

February 11, 2007

## **A NIGHT OUT WITH: Cat Cora; The Clean Plate Club**

By **TATIANA BONCOMPAGNI**

WHEN dining out with Cat Cora, the first female "Iron Chef," expect something a little more adventurous than a bread basket or a dish of olives to be passed around the table. Like a fried pig's ear.

"It's good," Ms. Cora said recently over dinner with a group of foodie friends at the Spotted Pig in the West Village.

"Crispy," she added in her trademark Mississippi drawl before handing the ear to Ted Allen, the food expert of "Queer Eye" fame, who then handed it off to Tom Colicchio, a judge on "Top Chef" on the Bravo network, who then passed it back to its rightful owner, Cesare Casella, the chef and owner of Maremma, an Italian restaurant in the West Village.

No doubt she was relieved to be eating out instead of cooking. Her second book, "Cooking From the Hip," comes out this spring, and she was recently named executive chef of Bon Appétit magazine.

"Does anyone want to try mine?" she asked, holding aloft her own chosen entree, braised lamb shank with roasted celery root. There were takers, of course.

Not much goes unsampled by this crowd. To start, there were duck eggs, pickled vegetables, chicken liver toasts, olives and almonds, and a table favorite: bacon-wrapped, pear-stuffed prunes. Ms. Cora polished off those snacks with a smuggled-in can of Fresca ("Restaurants never have it," she said) mixed with vodka.

Next followed a parade of new plates: prosciutto, fennel salad, sheep's ricotta, clam chowder and grilled white polenta, which in the dim lighting Mr. Allen confused with another dish. "What's this fish?" he asked, digging in.

"What the fish!" Mr. Casella cried out, which in his heavy Italian accent, sounded a lot like an expletive. "It's polenta," he clarified.

Too late. The whole table had already erupted in laughter. Ms. Cora found the exclamation so amusing that the top button of her electric-blue shirt popped open.

"That's never happened before," she said, buttoning it back up.

Enter another bottle of red wine, a Sangiovese blend from Tuscany selected by Mr. Casella. Somehow, after a fresh burst of hilarity, Ms. Cora's shirt came unbuttoned again. She shrieked playfully and turned to Mr. Casella, who had a handful of rosemary sprigs stuffed in the pocket of his red shirt. "You're Italian, I know you," she said, her finger extended in mock accusation.

Mr. Casella tucked some rosemary into Ms. Cora's shirt. She laughed, peering down at the herbs in her cleavage. "Hmm, fragrant," she said.

The meat of the night's conversation, like the selection of dishes, was eclectic. There was talk of Ms. Cora's new venture with Macy's in California (two barbecue-theme restaurants to open in late summer), as well as of Greece, where Ms. Cora vacations (she lives in California when not taping "Iron Chef" for

the Food Network in New York), and squid, which she fishes for on vacation.

Entree dishes cleared, Mr. Colicchio bade the table goodbye just before a stream of desserts -- crème brûlée and chocolate, walnut and ginger cakes -- arrived à table. One by one, they too were passed around and relished, especially the ginger cake, which Ms. Cora praised for its lightness.

The remaining group decided to peek into the restaurant's hot, cramped kitchen, where Ms. Cora and Mr. Allen marveled at an oversize hamburger and, competing with the loud clanking of dishes, thanked the chefs for dinner.

"That burger. Oh. My. God," said Ms. Cora as she settled into a spot near the bar with her last glass of red wine. "I've already eaten, but it looks so good."