



# Restaurants & Bars

Critic's Rating ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

## Restaurant review

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## Bar Artisanal

**Chef Terrance Brennan grows his empire.**

**By Jay Cheshes**

268 West Broadway at Sixth Ave (212-925-1600). Subway: A, C, E, 1 to Canal St. Mon–Sat 11:45am–1am; Sun 11:30am–9pm. Average main course: \$16.



**Duck pizza with confit, foie gras, goat cheese and a duck egg**

Photograph: Jeff Gurwin

Veteran chef and perennial James Beard Award runner-up Terrance Brennan has thrived for years just shy of the spotlight. Building a brand around his obsession with cheese, Brennan has expanded cautiously, with just Picholine and Artisanal in his roster. His balance sheet must surely be sound, judging from the speed with which he snatched up his third restaurant space. Like a corporate turnaround artist, he's transformed dead-on-arrival Tribeca brasserie Trigo into a viable commodity. Just weeks after taking over the lease and tweaking the stunning venue, Brennan's budget-oriented Bar Artisanal made its debut.

Like Tom Valenti's successful West Branch, the menu keeps every diner in mind—a good thing, considering how many seats need filling. (It's a prototype, presumably, for a Seattle project Brennan's planning to open in the fall.) The enormous dining room is like an Art Nouveau hangar, with tarnished mirrors, birdcage chandeliers and 20-foot-high ceilings.

The menu, meanwhile, is nearly as vast, running the gamut with bistro standards like *moules frites* and an exceptional steak tartare, high-end junk food like burgers and pizza, and extravagant nibbles featuring luxury ingredients such as Wagyu beef and caviar. Cheese plays a big role here, as at Artisanal, with a full-service *fromage* counter, cheese and wine pairing flights and cocktails designed with cheese in mind.

The pizzas, all listed under the misleading heading *pissaladières*—which technically describes only the onion-and-anchovy tart that kicks off the list—share a light, crisp crust and oblong shape. The intriguing collection of French and Italian pies includes the earthy *tartiflette*, based on the Alpine potato dish, topped with sliced potatoes, chewy bacon and oozing *reblochon* cheese. The even more unusual *canard* pie is a duck-fat-slicked nod to the cooking of southwestern France, with dabs of foie gras, chopped gizzards, shredded leg-meat confit and sharp melted goat cheese. A fried duck egg takes the already decadent package over the top.

Though the menu lists a handful of hearty mains, the two dozen “*petits plats*” and “amuse-bouches” (Brennan takes linguistic liberties with a number of the French headings) indicate that shareable nibbles are what this place is about. The inspired Comté beignets are more like a generous bar snack than a classic amuse, the hunks of fried cheese presented like savory lollipops. The skate “*choucroute garni*,” a petit plat that’s generous enough to be a small entrée, packs Alsatian flavors like mustard and braised cabbage in between layers of buttery skate.

Despite the Francophone packaging, the menu—which has wide global reach—seems to be a collection of the chef’s favorite things. Wagyu beef is cooked on the *plancha*, sliced rare and served with pickled ramps. Octopus too has an Iberian bent, the meaty tentacles sprinkled with *pimentòn* and paired with nutty chickpeas. Sea urchin custard delivered in a deep glass bowl has a Japanese soul—and a spoonful of caviar on top. The monochrome tub—too intense, and too copious—was the lone misstep among the dishes I tried. Service, however, was close to flawless, with waiters and floor managers swooping in to offer wine advice, or clear a plate, with breezy assurance.

Desserts by pastry chef Revital Melech (of Oceana and Abboccato)—featherlight beignets with a raspberry shake, a pillowy parfait layering chocolate mousse and espresso ice—have a homey quality, and are as playful, indulgent and universally appealing as so much else on the menu. Which further explains why Bar Artisanal, unlike so many other new restaurants, seems destined to survive the recession—and may finally catapult Brennan into stardom.

## Cheat sheet

**Drink this:** The fine wine selection offers a vast array of portion options, from full and half glasses to carafes and bottles, allowing for some mix-and-match experimentation—veering, from, say, a full glass of Nigl grüner veltliner (\$13) to a half glass of Lorinon Reserva rioja (\$8).

**Eat this:** Duck pizza, Comté beignets, skate choucroute, octopus with chickpeas, chocolate mousse with coffee *granité*.

**Sit here:** There are no bad seats in the vast airy space, although the tables near the mottled picture windows offer a fine refracted view of the street.

**Conversation piece:** Terrance Brennan’s Artisanal restaurant spun off his Artisanal cheese business, which boasts a cave to rival the finest in France, and sells wholesale to top purveyors around the country.