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The Hottest Lunch In New York: The Sandwich

By ERIC ASIMOV

LIKE soup kiosks in the afterglow of their "Seinfeld" embrace, the sandwich field is booming, catering to an accelerating appetite for anything that can be amicably placed between two slices of bread.

On nearly every block in Manhattan, sandwiches cry out for attention, the tempting choices cascading across window displays, their identities typically described in bold evocative handwriting on cards that trumpet what's new and different.

These are not deli sandwiches by any means. Pastrami is a foreign word in the new sandwich lexicon, and you won't find old standards like ham and cheese. That is, they won't be called ham and cheese. Like dull station wagons morphed into minivans, the ham-and-cheese is gussied up today as "Black Forest ham and provolone, with roasted red peppers and chopped Italian salad on ciabatta." At least that's how it's served at Deb's, a takeout shop on Varick Street. But sandwiches can be wilder conceptually, like the curried chicken salad with mango, radicchio and peanuts served on a baguette at Market, on Mott Street.

"I think that the sandwich for many years was neglected in this city," said Eileen Weinberg, whose shop in Clinton, Good and Plenty to Go, sells 500 a week. "Suddenly, it became something people really wanted for lunch, and they wanted good ones."

Too often, though, the adventurous end up with failed attempts, like prosciutto with white bean puree on delicate semolina bread, a viscous combination that turns the bread into foul putty. Many are unimaginative, like the knee-jerk addition of Brie and sun-dried tomatoes. Some are plainly ill-conceived, like a bacon, lettuce, tomato and avocado sandwich, a rude way to treat a classic. A lot are simply too big.

But a tour of sandwich specialists in Manhattan shows that many of these new combinations are stunningly good and imaginatively constructed by people who understand the principles of layering and balance. They know that flavors and textures need to complement each other or to work in counterpoint, that the filling shouldn't compete with the bread and that bigger is not always better. They see the sandwich as a coherent unit, one that can be picked up and eaten without the fear that it will disintegrate.

Takeout shops aren't the only ones selling these specialty sandwiches. Coffee bars, realizing that even New Yorkers need more than caffeine in the middle of the day, have devised sandwiches that could keep pace with their cappuccinos and lattes. Starbucks now serves roasted vegetables and goat cheese on pane rustico, and turkey and provolone on a "neo-Tuscan" roll. Delis and specialty grocery stores have also added new lines of sandwiches: the Ninth Avenue Cheese Market near 43d Street offers octopus salad with watercress on a hard roll. Even restaurants are jumping in. Patroon, the midtown steakhouse, for one, offers a lunch sandwich of wood-grilled portobello mushrooms with buffalo mozzarella on house-made focaccia.

Prowling the seething field are the sandwich makers themselves, their eagle eyes searching for the slightest movement from the competition, looking for ways to stand apart from the hordes and to improve efficiency without sacrificing quality. Should their sandwiches be made to order or pre-packaged and ready to go? Is there a new cheese to use, or a new bread? Will customers storm out if there's no tuna salad?

"There are definitely spies around, I am so convinced," said Stacy Sosa, whose TriBeCa restaurant, Sosa Borella, offers more than two dozen sandwiches at lunch. She herself is not immune from peeking at the competition, but she calls herself a contrarian, whose sandwich-making mantra could be "No honey mustard and no wraps."

"I try really hard not to feel compelled to do what they're doing," she said.

No one sets out to copy, of course, but it's not so easy to be different. As soon as one new ingredient joins the sandwich fold, it's seemingly everywhere: witness the profusion of sandwiches with avocado, or chipotle-flavored mayonnaise or aioli. More and more meats are described as "rubbed" or "crusted," and while focaccia and seven-grain breads remain popular, neither is as trendy as ciabatta, the rustic Northern Italian oval that has conquered the sandwich territory, for now. But too often, the effort to achieve individuality results in sameness, particularly in sandwich descriptions, which have adopted some of the overheated menu prose of fancy restaurants.

