

## Dining In

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Photographs by Evan Sung for The New York Times

### CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK

Frank Bruni

## Meals by Elevator, With the Touch of a Chef

**S**PEND enough time in hotels and order enough room service and you get used to strangers stomping through the door, stepping over your suitcase and nudging aside your laptop to make way for the turkey club. You get to the point where you don't even notice them.

But the stranger in my room at the London NYC hotel on a recent night had my full attention, because he was doing something I wasn't at all accustomed to. He was crawling across the floor and under the coffee table.

A friend and I exchanged befuddled glances: what was he up to — or rather down to? Then we saw. He was spinning the round top of the pedestal so that it rose and rose, until it was just the right height in relation to the couch beside it and could function as a proper dinner table.

Which was fitting, because this was a proper dinner. No turkey club here. He poured a white onion velouté from a stylized kettle that had been keeping it warm. He placed the soup near a peeky-toe crab salad studded with caviar, and a sunchoke risotto.

All of this food carried the stamp of the chef Gordon Ramsay. All of it had been prepared in the kitchen of his restaurants downstairs. From the levitating coffee table to the pliant gnocchi that encircled a brick of short ribs, this was room service



**BEDSIDE GNOCCHI** Bryan Woody delivers dinner to a room at the London NYC hotel, above and top.

on a higher plane.

More hotels are aiming and claiming to make that possible. But are they succeeding? There was only one way to know. So I grabbed my toothbrush, packed a bag and commenced a week of serial sleepovers. Seven nights. Seven hotels. Seven dinners. Seven breakfasts.

I checked into the Hotel on Rivington, where the coffee table didn't rise but the fillet of cod in a roasted red pepper broth was a miracle of warmth and moistness, given what can happen to a fish on an upstream journey of six floors and a twisting corridor to a corner room.

I checked into the Trump International on Columbus Circle, which gets its food from the restaurants Jean Georges and Nougatine on the ground floor. There I booked a suite with a tiny kitchen, because with the kitchen came the option of having one of the restaurants' cooks come in to prepare a multicourse meal on the spot.

A young man named Kyle did the honors for me and a friend. And he worked wonders under the circumstances: minimal counter space, a standard General Electric stove and a human pest unwilling to accept the fact that there wasn't enough room in the kitchenette, or a convenient vantage point, for a

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# Meals by Elevator, With the Touch of a Chef



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**UNDER (METAL) COVERS**  
Room service at the Trump International Hotel, above, can come with your own chef from Jean Georges, who cooks in your own kitchen.

The Hotel on Rivington, right, uses the kitchen of the restaurant Thor for dinner and breakfast, below.

Bottom right, the way of all room-service trays.



luster it had, and a wise person stuck with turkey clubs and burgers.

During my room-service marathon, I had only one burger, and that was because it was such a famous burger: the one made with sirloin, short ribs and foie gras at DB Bistro Moderne, the Daniel Boulud restaurant that sends food to the rooms at the City Club Hotel in Midtown. It was mildly overcooked, a fate to which room-service fare, streaming under metal or plastic covers, occasionally falls prey.

For my dinners, I otherwise focused on more ambitious dishes. For my breakfasts, I always got an omelet of some kind, and usually eggs Benedict, a dish with more staying power on room-service menus than almost anywhere else. Word to the wise: hollandaise sauce doesn't travel well, turning gluey en route.

All in all I was impressed more often than not, but I was also reminded of the subset of Murphy's Laws that govern room service:

- The food will arrive at the most inopportune moment, e.g., when you've just decided to try on the odd leopard-print robe hanging in the bathroom at the Muse Hotel in Midtown.

- The breakfast card will demonstrate a chameleon's ability to blend into its backdrop. You will locate it precisely 60 seconds after you call the hotel operator and, with righteous indignation, complain about its absence.

- Whether it has a metal hood above it or a cloth napkin swaddling it, the breakfast toast will be neither crisp nor warm.

- The automatic gratuity and the separate delivery or service charge will seem to have been chosen as arbitrarily as the Oscar winner for best animated short. In one hotel the tip will be 16 percent, with a \$5 supplement. In another it will be 18 percent, with a supplement of \$2.50 per person, up to a ceiling of \$10, minus a 33 percent discount on the supplement for orders of more than \$112.34, except on St. Patrick's Day.

**N**OT counting my feast at the Trump International, where the private-chef experience is in another realm, I'd rank my room-service experiences in the following order, noting that all but No. 6 impressed me with more virtues than vices.

