

ANNALS OF GASTRONOMY

## CHECK, PLEASE

*The challenge of creating a world-class restaurant—and turning a profit.*

BY JOHN COLAPINTO



One afternoon this spring, Will Guidara, the general manager and co-owner of Eleven Madison Park, a restaurant in Manhattan's Flatiron district, arrived at work limping and gray-faced. He had thrown out his back, a stress-related injury to which he is prone. ("I am an exceptionally anal person," he says.) Often, Guidara, a gregarious man of thirty-two who dresses in dark suits and ties, will enter and stand for a moment in the restaurant's foyer with his eyes closed, listening to the buzz of conversation, the clink of cutlery, and the murmur of his service team moving among the tables; he says that he can tell from the sound of the room how the restaurant is doing. Today,

he hobbled into the lounge and eased into an armchair.

He was joined by Daniel Humm, the restaurant's chef and co-owner. Dressed in his usual white chef's jacket and blue-jeans, Humm, thirty-five, is six feet four and has an athlete's lean build. Though soft-spoken and outwardly calm, he is as tightly coiled as Guidara.

"So did you go to that acupuncturist, like I told you?" he asked, in his light Swiss accent.

"I did," Guidara said, wincing. "And I went to my chiropractor, too."

Humm and Guidara had been under unusual pressure. In the previous six months, they had bought Eleven Madi-

son Park from their former employer, the restaurant mogul Danny Meyer; published a coffee-table cookbook; and opened their second restaurant, the No-Mad—all while striving to maintain the food and service that earned Eleven Madison Park a four-star rating in the *Times* and three stars in the *Guide Michelin*. They were scheduled to fly to London the next day to attend the San Pellegrino World's 50 Best Restaurants awards, where they would learn their current ranking. Eleven Madison Park first made the list in 2010—but barely, landing at the rank of fifty.

Humm's training is in classical French cuisine, but at Eleven Madison Park he has introduced a witty New York twist: his take on the bagels and lox served at such Manhattan delis as Barney Green-grass uses caviar, cream cheese, quail eggs, a bagel "crumble," and a fillet of sturgeon that arrives at the table under a custom-blown glass dome, swirling with applewood smoke. Guidara's service team eschews the stiff-spined rectitude of European fine dining for a New York casualness that permits an occasional smile and even some light conversation with guests. The restaurant's playful approach caught the attention of the San Pellegrino judges in 2010, but, because Humm and Guidara barely made the list, they surmised that Eleven Madison Park was still too much in the mold of conventional fine dining. Restaurants that rank highest tend to reshape the way people think about cooking: El Bulli, in Spain, held the top slot from 2006 through 2009 with Ferran Adrià's chemistry-set experimentation (frozen "air of Parmesan" with muesli) but was displaced, as fashions changed, by Noma, in Copenhagen, which has a near-Druidical emphasis on foraged ingredients (crispy deer lichen dusted with mushrooms on a bed of moss). Although the San Pellegrino awards do not have the mystique of Michelin stars, their comparative rankings give them marketing power. René Redzepi, the chef and co-owner of Noma, has said that before his restaurant was named the world's best there were days when he had only fourteen customers; after the announcement he had twelve hundred on his waiting list.

For guidance, Humm and Guidara looked to the restaurant's first review after Humm took over, in 2006: the New York *Observer's* critic Moira Hodgson had

*Will Guidara and Daniel Humm in the kitchen at Eleven Madison Park.*

called Humm “a star,” but said that the dining room felt stodgy and needed a “bit of Miles Davis.” “We had no idea what that meant,” Guidara says, laughing, “but we started to listen to a lot of Miles and read about him.” They made lists of words to define Davis’s music—“cool,” “collaborative,” “fresh,” “vibrant,” “spontaneous”—and hung them, along with a photograph of the musician, in the restaurant’s kitchen. They also looked for inspiration in other restaurants—some at the furthest remove from fine dining, like Rao’s, a red-sauce joint in Harlem, frequented by mobsters and celebrities, where reservations are impossible to get (tables are “owned” by regulars) and there are no menus. “It’s not like going to a restaurant,” Guidara says. “I felt like I was at my grandmother’s house.”