This affection for sandwiches is no new thing, of course. Sandwiches are as American as Dagwood Bumstead, and outlandishness has always been part of the recipe. Unhinging the jaw to accommodate a classic triple-decker club sandwich has always been a daunting proposition, as is picking up a Denver sandwich, essentially an omelet on white bread. But these were the exceptions to the routine of ham, turkey and tuna.

Like soup, sandwiches are fast and relatively inexpensive, though some of the new ones are up around \$10. Most important, they are portable. "Eating a sandwich is a very American thing -- lunch on the go," said Nancy Jessup, the executive chef at Mangia, now one of New York's largest takeout operations, whose 57th Street branch sometimes prepares 1,500 sandwiches a day. "It's not European, where you stop everything for lunch. Here, you grab something and you keep going."

Mangia, in the early 1980's, was one of the pioneers in extending the sandwich palette. Ms. Jessup is still striving for fresh ideas. Last fall, she said, she experimented with butternut squash on sandwiches. "We used that with roasted turkey, roasted red onion and Roquefort, and it flew," she said. "I wouldn't necessarily think of putting squash in a sandwich, but it worked."

Success is not automatic, however. Amy Scherber, whose bakery, Amy's Bread, now also sells her sandwiches, has tried in vain to create a sandwich of roasted vegetables, roasted nuts, cheese and a vinaigrette, but the ingredients won't behave. "You want it to be easy for people to hold in their hands without it falling all over," she said.

In the absence of codified rules for sandwich making, hit-and-miss will have to do, which may be for the best. Would the Sandwich Authorities have permitted Cafe Gitane on Mott Street to have added Parmesan and anchovies to a roast chicken sandwich with lettuce and chipotle mayonnaise? Maybe not, but it's a superb combination.

At Once Upon a Tart, in SoHo, the day's selection of sandwiches forms an enticing display in the front window. Some of them are wonders, like moist pork loin served on ciabatta with frisee and rosemary aioli. The flavors of the pork and rosemary shine through, with a good, garlicky kick from the aioli. Another sandwich offers a similarly nice combination -- roast chicken with arugula and artichoke hearts between squares of rosemary focaccia. But it's structurally unsound, falling apart as you lift it up.

A few doors up Sullivan Street is Pepe Rosso to Go, a small takeout shop, where the aroma of freshly baked focaccia is a magnet for hungry passers-by. Mauro Servi, the owner and chef, makes what is almost a perfect sandwich: bresaola, or air-cured beef, with goat cheese, arugula and truffle oil on circular focaccia. It is ideally proportioned, allowing you to get your mouth around the sandwich without squeezing the life out of it. Each of the elements of flavor and texture -- the spiciness of the beef, the creaminess of the cheese, the bitter edge of the arugula, the pungency of the truffle oil, the oily bite of the focaccia -- joins to form a perfectly balanced coherent unit. "I think the combination between the arugula, the goat cheese, and the truffle oil makes an amazing sandwich," Mr. Servi said.

Sandwich construction as practiced by Mr. Servi may be an art, but the Cosi Sandwich Bars, with four branches in Manhattan, leave the sandwich-making to the customers. As you line up at the counter, you choose from ingredients like tandoori chicken, coriander-roasted tomatoes and sun-dried-tomato spread. None of the ingredients stand out. The glory of Cosi is the crisp Roman flatbread, tasting of olive oil and salt, which is baked right in front of you.

While there may be no limit to the fillings and breads that can be used for sandwiches, the inevitable backlash may be setting in. With Sandbox, a minichain of sandwich bars with two Midtown branches and two more on the way, Jonathan Morr is trying to reverse the course of sandwich history as it has unfolded since arugula first met sourdough baguette. Blaming the seemingly inexhaustible variety of crusty peasant loaves that intrigue the city's bakers, he said: "There is this whole fascination about trying to create these different sandwiches with different breads. But it became physically difficult to eat the sandwich."

So he uses soft sliced bread, baked by La Boulangerie. The sandwiches are sliced diagonally, packed in triangular plastic containers and displayed in gleaming stainless steel industrial refrigerator cases that connote a modular efficiency without the pretense of homeyness. "You're not struggling with a lot of crust," he said of the softer loaves. "It's a much easier product to eat."