**1. THE LONDON NYC** The two-room suites provide ample space for dining, and not only did that spinning coffee table rise up to meet us, but the person who took our dinner order volunteered to send the desserts a half-hour after the rest of the meal, for no extra charge. The London was one of only two hotels that mentioned the possibility of a staggered delivery.

Come breakfast, the server who slowly and gracefully arranged the eggs and the pastries sensed my impatience and paused mid-arrangement. "You want some coffee, don't you?" he said. "Sometimes, right when you get up, before anything else, you need some coffee."

Any chance we can get this guy to throw his hat into the presidential campaign?

**2. THE HOTEL ON RIVINGTON**, which uses the kitchen of the restaurant Thor downstairs. I was jazzed by not only the cod but also house-made tagliatelle with Parmesan, butter, cream, peas and black truffle shavings.

The tagliatelle was clumpier in the room than it probably would have been in the restaurant, but a flavorful pasta dish isn't undone by that — something to bear in mind when ordering room service. A vegetable and pesto pizza was too floppy and "butter-milk and lemon zest fried chicken with peanut sauce" was the sorry spawn of chicken fingers and chicken sate. But the two desserts I tried — a crème brûlée with Madagascar vanilla and a cake with layers of chocolate mousse and hazelnut foam — were both knockouts.

**3. THE CITY CLUB** With the exception of the burger, all the dinner dishes were first-rate. They included a flaky tomato and goat cheese tart, squash soup with garam masala and toasted pumpkinseeds, and orecchiette made with chestnut flour and sauced with a venison ragout.

The City Club was the other hotel that asked me if I wanted a delayed dessert delivery. I said yes, but the desserts came with everything else.

**4. THE CARLTON** Its eggs Benedict, made with smoked salmon instead of Canadian bacon, benefited from English muffins less soggy and yolks less hardened than those in similar dishes at the other hotels.

Both of the main courses I ordered for dinner — pressed chicken with a potato purée, and a piggy triptych of pulled pork, pork belly and pork loin with jalapeño corn bread — were as fine as I remembered them being in the Café at Country, the less formal half of Country.

But a grumpy dinner server at first tried

to give us just a tray instead of a table: ludicrous, considering the amount of food we'd ordered. And though he pledged to return in an hour to clear the dishes, he didn't. We put them in the hall after two hours. After four, they were still there.

**5. THE HOTEL GANSEVOORT** My small room was laid out inconveniently for room service, and while almost every room-service menu I encountered was a significantly truncated sampling of what the restaurant had to offer, this one was especially abbreviated and tame.

But sesame-crusted tuna, requested rare, was cooked perfectly, and the wasabi béarnaise with it added the right notes of richness and heat. Roasted chicken was universally tender. And a miso soup with tofu and scallions had a bewitching perfume.

Breakfast broke the spell, thanks to an omelet stuffed with more spinach than Popeye could handle. And the spinach wasn't fully cooked, so eating the omelet was like biting into an egg lawn.

**6. THE MUSE** This hotel avails itself of the restaurant District's kitchen, but the tepid, bland salmon and tepid, bland cauliflower soup that I got could have been the work of some nameless commissary far away. I would have dozed each with salt and pepper, but the server failed to bring any.

**N**EVER did more than 31 minutes elapse between placing an order and hearing a knock. Except, that is, at the Trump International, where something like 48 hours elapsed. I'll explain.

To have a dinner prepared in the kitchenette of a suite, you choose from a menu of possibilities presented to you days in advance, when you also have to pinpoint the time of the meal. This involves faxes, e-mail, credit-card forms. Spontaneity isn't part of the experience.

Neither is privacy. With your personal chef comes your personal server, whose path from kitchenette to table is no more than eight feet and whose sole visual and aural focus is you. He's omnipresent and ineluctable, sort of like Will Ferrell.

But if novelty and very freshly made delivery are what you're after, this experience delivers. While the skin of the black sea bass, flecked with hazelnuts, almonds and sesame seeds, had already been seared on a plancha in the restaurant's kitchen, Kyle roasted the fish in the room, where he also made its sauce of caramelized mushrooms, Banyuls, browned butter and red and yellow tomatoes. I have no doubt that the sauce's perfume was sharper and its nuances finer than they would have been if the dish hadn't made it to the table so fleetly.

Squab had been smoked somewhere else, but Kyle finished it in the room's oven, then sprinkled diced Asian pear and licorice powder over it. It was as succulent and lively with flavor as just about any dish I've had in Jean Georges.

