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In Cheesecake City, a Quest for the Best

By ED LEVINE

IN the cosmology of New York City restaurants, there is no dessert more universal than the cheesecake. There are cheesecake variations playing in Manhattan dining rooms both upscale and down: at Gramercy Tavern, at Big Nick's, at ChikaLicious, at David Burke & Donatella.

There is a strawberry-covered cheesecake on a pedestal at the Greek coffee shop on the corner. There is also one on the special dessert menu at the extravagantly expensive Restaurant Daniel. You can get a cheesecake for dessert at Ruth's Chris Steak House, and at the Red Flame in Midtown.

You can buy chocolate cheesecake in your local supermarket, and in the Whole Foods at the Time Warner Center. There is (Swedish) cheesecake at Aquavit, and (Mexican) cheesecake at the Bright Food Shop in Chelsea, and an attempt (Japanese) at Sui in SoHo.

In a city of constant ethnic flux, cheesecake is itself a constant, offering something for everyone.

A month ago I set out to explore the state of the cheesecake in New York City, and thereby, I hoped, to find the city's best. Thirty days, 30 sojourns across the city, and more than four dozen cheesecakes later, I can attest to the health of our shared cheesecake culture. Opinions about cheesecake are, of course, as multitudinous in New York as its citizens. Tempting as it may be to do, I will not crown a "best" cake, but seven of them.

Cheesecake is one of those quintessential New York foodstuffs that in some circles is thought of as unsophisticated. Certainly its name does not roll off the tongue like tiramisù, or tarte Tatin. But cheesecake at its best is a perfect sweet -- a smooth, creamy confection with only a hint of tart.

You read that correctly. Any discussion of cheesecake in New York City must begin with a few stipulations. While Italian and postmodern cheesecakes have their place in the pantheon, the proper New York cheesecake has a simple and unchanging list of ingredients: cream cheese, eggs, sugar, vanilla and heavy cream. The result is light as gauze. It also packs the wallop of a professional boxer.

Americans understand this and champion it. When representatives from Junior's restaurant on Flatbush Avenue in Brooklyn appeared on the home shopping channel QVC last Christmas to advertise their wares, they were able to sell 70,000 cheesecakes in 24 hours. And the Cheesecake Factory, a chain of casual restaurants built on a foundation of cheesecake desserts, has the highest sales, per store, of any chain in the country right now, according to Nation's Restaurant News, a trade publication. Fifteen percent of the company's total sales are in desserts, 85 percent of them cheesecakes, or more than \$104 million in 2003.

CHOCOLATE swirls occasionally visit a cheesecake. So, too, do cherries, blueberries, lemon curds. It is not heretical to enjoy these jazzy renditions, but they are often paint on the lily.

Italian bakers and bakeries believe in a different sort of cheesecake, one made with ricotta -- which gives their cheesecake a rougher texture. At Veniero's in the East Village they've been making a huge, Sicilian-style rectangular cheesecake for more than 100 years that they sell by the pound. It is surprisingly light, with a crumbly, coarse texture.

There is a similar cake, though with slightly more body, at Monteleone's on Court Street in Carroll Gardens, Brooklyn; it's made with three kinds of ricotta. At Pepolino, an Italian restaurant in TriBeCa, Enzo Pezone makes a two-inch-high ricotta tart, which is simple, delicate and delicious. And around Easter, Neapolitan bakers all over the city make a dense, eggy cheesecake called a pastiera, made with grain. Zia Tonia at Buon Italia in the Chelsea Market makes a terrific, deeply custardy version.

And restaurant chefs have also weighed in with nontraditional takes on cheesecake. In fact, the best restaurant cheesecake I've eaten in recent memory is 'Cesca's, in which Tom Valenti, the chef and owner, and Amanda LaBarbera, the pastry chef, smoothed the slight graininess of ricotta with a mascarpone, and served it with a simple orange juice reduction.

At the Strip House on East 12th Street, René Lenger, the pastry chef, serves what can only be called a perfect slab of fine traditional cheesecake; it is five inches high, six inches long and three inches thick. It looks like something

from a giant's wedding. Gina DePalma at Babbo in Greenwich Village serves a wonderful pumpkin cheesecake with maple syrup and crème fraîche; it's studded with pieces of pumpkin and macerated raisins, and is as far from a traditional cake as it's possible to get and still be delicious.

At the dessert bar ChikaLicious, an owner and chef, Chika Tillman, makes an uncooked cheesecake out of fromage blanc bathed in heavy cream, and serves it on a bed of ice. This blindingly white-on-white presentation looks like an early Yoko Ono creation. It is cloudlike and downright delicious. And Dona Abramson of the Bright Food Shop and the Mexican Kitchen Market in Chelsea makes a very interesting Oaxacan cheesecake crusted with raw brown sugar; it's served with guava lime sauce. O.K.!

