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# A Favorite French Restaurant Is Re-Created

La Caravelle, a destination for French cuisine that closed in 2004, lives again at the Chefs Club



Andre Ihuellou, the old-school French maître d' who worked at La Caravelle from 1975 until it closed in 2004, resumed his role of attending to patrons during the Chefs Club's 'La Caravelle Takeover.' *PHOTO: ANDREW LAMBERSON FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*

By **CHARLES PASSY**

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In its heyday, La Caravelle was one of New York’s citadels of French cuisine—where a formally attired Gallic wait staff served a menu of classic dishes to a “who’s who” list of regulars, including many members of the Kennedy clan.

The restaurant closed in 2004 after a 43-year run. But this week, it lived again, briefly, at the Chefs Club, a trendy Nolita dining spot offering a slate of special events and visiting chefs.

On Tuesday, the first evening of the “La Caravelle Takeover,” as the two-night event was dubbed, more than 150 guests came to feast on classics such as mussel cream soup and sautéed chicken with Champagne cream sauce as part of the \$110 three-course meal.



Rita Jammer, ran La Caravelle with her husband, André, for about its last 20 years. *PHOTO: ANDREW LAMBERSON FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*

The contemporary-minded Chefs Club space—with its brick walls, open kitchen and centerpiece consisting of a nearly 1,400-pound hunk of pink Himalayan salt—wasn’t a perfect stand-in for the old La Caravelle, which called a Midtown hotel home.

But there were touches. A colorful La Caravelle sign from yesteryear, picturing the Christopher Columbus ship that inspired the restaurant’s name, was set up at the front of Chefs Club. More important: Rita and André Jammet , the husband-and-wife restaurateurs who ran La Caravelle for about its last 20 years, were on hand for the event, along with a few of the restaurant’s former chefs.



Salmon with asparagus was served at Tuesday's dinner. PHOTO: ANDREW LAMBERSON FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Then there was Andre Ihuellou, the old-school French maître d' who worked at La Caravelle from 1975 till it closed. On Tuesday, as if in a time warp, he resumed his role of quietly and efficiently attending to patrons.

In that sense, the evening had the bittersweet feel of a high-school reunion—albeit one at which the celebratory meal, which concluded with a choice of desserts including a Grand Marnier soufflé—was a lot more refined.



Chef Tadashi Ono in the kitchen PHOTO: ANDREW LAMBERSON FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

The event “is very emotional for me,” said Mr. Jammet, who takes pride in the fact the restaurant closed while still considered at the top of its game. It had been recognized with a prestigious James Beard

Award nomination in its final year.

But the restaurant's business was challenged by the economics of the city in the post-9/11 era, Ms. Jammet explained. The couple made the tough decision to shut the doors, saying goodbye to patrons that had become like extended family.

Some of the La Caravelle regulars who attended Tuesday's dinner bemoaned the fact that high-end French establishments are disappearing in a city that has become a stewpot of culinary cultures and has increasingly embraced casual dining.

"There are not that many big-deal restaurants anymore," said Pamela Fiori, a writer and former editor of Travel & Leisure magazine who used to dine at La Caravelle at least twice a month.

Ms. Fiori made sure to have the chicken with Champagne sauce on Tuesday night, an old favorite.

"I never took La Caravelle for granted," she said with a nostalgic sigh.

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