Today, when you step through Eleven Madison Park’s revolving door, you see not a maître d’ behind a lectern but a greeter, who shakes your hand as if welcoming you into his home. The casualness is illusory. In his left hand he palms a list of reservations, and he has spent the hours before service Googling names and studying Facebook photographs. He says your name in a voice loud enough to be heard by the maître d’, who is standing out of sight behind a pilaster. Using a computerized map of the dining room, with the tables color-coded to indicate their stage of readiness, the maître d’ decides where to seat you. Meanwhile, he signals to the greeter: a hand across the waist means “The table isn’t ready—send them to the bar”; gripping the wrist with the opposite hand means “I need a minute; stall them.”

With Rao’s in mind, Humm and Guidara thought about abolishing menus, but rejected the idea as impractical. Instead, they replaced the traditional leather-bound board with an eight-inch-square white card, printed with the names of sixteen ingredients that change with the seasons—“trout,” “almond,” “asparagus,” “foie gras”—in a four-by-four grid. (Prices were tucked away demurely at the bottom, without dollar signs: four courses, 74; tasting menu, 195.) Diners are instructed to pick one ingredient from each row, and the courses are built around those choices.

Humm and Guidara also broke down the traditional divide between dining room and kitchen; sous-chefs bring out dishes they have made, and diners are in-

vited into the kitchen, to stand in an alcove overlooking the bustling “pass,” where cooks tweeze the final touches onto plates. A server prepares them an applejack cocktail, frozen with a blast of nitrogen, and, at the end of the meal, brings them to the front lounge for free cognac. At departure, they are given a jar of granaola and a handwritten check.

Open Table, the online reservation system, conducts a customer poll that rates the food, service, and ambience of restaurants. Two months after Eleven Madison Park introduced these changes, in September, 2010, it was first in the city in every category, and, at the next year’s San Pellegrino ceremony, it moved from last place to No. 24. This year, Humm and Guidara learned, on their trip to London, that the restaurant had jumped fourteen slots, to No. 10.

“Every once in a while, in New York, there are restaurants that come along and create an evolution in the dining scene,” Joe Bastianich, Mario Batali’s business partner in a number of fine-dining ventures, told me. “Babbo was that fourteen years ago, and Gramercy Tavern before that. There are these benchmark restaurants that change the way people eat.” For the moment, Eleven Madison Park is that restaurant. It is booked twenty-eight days in advance, with a waiting list of a hundred and fifty people a night—a rare circumstance when many formerly successful places are closing.

But awards, honors, and even full bookings are no guarantee of success. In all restaurants—from fast food to haute cuisine—profit margins are thin and expenses and overhead high; the restaurateurs who survive are those who ruthlessly cut costs and eliminate waste. As Bastianich put it in his recent book, “Restaurant Man,” “You have to appear to be generous, but you have to be inherently a cheap fuck to make it work.” He tells how his restaurateur father saved on laundry bills by using chalk to hide sauce stains on tablecloths. Grant Achatz, the chef-owner of Alinea, an avant-garde restaurant in Chicago, eliminated the tablecloths altogether, saving forty-two thousand dollars a year. “It comes down to a day-to-day penny-pinching that you wouldn’t necessarily expect from a restaurant that shows a certain level of opulence,” Julian Brizzi, the general manager and co-owner of Ru-

cola, a high-end Italian restaurant in Brooklyn, says. “I hold back on changing the menu more than once a week, because that’s fifteen dollars in paper, and printer ink is very expensive.”

The imperative to be both frugal and generous creates a paradoxical relationship between restaurants and the people who eat in them: the guest has the illusion of control, but the restaurant determines everything that happens—or it should. Indeed, each of the changes that Humm and Guidara introduced to Eleven Madison Park, in order to make the experience of eating there more dynamic, was also designed to limit overhead, maximize turnover, and lift profits. According to one of their financial advisers, these innovations especially impressed potential investors when Humm and Guidara were raising money to buy the restaurant, last fall. “The things they did!” the adviser told me. “Let’s not call them tricks—because the experience of eating there only got better. But they’re tricks because the profits are only getting better. That’s pretty cool, when you can pull off making me feel better as you take more money out of my damn wallet!”

