

The New York Times

RESTAURANTS | PETE WELLS

Keeping Her Passport Handy

Anita Lo crosses culinary borders with ease at Annisa.

ANITA LO HAS BEEN THE CHEF of Annisa since it opened almost 14 years ago, and summing up her style has not gotten any easier. Even she, when naming the cookbook she wrote with Charlotte Druckman, defined her style by what it is not. The title is "Cooking Without Borders."

What is remarkable about her food, though, is not exactly the absence of borders but the ease with which she crosses them. Take the stunner of a Spanish mackerel dish that I ate there a few months ago. After marinating in sweetened soy sauce, the fish is blistered under a hot salamander, flesh side down, until the skin is crunchy with a bittersweet char. This is not far off from the way a Japanese cook may handle mackerel, but Ms. Lo's passport will be stamped a few more times before she's done.

In Hong Kong, she will pick up some fried milk, golden battered globes of squishy-soft pudding made from condensed milk. The oily mackerel could demolish the meek taste of milk with one flick of its fin, so she builds in depth by blending the pudding with mellow roasted garlic and, after a quick shopping run to Southeast Asia, fish sauce. For the brick-red paste beneath the mackerel she pops over to Seoul for gochujang, funky and unabashedly hot.

At last, Ms. Lo returns to Japan for creamy cubes of roasted satsumaimo, the yellow sweet potato. By now she had racked up frequent flier miles by the thousands, but what my mouth noticed were the exhilarating runs from one pole of flavor to another, from sugary to savory, soothing to fiery, nuanced to potent. The far-flung elements were anything but all over the map; they touched down precisely where Ms. Lo wanted them, and I followed along, hungrily.

Free-form creativity like Ms. Lo's is rare. To explain it, we often fall back on family history. Ms. Lo's mother is Chinese, from Malaysia. Her father was Chinese, too, from Shanghai, but he died before she knew him, and she was raised in Michigan by her mother and a non-Chinese stepfather. As a girl she ate Chinese food, Hungarian food and American food, and marked her birthdays with steamed lobster. The two chefs who taught her much of what she knows about professional kitchens were David Waltuck and David Bouley. Many of the techniques they imparted are French, but the chefs are not. Biography takes you only so far.

Ms. Lo will tell you that the taste of her mother's cooking made its way into Annisa's soup dumplings. They have been on the menu from the beginning, and can still startle with their seductive filling of foie gras mousse in a thick, glistening broth seasoned with ginger, star anise and cinnamon.

But the hot-and-numbing Sichuan-inspired sauce on another remarkable appetizer, a hearts of palm salad, owes its presence on the plate to Ms. Lo's roving curiosity. So does the main ingredient, hearts of palm that are shipped overnight to Greenwich Village by a farmer she met on Oahu. They are grilled just enough to soften them



ANNISA ***

13 BARROW STREET (WEST FOURTH STREET), GREENWICH VILLAGE;
212-741-6699;
ANNISARESTAURANT.COM

Atmosphere The civilized, comfortable dining room is one of downtown's best spaces for conversation over an exciting meal.

Service Graceful, focused and polished but not stiff.

Sound level Moderate.

Recommended Grilled hearts of palm; black sea bass sashimi; steak tartare; foie gras soup dumplings; broiled Spanish mackerel with garlic fried milk; pan-roasted chicken with cherry, white truffle and pigs' feet; saddle of rabbit with pistachio, mint and grape leaves; grilled pork with crispy ears and dandelion; poppy-seed bread-and-butter pudding; "tasting of chocolate and malted desserts."

Drinks and wine Wines are extremely well chosen for compatibility with the food, and prices are reasonable, with many bottles \$60 or less.

Prices Appetizers, \$9 to \$21; main courses, \$30 to \$41.

Open Nightly for dinner.

Reservations Accepted.

Wheelchair access Not accessible.

What the stars mean Ratings range from zero to four stars and reflect the reviewer's reaction primarily to food, with ambience, service and price taken into consideration.



PHOTOGRAPHS BY EVAN SUNG FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

without taking anything away from their fresh, quiet, rounded sweetness.

Annisa's impressive beef tartare, chopped by a knife and chilled so it is the opposite of mushy, borrows its cinnamon and steamed bulgur from the family recipe of Annisa's sous-chef, Mary Attea, whose father is Lebanese. Ms. Lo's ear has always been attuned to the lilt of the Middle East. You can also catch it in an elegant main course of roasted rabbit loin stuffed with chopped pistachios and grape leaves with a thick and lemony yogurt sauce.

In a few of the main courses, Ms. Lo's skill at layering flavors didn't quite manage to maintain interest in larger expanses of fish or meat. I wished that every piece of roasted lamb had been as remarkable as the brooding stew of merguez meatballs

that came with it, or that the warm avocado dice had brought more fizz to an admirably well-grilled cobia fillet. In the slightly smaller portions of a five-course dealer's choice tasting menu for \$85, that trouble disappeared.

Ms. Lo devises the desserts herself, but if you are still trying to figure out which box she fits into when they arrive, I'd suggest you give up and enjoy yourself. Multicultural syncopation gives way to more homey pleasures like a banana and peanut butter "tower." It must be a tower that fell over, because it is short and flat like a napoleon.

You can't draw any conclusions about the person who made the long plank of poppy-seed bread pudding, which has twice as much toasted surface as usual and



Saddle of rabbit with pistachio, above left, at Annisa. Above, the chef, Anita Lo, in her kitchen. Left, the restaurant's understated dining room. Below left, poppy-seed bread pudding. Ms. Lo devises the desserts herself.

a pool of creamy lemon curd to swish it around in, except that she must really like eating dessert. (The feeling evidently doesn't extend to bread, based on the perfunctory dinner rolls. The little dish of retro butter curls is good for a smile, though.)

The space in which these pleasures play out is remarkable for how unremarkable it is. The dining room sits a few steps above Barrow Street, where you can watch terriers wearing warm jackets and disapproving expressions take their evening walk. The canine fashion parade is virtually the only distraction from food and conversation.

Around 10 one evening, when a few tables had emptied, a friend asked a question nobody ever asks in most new restaurants: "Have they been playing music all night?" Every week I get emails from readers who say they feel unwelcome in restaurants that have industrial noise levels, congested dining rooms, penitential chairs and subterranean lighting. Annisa is free of these annoyances. I don't think anyone of any age who enjoys going out to eat would feel out of place there.

Service is graceful and unfussy, although perhaps not quite as watchful as it was before Annisa's other founder, Jennifer Scism, moved to Maine a few years ago. One night, as my guest stood by the door, a host asked how she had enjoyed dinner. It was nice of her to wonder, and would have been even nicer a couple of hours later, after we had eaten. Still, the overall tone Ms. Scism set, one of maturity and inclusiveness that Sam Sifton called "rare and noteworthy" in his two-star review in The New York Times from 2010, still prevails.

Today, Annisa deserves a third star. Ms. Lo pulled out of a dumpling side project shortly after that review, and it may be that the restaurant has benefited from her undivided attention. She may never have an empire, but she has a superb Greenwich Village restaurant. Then again, it's just as likely that time has simply made it more clear how singular Annisa is. It's still not easy to say what Ms. Lo's style is, but it is hers, and hers alone, and the city is a more exciting place for it.

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