Sandbox's best sandwiches are very good. The mildly spicy curried chicken on thin slices of walnut-raisin bread with slow-roasted tomatoes and arugula is excellent. But another sandwich illustrated the problem of the prefab approach: roast beef with watercress, pickled onions and slow-roasted tomatoes was so soggy it was inedible, the bread completely soaked through.

The rococo fillings that tantalize even Mr. Morr offer little to Sean Meenan and Sam Martinez, co-owners of Rialto, the hot restaurant and lounge on Elizabeth Street. Later this month, they will open Bread and Butter, a determinedly straightforward sandwich shop, at 229 Elizabeth Street. Their made-to-order standards -- things like a Reuben, a lobster club, even a peanut butter and jelly -- won't intimidate.

"Everything is old school," Mr. Meenan said. "The creativity isn't just making up new things. After all, it's a sandwich shop -- we're not reinventing the wheel."

Where Inventors Are at Work

Following are some places in Manhattan where creative sandwiches can be found.

AMY'S BREAD -- 672 Ninth Avenue (46th Street), 977-2670; also at Chelsea Market, 75 Ninth Avenue (15th Street), 462-4338.

CAFE GITANE -- 242 Mott Street (Spring Street), 334-9552.

COSI SANDWICH BAR -- branches at

11 West 42d Street, 398-6660; 38 East 45th Street, 949-7400; 165 East 52d Street, 758-7800; 60 East 56th Street, 588-0888.

DEB'S -- 200 Varick Street (Houston Street), 675-4550.

GOOD AND PLENTY TO GO -- 410 West 43d Street, 268-4385.

MANGIA -- 50 West 57th Street, 582-5882; 16 East 48th Street, 754-7600.

MARKET -- 230 Mott Street (Spring Street), 941-1546.

ONCE UPON A TART -- 135 Sullivan Street (Prince Street), 387-8869.

PEPE ROSSO TO GO -- 149 Sullivan Street (Houston Street), 677-4555.

SANDBOX -- 289 Madison Avenue (41st Street), 986-7090; 1394 Avenue of the Americas (57th Street), 713-1557.

SOSA BORELLA -- 460 Greenwich Street (Desbrosses Street), 431-5093.

BRESAOLA, GOAT CHEESE, ARUGULA AND TRUFFLE OIL ON FOCACCIA

Adapted from Pepe Rosso to Go

Total time: 5 minutes

Sandwich-size fresh focaccia, split

2 ounces goat cheese, like Italian Caprini

4 ounces top-quality bresaola (air-cured beef)

6 leaves arugula

4 drops Italian black truffle oil.

Spread half focaccia with goat cheese. Top with bresaola, arugula and truffle oil. Cover with the other half. Serve immediately.

Yield: 1 sandwich.

CREOLE AIOLI

Total time: 30 minutes

4 garlic cloves

2 teaspoons olive oil

1 cup mayonnaise

2 teaspoons harissa (available from specialty food markets)

1 1/2 tablespoons pommery or other whole-grain mustard

1/2 teaspoon black pepper

1/2 teaspoon white pepper

1/2 teaspoon paprika

1/4 teaspoon allspice

1 1/2 tablespoons minced parsley

1 teaspoon sherry vinegar.

1. Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Take a piece of aluminum foil about 12 inches long and fold it in half. Place the garlic in the center, and drizzle with olive oil. Fold the foil around the cloves to form a sealed packet. Roast the packet until the cloves are soft and a deep brown color, about 20 minutes. Mash the cooked cloves to a smooth paste. (If you wish to make extra garlic paste, it can be stored in a jar, covered with oil and refrigerated, for about a week.)

2. In a small mixing bowl, combine 1 teaspoon garlic paste with the remaining ingredients. Mix well. Store refrigerated.

Yield: 1 1/4 cups.

ONION JAM

Total time: 25 minutes

2 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil

1 pound red onions, thinly sliced

1 tablespoon sugar

1 teaspoon salt

1/4 cup balsamic vinegar.