The dining room at Eleven Madison Park looks like a train station in some enlightened European city: thirty-foot ceilings, terrazzo floors, Art Deco lamps, and tall casement windows that look onto the lawns of Madison Square Park. Designed in the nineteen-twenties, the building, near the southern end of Madison Avenue, was originally part of MetLife’s corporate headquarters. It was turned into a restaurant in 1998 by Danny Meyer, the C.E.O. of Union Square Hospitality Group, whose restaurants include Gramercy Tavern and the burger chain Shake Shack. Meyer’s original concept was a New York take on the unpretentious neighborhood brasserie. But, after years of serving French comfort food to middling critical success—the *Times* gave it two stars—he decided to upgrade. “In its DNA, that dining room really wanted to be grander than a brasserie,” he says. “That’s why I went looking for a young chef who could turn it into something more.”

After a five-month search, he found Humm, who was then the executive chef at Campton Place, in San Francisco, where he made unfussy but technically

complex dishes: terrine of foie gras formed around a reservoir of aged maple syrup, a deboned suckling pig compressed and crisped in duck fat. "He was cooking with this just incredibly advanced technique and imagination, but not at the sacrifice of flavor or soul," Meyer told me. Humm also had thorough training in the rigors of running a business. Brought up in a small town near Zurich by an architect father and a homemaker mother, he took his first job at the age of eight in a farmers' market where his mother shopped; at fourteen, he left school to apprentice as a chef. For a decade, he worked at three-Michelin-star establishments in Switzerland, including Le Pont de Brent, in Montreux, under the chef-owner Gérard Rabacy, a perfectionist who rooted through the garbage to check for discarded food. At the end of each week, Humm and the other cooks cleaned the kitchen until three in the morning, standing on ladders to swab the corners of the ceilings with Q-tips. Rabacy would reward them with half a glass of cola. "Half a glass," Humm says, laughing. "And not real Coke! Cheap cola. It was insane. But in a way I loved it. It taught me so much about running a kitchen."

After three years, Humm, exhausted, took a job as executive chef at a Swiss mountain inn, Gasthaus zum Gupf, where he became the youngest chef in the country's history to earn a Michelin star. Hired by Campton Place in 2003, he quickly made it a critical success and packed the place every night. Meyer hoped that he would do the same for Eleven Madison Park.

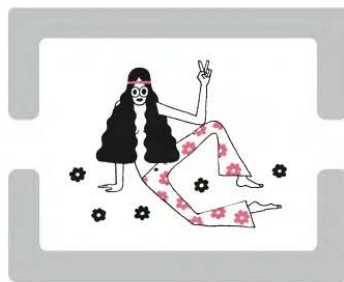
But when Humm started there, in January, 2006, he had a problem with the dining room. The general manager, who hires service staff and sets the aesthetic—décor, plateware, stemware, menu design—was a veteran from Charlie Trotter's, in Chicago, and Humm felt that the room lacked verve and excitement. He complained to Meyer, who asked if there was anyone better in Union Square Hospitality Group. Humm named Guidara, whom he had seen at company conclaves.

Guidara, who was then running Meyer's two cafés at the Museum of Modern Art, was only twenty-six, but he had grown up in the business. Reared in Tarrytown, New York, the son of a successful restaurant executive, he attended the Cornell Hospitality School and a hotel school

in Spain. His restaurants at MOMA were elegant but unceremonious, serving panini and ice cream on bare tables, and he was leery when asked to take over at Eleven Madison Park. "Everything about fine dining, as I understood it, was stuffy, it was rigid, and it was not fun at all," Guidara told me. But he agreed to take the job after meeting with Humm, who was then twenty-nine. "I realized he's young like me, he's a fun dude, and, yeah, he's excellence-minded, but we began to talk about how we could build a four-star restaurant that's not rigid or stuffy."

