

Foods

produce, fresh from the nearby Union Square Greenmarket, tampered with only enough to evoke the naturally perfect flavor of each item. Cauliflower, broccoli, and fennel show up singly or tossed in pasta or grain salads, and we understand implicitly what there is to love about such humble vegetables. In season, the tiniest, sweetest cherry tomatoes nuzzle chunks of creamy fresh mozzarella. Bok choy, kale, and more exotic greens are cooked only until properly tender, then lightly dressed. Some days, there may be only a handful of platters in the high-tech



FISH TALE: Petite Crevette.

chrome trough; Rubin's triumph, though, is in making you crave every single one of them. (For an animated recitation of the day's menu, call 366-1414, extension 1.)

TIRAMI SU

It's a dessert I often ordered but never got, this lump of cheesy goo covered with enough chocolate dust to powder a baby's bottom and a medicinally alcoholic aftertaste. I'd watch other tables scarf it up and wonder what I was missing. They love it at Bar Pitti. They love it at Coco Pazzo. They practically dance in the plate at Fresco. I would order tartufo and sit back feeling like someone who didn't know the secret

handshake. Until **TORRE DI PISA** (19 West 44th Street; 398-4400) passed a plate under my nose and suddenly I heard angels singing along with a concertina. It doesn't look like anyone else's version. Sort of mushy and slight, more free-form than geometric, and very yellow. But the mascarpone goes down like fingers grazing the small of your back, and though you hardly see it, the chocolate is there to fulfill, not to tease. The Tower of Pisa can't help but lean. Now you can't, either. That's what happens when you swoon.

VEGETARIAN RESTAURANT

Western cuisine suffers from a basic misconception of the vegetable. Good though their intentions may be, most meat-free menus still reveal centuries of carnocentric thinking, relying on such veggie apologia as soy steak and textured vegetable protein, barely disguising a fundamentally barbecuish view of the vegetable as

anyone?—when they arrive in smooth black bowls, the dishes quickly dispel any doubts. Korean cuisine works on a dialectic—hot and cold, spicy and bland, rough and smooth—and the meal proceeds as a series of meditations on, say, the warm sweetness of pumpkin porridge, followed by the colorful sponginess of yellow, red, and green pancakes. The mushroom dishes are a fungal symphony, mixing smooth, rubbery, and crunchy textures in a sweet-and-sour sauce. And the aforementioned root, a todok, is pounded, sliced, and marinated in spicy kochung paste—fibrous, chewy, and fantastic. Hangawi's close second is **MAVALLI PALACE** (46 East 29th Street; 679-5555), a supreme South Indian restaurant—the best in the city—that has perfected such standards as the potato-and-onion-crepe masala dosa yet adds more-exotic delights, like anardana (a mixture of chickpeas and pomegranate) and Kashmiri pullav (a spicy mélange of rice, carrots, peas, nuts, and dried fruits). The dishes at Mavalli Palace can be fiery, complex, or sweet, with spices focusing and augmenting the inherent flavor of vegetables without drowning them in the curry sludge that plagues much of 6th Street. Step inside these doors and you may never eat cow again.

BROOKLYN FISH PLACE

Knowing what to do with a piece of fish is a bedeviling question that confronts almost all fish buyers. Face it, it just lies there like the proverbial dead fish. You will get expert advice at **PETITE CREVETTE** (127 Atlantic Avenue; 718-858-6660), at the southern tip of Brooklyn Heights. On site is stream-of-consciousness chef Alan Harding (he used to be at Nosmo King), who will sell you fish or cook it in any number of ways—from plain old cornmeal to sublime ginger beurre blanc. Owner Neil Ganic, also a gifted chef, runs **LA BOUILLABaisse** (145 Atlantic Avenue; 718-522-8275) up the street (the No. 3-rated bistro in Zagat) and is his own biggest customer. The selection of fish is small but always interesting and has that aroma of sliced cucumbers that means fresh. Buy some; take some home. The takeout side dishes include a pepper-and-white-bean bruschetta that you should claim as your own. Your dinner guests will think you are a majordomo. You are a majordomo.

"side." When going veggie, then, the gourmet is best advised to go ethnic. New York offers two excellent options. The first and most spectacular is **HANGAWI** (12 East 32nd Street; 213-0077), a quiet, softly lit, Buddhist-temple-like dining spot where shoeless diners sit at floor level with their legs dangling in cozy recesses under the tables. The food is amazing: elegantly presented and olfactorily expansive, these root, mushroom, and squash confections are a rare combination of exotic and delicious that amply rewards a tiny bit of adventurousness. The clueless are abetted by a prix fixe menu that serves two for about \$100, and while some items sound in print as though they came straight from Yoda's cave—pounded mountain root,