1. Heat oil in a large skillet over a medium flame. Add onion, and saute, stirring, until it is wilted and transparent. Sprinkle with sugar, salt and balsamic vinegar.
2. Saute, stirring occasionally, until onion is soft and a deep brown color, 15 to 20 minutes. If necessary, add a little water to keep onion moist. Use at room temperature.

Yield: 2 cups.

PECAN-CRUSTED CHICKEN CUTLET TRIPLE DECKER

WITH ONION JAM, CREOLE AIOLI AND ARUGULA

Adapted from Mangia

Total time: 30 minutes

2/3 cup pecan pieces

1/3 cup plain dry bread crumbs

Salt and freshly ground pepper to taste

4 skinless, boneless chicken breast halves

2 large eggs, beaten

Nonstick cooking spray

12 slices Pullman or other fresh bread

1/2 cup Creole aioli (see recipe)

1/2 cup onion jam (see recipe)

8 leaves arugula.

1. Preheat oven to 400 degrees. In a food processor, combine pecan pieces, bread crumbs, salt and pepper. Dip cutlets into beaten egg, then coat with bread crumbs.
2. Cover a baking sheet with parchment paper. Spray. Place breaded cutlets on top. Bake until golden, about 15 minutes. Remove and set aside at room temperature.
3. Assemble the sandwich: Spread about 1 1/2 tablespoons creole aioli on a slice of bread. Cut 1 chicken cutlet diagonally into 4 wide, thin slices. Place 2 slices on the aioli and spread with about 1 tablespoon of onion jam. Cover with a second slice of bread. Top with remaining 2 slices of chicken, 2 leaves of arugula and a third slice of bread. Repeat.

Yield: 4 triple-decker sandwiches.

SLOW-ROASTED TOMATOES

Total time: 3 hours

4 plum tomatoes, halved lengthwise, seeds removed

2 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil

2 cloves garlic, minced

1/2 teaspoon dried thyme

Salt and pepper to taste.

1. Marinate ingredients in bowl for 1 hour.
2. Preheat oven to 200 degrees.
3. Place tomatoes on baking sheet. Roast for two hours.

Yield: 8 tomato halves.

CURRIED CHICKEN SALAD WITH SLOW-ROASTED TOMATOES

ON RAISIN-WALNUT BREAD

Adapted from Sandbox

Total time: 45 minutes

2 chicken breasts, whole or halved, with bone

Salt and freshly ground pepper to taste

2 teaspoons vegetable oil

1/2 cup diced celery

1/2 cup diced onion

1 teaspoon grated fresh ginger

1 teaspoon Madras curry

1/2 teaspoon turmeric

1/4 cup chicken stock or canned broth

3 tablespoons mayonnaise

3 tablespoons plain low-fat yogurt

8 slices good-quality raisin-walnut bread

8 arugula leaves

Slow-roasted tomatoes (see recipe).

1. Preheat oven to 400 degrees. Season chicken with salt and pepper, and place on a baking sheet. Roast until juices run clear when chicken is pierced, 25 to 30 minutes. Set aside to cool.
2. In a small saute pan over medium-low heat, heat the oil and then add the celery, onion and ginger. Saute, stirring, until onions are softened and transparent, about 5 minutes. Add the curry powder and turmeric, and cook for 2 minutes. Remove chicken from bone, and cut into thin strips. Add the chicken strips and stock to pan, and saute until the liquid has evaporated.
3. Let chicken cool, then place in a mixing bowl and add mayonnaise and yogurt.
4. To assemble sandwiches: Place a slice of bread on each of 4 plates. Top each slice with 2 arugula leaves, an even layer of curried chicken and 2 roasted tomato halves. Cover with a slice of bread, and cut in half. Serve immediately.

Yield: 4 sandwiches.

Photos: CREATIVITY TO GO -- Bresola with goat cheese, arugula and truffle oil on round focaccia, at Pepe Rosso to Go. (Matthew Klein for The New York Times)(pg. F1); WHAT WOULD DAGWOOD THINK? -- Sandwiches on display at Once Upon a Tart, in SoHo. (Matthew Klein for The New York Times)(pg. F6)