Humm was trained in the high-church tradition of European dining—tableside carving, uniformed waiters, serving from the left—and he was startled when Guidara wanted to abolish some of the more abstruse rituals. They recall fighting until three in the morning over Guidara's insistence on using only one spoon, instead of the traditional two, to drop a bolus of sorbet into a soufflé. Over time, they devised a restaurant that observed the formality that high-end diners expect but that also acknowledged the growing appeal of places like David Chang's Momofuku Ssäm, which serves thoughtful food in the ambience of a burrito joint.

In January, 2007, six months after Humm and Guidara started working together, Frank Bruni, then the *Times*' restaurant critic, raised Eleven Madison



Park's rating to three stars. Emboldened, they approached Meyer about spending the money necessary to win a fourth star. They wanted to remove some of the leather banquettes and rectangular tables, which impeded the servers, and bring in comfortable chairs for guests who were spending hours eating Humm's twelve-course tasting. They needed new service uniforms, better china and glasses, and various pieces of expensive kitchen equipment, including a Pacojet for frozen pu-

rées and a Hold-o-mat slow-cooking oven. They also wanted to reduce the number of seats, to alleviate pressure on the kitchen. Humm explained, "On this level, there is a limit for a chef of how many plates you can let go through your hands and make sure they're perfect."

Meyer was uncertain. The overhaul would cost hundreds of thousands of dollars, and fewer tables meant lost revenue—at least, until the restaurant attracted enough diners to raise prices. "It's a high-risk game," he told me. But, after mulling the proposal for two weeks, he said yes. In September, 2008, after the renovation was done, Eleven Madison Park hosted a thousand-dollar-a-head benefit for an anti-hunger organization. Late that night, the news broke that Lehman Brothers had collapsed. "The world was changing before our eyes," Meyer says.

In the coming months, restaurants closed across the city, including landmarks like the Rainbow Room and the Michelin-starred restaurants Fiamma and Fleur de Sel. As the recession deepened, Eleven Madison Park was serving as few as twenty customers a night, while still employing thirty servers and Humm's full seventy-five-person brigade de cuisine. "In 2008, I don't think we made a dollar," Humm said. Guidara added, "Then 2009 came, and we were losing money."

They made efficiencies where they could. They instructed cooks to cut paper towels in half, and to trade in their disposable white paper chef toques (which cost twelve thousand dollars a year) for cotton dishwasher caps that could be laundered and reused. They reduced the amount of soap for washing dishes, and enforced strict departure times for chefs to eliminate costly overtime. Although Humm still offered filet mignon, he also introduced, for the twenty-eight-dollar lunch special, less expensive proteins, like chicken and skate. Still, by the summer of 2009 they had emptied their bank account and were within weeks of having to downscale.

But, since January, Bruni had been spotted several times in the restaurant, and Humm and Guidara were convinced that a four-star review could bring back the crowds. On days when they ascertained that Bruni was coming, they called up friends to pack the restaurant. "You're not going to get a four-star review if you're

struggling,” Humm says. Bruni told me that he was unaware of the restaurant’s troubles. “Eleven Madison Park just oozed from every one of its pores the fact that it was a place where a number of extraordinarily young and talented people were determined to make their mark,” he says. “There was a crackle of excitement to being there that you didn’t feel at a Le Bernardin or a Jean Georges—magnificent as those restaurants are.” In August, 2009, his review, under the headline “A DARING RISE TO THE TOP,” awarded the restaurant four stars. “We’ve been fully reserved every single day since,” Guidara says.

Humm and Guidara say that they were inspired by Miles Davis’s willingness to reinvent himself—abandoning the minimalism of “Kind of Blue,” one of the most popular jazz recordings ever made, for the electric experimentation of “Bitches Brew.” A few months after earning the *Times*’ highest rating, they decided to recast the restaurant again. Spurred by their last-place ranking on the San Pellegrino list, they wanted to make it livelier—but after the deep losses of the crash and the expense of the previous renovation, it also had to be more cost-efficient. “We couldn’t be reckless,” Guidara says. “We needed to do it in such a way where we could continue making money.” Humm added, “Everything was: How can we streamline?”

