

The New York Times

FOOD

At Sauvage, European Discipline Meets Gut Instinct

SAUVAGE NYT Critics' Pick | American, French | \$\$\$ | 905 Lorimer Street, Greenpoint | [718-486-6816](tel:718-486-6816)

Restaurant Review

By PETE WELLS | SEPT. 27, 2016



Ben Stiller for The New York Times

Roughly half of what I've eaten at [Sauvage](#) since it opened just before Memorial Day has been either forgettable or familiar. In the other half, though, this restaurant in Greenpoint, Brooklyn, seemed to be on to something exciting, a combination of European kitchen discipline and a gut instinct for meeting appetite head on.

Nothing I ate this summer knocked me back quite as hard as Sauvage's pig head confit. The name is no figure of speech. This is the head of a pig in profile, flattened like a Cuban sandwich. I was still staring at it when a server said sweetly: "Just so you know: I forgot to mention that the sauce is made from the brains. It's coming out of the ear."

When brain sauce is spilling from the ear of a pig, you don't need to tell me what to do. I tore into the head, beginning with the tanned cheeks, following the curve of the smile and ending with the round snout, the size of a Ritz cracker. The skin was chewy and crunchy, with a compressed layer of firm meat underneath, basted in fat.

On the side were plump white shell beans baked with some pig tongue, along with bitter greens in vinaigrette. The beans would have been creamier with a few more minutes in the oven, but on the whole, I couldn't get over how skillfully done it all was.

The chef is Lisa Giffen. She cooked for about three years at Adour Alain Ducasse, with shorter stints at [Daniel](#) and [Blue Hill](#). In 2013, she was hired to run the kitchen of [Maison Premiere](#), a cocktail parlor and raw bar in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, whose owners opened Sauvage.

I ate at Maison Premiere one night just after Ms. Giffen had started. I remember thinking that the compositions were pretty; the ingredients, especially the seafood, were excellent; and the portions were feathery, to the point that I wasn't convinced I'd had dinner.

There is some wispieness on the menu at Sauvage, too. Sea urchin with scraps of pickled watermelon rind didn't make a lasting impression. A terrine of leeks with clams needed salt and acidity. A salad of peeled and pickled grapes, a recent special, wasn't worth the obvious trouble that had gone into making it. The same was true of a plate of tiny stuffed vegetables, including a baby eggplant that was cute but underbaked.

But Ms. Giffen's talents are best used when she abandons the miniaturist mode. There's a full-throttle thrill to breaking open chilled snow crab legs and dunking their briny flesh in brown butter that's reinforced with mashed crab liver. There's undeniable pleasure in slicing open the malakoff, dough mixed with alpine-style cheese that's lumped on a slice of sourdough and then deep fried. This bonanza of starch, cheese and oil comes with pickled vegetables. It should also come with a small mountain for you to you climb after you finish it.

Ms. Giffen's chicken pot-au-feu is an essay in beak-to-tail poultry cooking. The breast goes into delicate white sausages that share an enameled casserole with a confit of dark meat, mushrooms, carrots and fennel. The vegetables are braised but still crisp. On a separate plate is a slice of sourdough toast spread with whipped schmaltz and fragments of brittle skin; the menu doesn't call them grribenes, but I will.

The pot-au-feu is a small feast and, at \$25, a great buy. The pig head confit is \$65. While price is not likely to be a deciding factor for people who want brain sauce coming out of a pig's ear, there is a more affordable cut of pork on the menu. An Old Spot porterhouse, set off with pickled rhubarb, was intensely good and cost \$31. The meat, robustly seasoned and juicy, was cooked and served on a bone that was last seen between the teeth of a woman at my table.

Like [Liz Johnson](#) at [Mimi](#) in Greenwich Village, Ms. Giffen doesn't cook in a systematically French way; both chefs just borrow French ideas at will and both have the French knack for spurring desire and then satisfying it. You can taste Ms. Giffen's respect for the Gallic kitchen in the way she makes potatoes: the creamy dauphinoise with strip steak, the lavishly buttered chunks and bits of potato with lobster (itself slicked down with olive oil and served with a subtle, earthy blood sauce).

One area that would benefit from a more overtly French treatment is the dessert menu. Recently there was a honey panna cotta, a chocolate cremeux and a mascarpone semifreddo — three variations on a sweet, creamy substance with random stuff in it. Cheese, when it's offered, is a more persuasive last course.

Ms. Giffen is a partner in the restaurant along with Joshua Boissy and Krystof Zizka, the people behind Maison Premiere. [When Maison Premiere opened in 2011](#), its attention to period details like the weathered French Quarter facade, the antique absinthe fountain and the suspended barmen was so thorough that it was easy to believe you'd wandered into an underground party for enthusiasts of Belle Époque New Orleans cosplay.

But there was a serious dedication to food and drink, both of which got better as the place went along. (The quality of the work at Maison Premiere's bar won it an [award from the James Beard Foundation](#) this year.)

For all the hype about Brooklyn restaurants, the ones that turn out to be most impressive often come together slowly. Before [Chef's Table](#) at [Brooklyn Fare](#) and [Roberta's](#) became national names, it was hard to tell whether they were following a grand, premeditated design or just making it up as they went along.

Sauvage at least has the advantage of starting off with expertise that Maison Premiere needed several years to accumulate. It has Ms. Giffen. It has Will Elliot, a former bartender at the first establishment whose cocktail recipes and spirit choices at Sauvage I've enjoyed very much, even though I haven't had a chance to try out all six forms of ice he is rumored to stock. It has a wine list whose shallow end is very rewarding and whose deep end betrays extensive, possibly obsessive attention.

This is no doubt the case with the restaurant's design, too, but this time the owners are not as interested in historical re-enactment. Sauvage, which sits across the street from McCarren Park and opens its cafe doors on warm days and nights, seems to come from another era, but it's hard to say which one the owners had in mind. Maybe they're making it up as they go along.



Sauvage NYT Critics' Pick

[RESERVE A TABLE](#)

905 Lorimer Street
(Nassau Avenue)
Greenpoint
[718-486-6816](tel:718-486-6816)
sauvageny.com

Atmosphere Like a classic sidewalk cafe in Paris that's been taken over by young upstarts. Servers are extroverted and able to convey enthusiasm that seems genuine.

Sound At peak hours, like a bed rugby match.

Recommended Dishes Oysters; queen crab; malakoff; summer crudité; lobster with blood sauce; Plymouth Rock chicken pot-au-feu; Old Spot pork porterhouse; pig head confit. Appetizers, \$7 to \$22; main courses, \$19 to \$31.

Drinks and Wine Cocktails are exemplary; the wine list offers a rich vein of Champagne, among many other attractions.

Price \$\$\$ (expensive)

Open Daily for dinner; Saturday and Sunday for brunch.

Reservations Accepted.

Wheelchair Access The dining room and accessible restroom are a short step up from sidewalk level.

What the Stars Mean Ratings range from zero to four stars. Zero is poor, fair or satisfactory. One star, good. Two stars, very good. Three stars, excellent. Four stars, extraordinary.

This information was last updated: Sep. 29, 2016.

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COMMENTS