Wonderful cheesecakes all. But in the end the best way to satisfy a cheesecake craving is with a creamy piece of unadorned, undoctored, New York cheesecake. And so it was that 30 days into my eating, on the very last day of my hunt, I took a cab to the corner of 114th and Pleasant Avenue in East Harlem, to have a slice of cheesecake at Rao's, the fabled Italian restaurant so exclusive that there was no other way I was going to get a slice of its cake.

Reservations are not accepted at Rao's so much as they are conferred. Its cheesecake, I had heard, was ethereal, perfect stuff, made by a neighborhood woman. Repeated calls to the restaurant's owner, Frankie Pellegrino, were not returned. Nor was a written request for an interview. There may have been a reason for this. Mr. Pellegrino's nickname, known to many who have asked him for a table, is Frankie No.

I called his son, Frankie Pellegrino Jr., who owns Baldoria, on West 49th Street. (There's cheesecake on his menu, too.) The younger Mr. Pellegrino chuckled when I asked him about his father's cheesecake source. "I don't even know her name myself," he said. "It is great cheesecake. I'll call my dad and get back to you."

He did not.

I walked into Rao's and took a seat at the bar in front of Nicky the Vest, so known for the 142 vests he owns and wears to pour drinks. "I don't have a reservation," I said. "But could I have a piece of cheesecake here at the bar?"

Nicky the Vest shook his head, doing his best Frankie No.

"We don't have any cheesecake," he said. "The lady that makes it broke her arm bad. I don't know if she's ever going to be able to make it again, but you could try back in a couple of months."

That's something to live for. In the meantime, here's a list of my magnificent seven -- the best cheesecakes in New York City.

EILEEN'S SPECIAL CHEESECAKE -- Eileen Avezzano's mother used to make cheesecake for special occasions. To honor that memory, and because she needed a way to support her two young children, Ms. Avezzano started baking her own version of those cheesecakes for a Queens deli owner almost 30 years ago. Eileen's cheesecake is ethereally light, and not too sweet. It's sold from one of the cutest stores in Manhattan, at 17 Cleveland Place (at Kenmare Street), SoHo; (212) 966-5585 .

HELEN'S FABULOUS CHEESECAKE -- The first time I walked into Helen Couloufacos's bright and airy shop in Carroll Gardens, she had only a pecan praline cheesecake to sell. I'm a purist, so she told me to come back the next day. I did, and boy, was it worth it. Her crustless cheesecake is creamy, not too dense, and has a lovely vanilla accent. It's sold at 126 Union Street (between Columbia and Hicks Streets), Brooklyn; (718) 722-7691 .

MONA LISA PASTRY SHOPPE -- This place has been around for 90 years, and still bakes all its cheesecakes in a coal-fired brick oven. The ricotta cheesecake has a wonderfully creamy consistency and a thin golden brown crust, and it would be Italian cheesecake heaven if it weren't quite so infused with orange flavor. But the traditional cheesecake is excellent, with a custardy interior and a perfect crust. At 1476 86th Street (15th Avenue), Bay Ridge, Brooklyn; (718) 837-9053 .

MONTELEONE'S -- Lenny Cristino, the baker and an owner, makes a Sicilian cheesecake in the Veniero's tradition, though with three kinds of ricotta cheese. The result is a light, moist cheesecake with plenty of body and plenty of flavor. At 355 Court Street (President Street), Carroll Gardens, Brooklyn; (718) 624-9253 .

MONTE'S VENETIAN ROOM -- The ricotta cheesecake is so ridiculously good and creamy it's hard to believe it's not made with cream cheese. I asked an owner about that. "What are you crazy?" Tony Monte said. "Does Coke tell Pepsi what they put in their soda?" It can be ordered to go from 451 Carroll Street (between Nevins Street and Third Avenue), Carroll Gardens, Brooklyn; (718) 624-8984 .

TWO LITTLE RED HENS -- If I had to choose a first among equals, Christina Winkler's cheesecake at this perfect little shop on the Upper East Side would merit trumpets and shouts. Hers is the very definition of a phenomenal New York cheesecake; rich, light, and the perfect balance of sweet and tart. At 1652 Second Avenue (between 85th and 86th Streets); (212) 452-0476 .

YURA & COMPANY -- Yura Mohr is the most unpretentious top-drawer baker I know. I asked her how she developed her wonderfully lemony, fluffy cheesecake recipe. "It's from a magazine," she said, laughing. But she wouldn't say which one. Her "turtle" cheesecake, with a layer of perfect caramel on top that complements the tart sour creamy taste of the cheesecake below it, is one of the great tastes of this city. At 1659 Third Avenue (93rd Street); (212) 860-8060 .

ONLINE Ed Levine narrates a tour of New York's cheesecake spots at nytimes.com/dining.