The grid menu helped, by overcoming challenges that traditional menus pose for chefs. If, for instance, a restaurant serves snapper, Dover sole, and sea bass, it is obliged to buy those three fish every day, regardless of their quality and their price. Fish that go unordered have to be thrown out—and spoiled food is a significant cost for kitchens. Diners are also unpredictable. “With à la carte it can be all over the place,” Humm says. “One person can order three appetizers, or one appetizer and an entrée, or an entrée and a dessert”—which makes it difficult to plan how much food to buy and to project revenues. Humm described the grid menu as “a balance between control and surprise.” By paring down to just sixteen items, which can change each day, he eliminated much of the waste; because the kitchen typically offers a single fish, Humm can buy the best one, and just enough of it. “Less ingredients in-house, less waste,” he says.

The kitchen tour and lounge visit, de-

## NEIGHBORHOOD WATCH

A weather of sweaters mostly moth-woven,  
tea made from tires you find as rags on the road,  
toast you’d rub on your skin and draw blood.

What’s outside the door could be your third boy.  
Just a bird? Not so heavy-winged it drops stones  
on the roof. A parked car won’t open for you

until you scratch a word into its window grit:  
Want, of course, a planet telescopically  
positioned on On. You hobble off,

your cheek withering for kisses. Take the iPad  
with its easy interface. Our face, you say,  
staring at its black. Boot it up.

—Terese Svoboda

ployed late in the meal, also solved a problem that bedevils every restaurateur: how to get people up from the table so that the next customers can be seated, a feat known as “the turn.” Fast-food places, which must turn every few minutes, use bright primary colors and loud, fast music to encourage people to eat faster. In fine dining, the turn is enacted differently, but it’s no less important. For Eleven Madison Park, which now reduced its seats to eighty-eight, an extra half-turn—forty-four seatings—would bring in thousands of dollars more each night. Daniel, a three-Michelin-star restaurant on the Upper East Side run by Daniel Boulud, monitors patrons with discreet cameras in the dining room. Before a fork is lowered after a course, cooks watching from the kitchen can insure that the next dish is ready, shaving vital minutes off the meal.

Humm and Guidara rejected the idea of using cameras; it would be too difficult in their cavernous dining room. The kitchen tour and lounge visit was their solution. Indeed, everything about the refurbished restaurant—from the greeter to the lack of dollar signs on the menu, the elimination of supplemental charges for expensive items like foie gras, and the handwritten bill—was meant to elide what Guidara calls the “business-transactional” nature of the visit, to draw customers’ attention away from the fact that they were disbursing enough money to buy a week’s groceries for a family of five.

The city’s high-end restaurants can be outlandishly expensive. At Per Se, Thomas Keller’s restaurant in the Time Warner Center, a full tasting menu for two, with wine pairings, costs a thousand dollars. A similar dinner at Eleven Madison Park, at about nine hundred dollars, is not much less. Ryan Sutton, a restaurant critic who monitors restaurant prices on his blog the Price Hike, points out, “Eleven Madison Park has a higher starting price point”—the least expensive prix-fixe option—“than Jean Georges, Corton, The Modern, Del Posto.” But, in the *Times*, Bruni described it as a cheaper alternative to other fine dining places, and, Sutton points out, this perception has stuck. “That really is the trick of fine dining—or any luxury business,” he says. “How can you convince customers to spend eight hundred and seventy-six dollars on a wine-paired tasting menu and make them feel like they got a value?”

Humm and Guidara admit that the refinements they introduced in 2010 contributed significantly to the restaurant’s bottom line, but are adamant that their priority was creating the best experience for customers. “We understand that, without making money, we can’t stay open,” Humm told me. “That’s why we are really driven to make money. It’s going to end if you don’t.”

“But if you ever make a decision first and foremost to make money, it will end as well,” Guidara added. “Every decision needs to start with it making you better.

And then you have to ask yourself, 'Is this also a good financial decision?'

