



I felt a shiver of excitement at **Café d'Alsace** as I savored a gorgeous soup bowl of that almost abandoned classic, *quenelles de brochet*, rich and cleverly textured for its 21st-century revival. And the perfection of overgrown heads-on shrimp riding those plump pike-and-shrimp dumplings side-saddle was the clincher. I just knew there had to be a Frenchman in the kitchen. Though Brittany-born, veteran Philippe Roussel vividly recalls eating the Alsatian dishes of his chef-papa, and he channels them as cocopartner here. A pleasant tartiflette with bacon. The essential choucroute garnie cooked in Riesling. And a saucy version of the rustic Bœuf à la mode (lamb shoulder, carrots, bacon, potatoes, and onion braised in Pinot Gris) that Alsace's gifted son André Soltner used to do for special customers at *Lafitte*. Partner Simon Oren's collection of jewel-toned seltzer bottles and French-call signs perks up a modest space just south of Elaine's. Beer connoisseurs will find a lot of 118 labels to wallow in. And it's worth a detour for warm *leeks vinaigrette* (a seasonal riff on the classic), lush goat-cheese Tatin, thick and meaty duck breast with celery-root purée, and first-rate hanger steak with "well-done" fries so perfect we called for seconds. This apple tart is enough for six to taste, and our cookbook-writer pal is carrying away the blueberry-tart recipe. Happily, Roussel has the credentials to keep it honest, should crowds descend (1095 Second Ave., at 89th St.; 212-722-0332).

## Openings

### My Befana

101 W. Houston St., at Thompson St.  
212-439-9200

In the ever-expanding world of meal-delivery services, it's tough to stand out. Chef Daniele Bellini, a veteran of *Le Cirque*, *San Domenico*, and *Restock Pignoli*, realized that food is his best advertisement. At *My Befana*, Bellini has combined a production kitchen with a twenty-seat stand-out serving his seasonal Mediterranean fare to stay, to go, and, ideally, to tempt customers to sign up online for home or office delivery ([mybefana.com](http://mybefana.com)). Drawing on Italian, Spanish, and French influences, Bellini offers generously a daily changing assortment of whatever he's cooking for his most-plus clients—from short-rib stew *bruschetta* to pork tenderloin *au jus*.



### Dona

100 E. 116th St., at Third Ave.  
212-439-9200

As far as Donatella Arpaia was concerned, her first restaurant, *Bellini*, might have been a success, but it didn't reflect her personality—not in the trendy, busy way that her subsequent ventures (*Cherchez la Bouchée* and *Amici*) did. So she hired a designer to give the sturdy millstone spot a bright white facade and olive-wood carpet, partnered with *Cherchez* chef Michael Polakis, and reopened this week as *Dona*, an upscale southern-European restaurant. Each raised on Long Island by immigrant parents, Arpaia and Polakis have collaborated on what they call first-generation cuisine:



### Per Lei

1247 Second Ave., at 71st St.  
212-439-9200

Restaurateur Enrico Proietti has the very specific knack of creating a festive downtown atmosphere in a straitlaced uptown neighborhood. At *Baraonda*, one of his free-wheeling Upper East Side restaurants, dancing on the table is not only allowed—it's encouraged. Expect the same high spirits at *Per Lei*, where Fabrizio Musa's colorful female portraits are in keeping with the restaurant's name ("for her" in Italian). Proietti recruited two chefs from Milan to cook classic and modern regional fare, from carpaccio and panzanella to potato-crust branzino with red-onion marmalade.

a blend of her Italian heritage and his Greek one, expressed in dishes like sea-urchin crudi with horseradish, carrot, and fava bean purée, and spaghetti with eggplant and lamb "Bolognese."



*Dona's Polakis and Arpaia.*

### Astor Center

100 Lafayette St., at 6th St.  
212-476-2300

In this age of exploding commercial rents and national retail chains willing to pay them, it behooves a local merchant to own his building.



At least it's worked out that way for Astor Wines & Spirits, which has just relocated from its longtime leased home (and eventual *Widows*) to the Theodore De Vries Press Building, a neo-Romanesque Nike landmark that Edwin Fisher, Astor's former owner, had the foresight to buy over twenty years ago. Under the direction of Fisher's son Andrew, the newly christened and handsomely well-collared Astor Center retains the store's broad selection and egalitarian vibe, with a few notable improvements: a 27-degree, 70 percent humidity "cool room" for storing fragile, rare, and organic wines; a tasting bar equipped with spittoons and glasses; and a library of wine-reference books. Education will play an even greater role at the Study, a combination kitchen-classroom Fisher hopes to open this fall.

BY GAIL KAMEN