\$13; flights of three cheeses \$15.) ♦