Humm and Guidara's company, Made Nice, is a private corporation, and they decline to say how much money Eleven Madison Park makes. But some rough calculations are possible. About a hundred and twenty-five people dine there each night, and an average check is about two hundred and twenty-five dollars per person; at lunch, sixty people spend about a hundred and twenty-five dollars apiece. This includes wine and liquor, a significant part of the check. The wine director, Dustin Wilson, says that he routinely sells bottles with a four-figure price, and alcohol is marked up between a hundred and three hundred per cent; on a four-thousand-dollar bottle, the restaurant makes twenty-four hundred dollars in the time it takes a sommelier to remove a cork.

These figures suggest annual revenues of about eleven million dollars, out of which the restaurant must pay for food and labor, rent, service on debt, and miscellaneous costs—from flower arrangements and publicity to menus, linen service, and those free jars of granola. Bastianich has said that profit margins at fine-dining restaurants in New York are between ten and twenty per cent. Assuming a return of ten per cent, to account for the bad economy and the spiking costs of food and labor, Eleven Madison Park makes about \$1.1 million a year on its main dining room. The upstairs private dining room, however, is booked almost every day, and has far higher profit margins; it charges more, serves a limited menu, and uses only three chefs. With this extra source of income, the restaurant may clear about \$1.3 million a year after taxes—at a time when most fine-dining restaurants are struggling.

Jimmy Bradley, who runs the Red Cat and the Harrison, in downtown Manhattan, told me that every successful restaurateur receives offers to expand. "It's paid for," Bradley says. "Why say no? Well, I can give you ten reasons to say no. It's the same thing when your wife says, 'Let's have another child.'" When a restaurateur begins to lose control, Bradley says, "something's going to break."

Since 2009, Humm and Guidara have been invited to open branches of Eleven Madison Park in London, Tokyo, and scores of other cities—sometimes with

seven-figure bonuses attached. "That's what happens when you become a brand," Guidara told me. They declined, believing that far-flung outposts would be distracting. But in the summer of 2010 a development firm called GFI Capital Resources approached them about opening a restaurant in a new hotel at Broadway and Twenty-eighth Street—six minutes' walk from Eleven Madison Park. GFI, which was calling the hotel the NoMad (after the real-estate neologism for the neighborhood "north of Madison Square Park"), offered a partnership deal in which Humm and Guidara would share profits but not invest any money. "It was too good to pass up," Guidara says.

They signed in the fall of 2010. Meyer, though he says he admires their entrepreneurial drive, told them that he could not sanction a competing restaurant so close by. According to Humm, Meyer said, "The only way it can work is that either you leave Eleven Madison Park and do the NoMad or you buy Eleven Madison Park." Meyer set a price, which both parties say was "in the millions." With the help of an Eleven Madison Park regular who is a successful banker, Humm and Guidara found an investor: Noam Gottesman, a billionaire former Goldman Sachs banker who created his own hedge fund. Asked why he had invested in a business with famously high risks and relatively low yields, Gottesman said that he was impressed with Humm and Guidara and their staff: "It's just a quest for excellence

that I believe—regardless of whether this was a high-margin or low-margin business as a whole—could work out to be a good investment."

The NoMad, housed in a suite of large, dark rooms off the lobby of the hotel, is five distinct dining spaces: a glass-ceilinged atrium, a cocktail bar, a book-lined library, and a "parlor" with gilt-trimmed chairs and velvet draperies, as well as a rooftop patio. Food is served from a conventional menu, and the crowd is heavy on Wall Streeters impressing their dates. In décor, the NoMad could not be further from Eleven Madison Park's airy classicism; the dark-leather walls, by the French architect Jacques Garcia, evoke a late night at the Hellfire Club.

By mid-May, six weeks after the NoMad's launch, the strain of running two restaurants had become apparent. One afternoon, I joined Humm as he conducted a pre-dinner-service inspection in Eleven Madison Park's vast white-tiled kitchen. Humm had transferred his former chef de cuisine and top sous-chefs to the NoMad, and he knew few of the line cooks who had taken over at the flagship. He is ordinarily unflappable, but he became increasingly annoyed as he began to discover problems: a cook at the cold-appetizer station had stored some sweet Maine shrimp improperly, and it had to be thrown out. At the fish station, seconds before service began, another cook was simultaneously boiling a large pot on the stove and cleaning lobsters



*"Why the hell would you want a bison on your arm?"*

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in a sink, while dirty paper towels littered the counter. "It's a disaster!" Humm cried. To his chef de cuisine, he shouted, "Why is he cooking like a pig here? The line is breaking down!"

