

COUNTER PROGRAMMING

BKLYN GROCERY DOES NIGHT DUTY AS SWISH RESTAURANT

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By **CARLA SPARTOS**

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A grocery store on a desolate stretch of Downtown Brooklyn isn't the first place you'd expect to find a gourmet tasting menu with avant-garde flair, but that's just what's being cooked up at a new pop-up restaurant right near the Hoyt-Schermerhorn subway stop.

By day, Brooklyn Fare (200 Schermerhorn St.) serves Whole Foods-style takeout dishes by accomplished chef César Ramirez, formerly of Bar Blanc and



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Bouley restaurants. By night, its white-tiled prep kitchen is transformed into Brooklyn's Kitchen -- an intimate dinner party hosted by Ramirez Wednesday through Saturday evenings.

It's basically a bargain version of the chef's table: the one-of-a-kind dining experience usually offered at high-end restaurants such as Daniel and Le Cirque in which the head chef cooks and serves a small group seated in -- or adjacent to -- the kitchen. In the case of Brooklyn's Kitchen, up to 12 guests are accommodated in a single 7 p.m. seating.

And at \$70 per person, it may be the best deal in fine dining right now. Even better: It's BYO. No wonder it's currently booked more than two months out, though expanding operating hours should open more seats.

On a recent Wednesday night, diners had traveled from as far as the Upper West Side to attend a raucous birthday party for entertainment lawyer Daniel Rayner. Dinner guest Victor Owen Schwartz, a wine distributor, had chosen a dozen bottles to accompany the evening's many courses. (Those not fortunate enough to have friends in the wine industry can visit nearby wine shop Heights Chateau, which collaborates with the restaurant to offer pairing suggestions.)

"We try to give you a high-end meal without all the fuss," says Ramirez, whose menu includes four to six courses, with plenty of extras.

Diners are seated at a gleaming metal prep table facing the cooking action amidst hanging copper-clad pots, large industrial racks and a self-serve wine station with corkscrew, ice bucket and a variety of glassware. Looking for the bathroom? It's in the back room -- just past the dishwasher furiously scrubbing pots.

Ramirez's culinary artistry is showcased in carefully composed dishes such as "Tomato," which features the fruit in multiple guises: Tomato mousse resembles a hard-boiled egg but tastes intensely tomato-like. A perfect sphere of superbly creamy buffalo mozzarella is created by blending the cheese with milk and its own juices, straining it, then reassembling it in a silicon mold. Campari tomatoes are made super sweet by cooking them at 200 degrees for an entire day.

Not all dishes are as conceptual. Halibut was seared, finished in a 170-degree Hobart oven and served with crispy spinach and a velvety corn sauce that elicited wonderment because it contained no butter.

Indeed, it's the gee-whiz factor that sets this dining experience apart, inspiring a relaxed party vibe in which diners feel free to interact with the chef. Of course, Ramirez's handsome looks, easygoing banter and improvisational style certainly help.

"It's about the food and people having a good time," says Ramirez, noting he recently had a group stay until 2 a.m. -- despite the fact that he and his crew had to be back in the kitchen at 7 a.m.

Just how long this unusual experiment will last is unclear, but Ramirez says it's a prototype for a more permanent restaurant he eventually hopes to open. Until then, diners can reserve a seat in the prep kitchen by calling 718-243-0050.

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At night, Ramirez transforms his Brooklyn Fare work space into Brooklyn's Kitchen.

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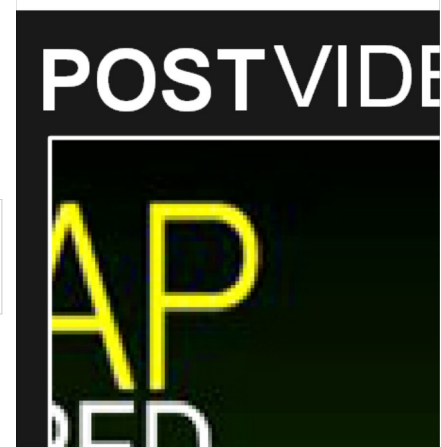
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