And while Kyle's ministrations weren't easily monitored, the refrigerator-size vessel he had wheeled into the kitchen — for spices and herbs, fruits and vegetables, mushrooms and meats — was an impressive testament to how many ingredients go into a fancy dinner for two.

Even more impressive? The bill. For four courses, including dessert, it was \$195 a person, twice the price in Jean Georges. Plus \$225 for three hours of Kyle's time. Plus beverages. Plus an automatic gratuity of 21 percent on everything but Kyle's time.

My dinner for two came to about \$800.

So for breakfast the next morning, it was back on the austerity plan: eggs Benedict and an omelet the usual way, from a distant kitchen, via a nameless stranger who didn't linger. The toast was rye. It was also kind of cold. Not even the combined forces of Jean-Georges and the Donald can beat certain inevitabilities.



with sauces that balanced sweetness and tartness in the trademark style of the chef Jean-Georges Vongerichten — fully measured up to his high standards.

**R**OOM service has moved up in the world, reflecting hotels' belief that superior bedside dining can be a perk as appreciated and alluring as a gleaming fitness room or a full-service spa. Many hotels don't simply want a marquee chef and a destination restaurant on the ground floor. They want that chef and restaurant to be at least nominally in charge of the food going to the rooms above.

The restaurant Ono, owned by Jeffrey Chodorow, supervises in-room dining for the Hotel Gansevoort in the meatpacking district.

The Carlton hotel near Madison Square Park recruited the chef Geoffrey Zakarian to open a new restaurant, Country, a year and a half ago and put the Country kitchen in charge of room service.

The chef Marco Canora's forthcoming restaurant in the Michelangelo Hotel in Midtown Manhattan will handle room service there. And a deal is nearly complete to have Laurent Tourondel open a BLT restaurant in the Trump SoHo hotel, on which ground has been broken, and to give that restaurant control over room service.

I stayed, and ate, at the Carlton and the Gansevoort, and had meals that exceeded my expectations. I had long considered the expression "in-room dining," like "in-flight dining," to be something of an oxymoron. Convenience more than quality lent it what

## No Need for Pillow Mints

A guide to some of the hotels in New York that provide a higher class of room service.

	Muse Hotel 130 West 46th Street (212) 485-2400	City Club Hotel 55 West 44th Street (212) 921-5500	Hotel on Rivington 107 Rivington Street (212) 475-2600	Hotel Gansevoort 18 North Avenue (212) 206-6700	London NYC 151 West 54th Street (212) 307-5000	Carlton 88 Madison Avenue (212) 532-4100	Trump International Hotel 1 Central Park West (212) 299-1000
Affiliated restaurant(s)	District	DB Bistro Moderne	Thor	Ono	London Bar at Gordon Ramsay at the London	Café at Country	Jean Georges, Nougatine
Recommended dish(es)	Panzanella salad.	Squash soup, orecchiette with venison ragout, country pâté.	Tagliatelle, cod in red pepper broth, vanilla crème brûlée.	Miso soup with tofu, loin of tuna with wasabi béarnaise.	Peekytoe crab salad; white onion velouté, short ribs.	Scallops with celeriac cream; pressed chicken; pork with corn bread.	Information below is for regular room service, which does not include dishes prepared by private chef.
Minutes to deliver dinner	22	31	23	28	28	24	
Missing in action	Salt and pepper at dinner	Butter and jam for breakfast toast	Artificial sweetener for breakfast coffee	Ice water	Nothing	Courtesy	
Automatic gratuity	18 percent	20 percent	20 percent	16 percent	17 percent	20 percent	18 percent
Delivery charge	\$3	None on orders \$10 and up	\$2	\$4.50	\$3.50 a person	\$5	\$3
Eggs Benedict on menu	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Dining surface	Portable table	Tray	Stationary table	Portable table	Stationary table	Portable table	Portable table
Fraction of restaurant menu offered in room	Two-thirds	Less than half	All	Less than a third	Less than half	Four-fifths	All of Nougatine menu
Comparative price of room-service versus restaurant dish	Grilled salmon: \$24 in room, \$21 in restaurant	DB burger: \$32 in room and in restaurant	Tagliatelle with truffles: \$19 in room and in restaurant	Miso soup: \$11 in room, \$6 in restaurant	White onion velouté: \$14 in room, \$12 in restaurant	Organic chicken: \$25 in room and in restaurant	Steamed lobster: \$48 in room, \$42 in restaurant