In late May, in the NoMad's first major review, *New York's* critic Adam Platt took Humm and Guidara to task for trying to "monetize" their success. The review said that the prices were too high (hyped as a less expensive version of Eleven Madison Park, the restaurant offered a carrot dish for twenty dollars), and gave the NoMad only two stars out of five. Neither Humm nor Guidara had ever had a negative review. "Our confidence definitely got shaken up a little bit," Humm said.

A few days later, Humm met with his sous-chefs in the NoMad's cramped basement office. Sitting on chairs and on the floor, the six cooks looked glum. "We know we're better," Humm said. "But the best way to fight against it is to just be quiet, put your head down, and work hard." He handed out copies of the NoMad's profit-and-loss statement for the first month of operation, and announced, "What is really exciting is that we are twenty-eight per cent over what we had budgeted" for gross revenue. The restaurant, after its well-publicized opening, was packed every night. But there was a problem with costs. Food, Humm pointed out, was about eighty thousand dollars more than projected. "Which is a lot of money, but—"

"A hundred and ten," Abram Bissell, the NoMad's chef de cuisine, interrupted. "Is it that much?" Humm asked, wrinkling his brow. "So, um, we have a long way to go to become profitable." He looked again at the sheet and saw that losses for the month were in the six figures. According to the rule that every new restaurateur learns, the combined costs of food and labor must not exceed seventy per cent of expenses; ideally, food should be thirty. At the NoMad, food was more than thirty-five per cent, and labor costs were a whopping fifty, reflecting the overtime necessary to handle the hotel's three crowded dining rooms and two bars.

"You're going to see these numbers every month," Humm told his sous-chefs, "and I'm sure there's going to be a point where we're going to say, 'Stop fucking around.' You lose money every month, eventually there's no restaurant, right? So we've got to figure out that line." He added, "It is so important that we, as

chefs, understand how to manage in a way that we are not losing money. Because otherwise there is no point."

Over the next six weeks, Humm and Guidara brought down costs at the NoMad, and in late June the *Times* gave the restaurant three stars, calling it "novel and wonderful." The next month, it eked out a four-figure profit, as President Obama held a forty-thousand-dollar-a-plate fund-raiser there. Guidara, feeling confident, told me, "The NoMad will be real profitable."

Yet, at Eleven Madison Park, the novelty of the changes was starting to wear off. At a meeting of top managers, in May, Guidara learned that a problem had arisen with the end-of-meal kitchen visits: "We're seeing a different crowd of people coming through," the assistant general manager, Daniel Green, said. "They are very much: 'We waited twenty-eight days for this, we're going to sit, we're going to linger, we're going to take our time. You taking me into the kitchen and then asking me to leave is a clear sign that you want me to leave.'"

Guidara, startled, suggested that cutting back on reservations might alleviate the pressure to turn tables. "But," he added, "I firmly believe that going into the lounge at the end of the meal is the superlative way to experience the restaurant. And it makes me concerned that somehow we're not doing it right."

Green insisted that no matter how assiduously he tried to "sell the idea that this is a special, or a new, or different, or unique, or fun experience, people can tell that it's to get them up from their table."

"They feel like they've lost control over their evening," Steven Kelly, the dining-room manager, said.

In August, Humm and Guidara announced a new wave of changes at Eleven Madison Park, which would take effect after Labor Day. They had begun planning to transform the restaurant eight months earlier, hoping to rise still higher on the San Pellegrino list. "Two years ago, when we made the big change, it really put us on the map," Humm told me. "We wanted to make another effort in evolving and moving up a little further." Neither Humm nor Guidara will say that they are aiming to knock Noma from its perch at No. 1, but their former boss, Danny Meyer, told me, "The ranking is very, very

important to them. They were justifiably proud to be No. 10, and there's nowhere else to go but No. 1. They are trying to figure out what tactic it might take."

The San Pellegrino list rewards restaurants with a strong sense of place, and of theatre. Accordingly, Humm and Guidara are shaping Eleven Madison Park around a New York theme. They are replacing the waiters' pale-green shirts and mossy vests with uniforms made by a local designer, Bespoken Clothiers: gray two-button suits, white shirts, and dark ties. For the Limoges china, they are substituting plates produced by a Brooklyn-based potter. The wine-list covers, the cocktail menus, and the bar coasters will be produced by Ghurka, a luxury-goods outfit based in New York and Connecticut.

Humm has always paid homage to the city with his dishes—black-and-white cookies, a Long Island-style clambake—but now he will provide more items that are made entirely from indigenous foods, including a course of local cheese and beer, served in a wicker basket meant to evoke picnics in Central Park. Servers will describe the origins of each course, complete with historical dates, names, and facts.

The changes, when announced, provoked a wave of commentary online. Some critics praised Humm and Guidara's boldness in changing a winning formula. Others called the New York theme gimmicky and predicted that it would alienate regulars; Meyer agreed, telling the *Times*, "There does come a point when you just can't see that play another time." But there was surprisingly little outcry over another big change, which Humm and Guidara slipped in behind the talk about the new theme: they are removing the lower-priced prix-fixe options in favor of an obligatory twelve-course tasting menu, for a hundred and ninety-five dollars. Dinners are expected to last as long as four hours, which severely limits the number of customers each night. "Maybe we'll turn, like, two tables," Guidara says. But with the higher minimum price the restaurant can still increase profits slightly. At the same time, Humm and Guidara have kept a close eye on costs: all of Ghurka's leather goods are being supplied free, in exchange for the company's name on the menus and coasters, and similar deals have been struck with other purveyors. Some of the proposed new dishes, too, seemed designed in tribute to outer-borough thrift: a carrot "tartare" ground table-

side, and Humm's riff on street ices, flavored with syrups of curry, lemon, and lime.

The most controversial addition is the card trick. "We wanted something that reflects that old, gritty New York, before the place got so cleaned up," Guidara told me. As a teen-ager in the late eighties, he was once relieved of sixty dollars by the three-card-monte players who plied midtown. Theory11, a magic company based in Las Vegas, designed a deck of cards with icons of ingredients: hazelnut, plum, espresso. The trick uses a simple manipulation to make diners select a card that matches the ingredient hidden inside a chocolate dessert. Guidara was enthusiastic—until online commentators began to criticize the card trick as a cheesy gimmick. "It has been pretty brutal," he said.

But he and Humm were determined to keep it. In the weeks before the new opening, Guidara was rehearsing the trick with his service team half an hour a day. One morning in mid-August, before Eleven Madison Park opened for lunch, Guidara sat in the dining room and watched closely as Natasha McIrvine, a service captain who wears her blond hair in a tight bun, ran through the trick. A week earlier, an emissary from Theory11 had come to the restaurant to give the servers a lesson in sleight of hand, and McIrvine had been practicing ever since, walking around with cards in her hands to sharpen her feel for them. She started the trick, hesitated slightly, and then forged on.

"Good," Guidara said, when she was finished. Then he pointed out that she had done part of the trick out of order. "That's when you got flustered."

He asked her to try again. She squared her shoulders and launched into the spiel that servers will deliver. Culled from research by Theory11 and Sandra DiCapua, the restaurant's Harvard-educated special-projects manager, the speech draws on the stories of grifters, scam artists, and profiteers in New York over the past two centuries. "In the summer of 1870," McIrvine said, "the *New York Times* ran a story that had just three words in the headline: 'Three Card Monte.' These card players cheated New Yorkers and tourists out of their money for years. It's illegal now, but we'd like to pay homage to those old scams with our own card trick."

She ran through the trick again, this time smoothly and confidently.

"Perfect," Guidara said. ♦

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