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Travel: Delmonico's Reborn, and a Town Rediscovered

By Frederick E. Allen
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In the mid-nineteenth century Delmonico's, in New York City, was the most famous and probably best restaurant in America. It was the birthplace of chicken marengo, eggs benedict, lobster newberg, and, of course, Delmonico steak. In 1852, near the peak of its fame, it acquired a Swiss-born chef, Louis Fauchère. Around the same time, Louis Fauchère's family built a small summer hotel in Milford Pennsylvania, near where that state meets New Jersey and New York, and he became its chef. Sarah Bernhardt and Andrew Carnegie and August Belmont and Theodore Roosevelt dined at the place. It stayed in the family for generations and hung on until the 1970s. Now it has reopened, meticulously restored and brought up to date, and with a superb dining room that pays sophisticated homage to the kind of food Fauchère cooked.

The Hotel Fauchère, in New Milford, Pennsylvania.
(Chris Ramirez/The New York Times/Redux)

Sean Strub, who with his business partner Dick Snyder oversaw the Hotel Fauchère's rebirth, used to be a New Yorker. He discovered Milford in a real estate listing in The New York Times in 1996, saw the town, and fell in love with it. Years passed before he set foot inside the old Fauchère building, though. It had held offices after it closed and then stood empty, with a leaky roof and vinyl siding. "As soon as I walked through the front door, it had me," he says. "But a cute little town with a cute little hotel doesn't work anymore. That's why it had closed in the 1970s. I wanted to make it a combined hotel and restaurant, as it had once been, but we considered a lot of things—apartments, offices even. As it turned out, the business plan that made most sense was to do the hotel and restaurant, but very upscale."

So that's what they did. He and Snyder spent three years planning and getting permits, and construction took two years more. The hotel reopened last summer. It's in a three-story box-shaped Italianate clapboard building ringed by windows around all its three floors. Inside, workmen took down, labeled, and catalogued every piece of molding, and sent them off to be stripped and refinished to look as they had when Fauchère erected the present structure in 1880. The

handsome, thick original broad-plank chestnut floors in the dining room and reception area were refurbished, and the central marble hallway was repaired, with its tiles extended all the way to the back of the building. The surviving section of the walnut and mahogany banister along the main stairs was painstakingly fixed and, where necessary, replaced. The classic tongue-in-groove ceiling of the main hallway was also patched and refinished.

Upstairs where there were once 30 guest rooms there are now 16. That's because each has an oversize bathroom with a heated bluestone floor, heated towel racks, and a clawfoot tub, a built-in marble tub, or a two-person shower stall. The other amenities include Frette Italian linens, flat-screen TVs, and Kiehl's bath products. Andrew Carnegie and Sarah Bernhardt never had it so good.

The restoration has all been done with elegant and restrained taste, so the hotel feels classic and timeless rather than old (of course it never felt old in Fauchère's day either). The same goes for the menu. For a first course at dinner, in the Delmonico Room, I had frogs legs in an aioli (garlic mayonnaise) sauce and basil pesto. I hadn't seen frogs' legs on a menu for years; the choice was a tribute to Louis Fauchère and Delmonico's, the preparation a tribute to the hard-to-impress palate of today. They had a mild sweetness like freshwater fish, which I guess stands to reason, since they live in the same environment. I followed that with a delicate dry-spice-rubbed crown rack of lamb. My wife had a salad with blue cheese, spiced pecans, and pears, followed by a fine veal chop stuffed with goat cheese and herbs. For dessert we both had as good a crème brulée as we had ever tasted.

The Delmonico Room itself is warmly stately, with generous space between the tables. Its walls are decorated with vintage framed menus most of a century old from places like Maxim's in Paris and Maison Basque in London. The service is as stylish and classy as the food and the room.

We stayed two nights, and the second night we had dinner in the surprising space underneath the hotel. The basement is now Bar Louis, an utterly contemporary and urbane bar presided over by a three-by-five-foot blow-up of a 1978 photograph of Andy Warhol kissing John Lennon on the cheek. The bar menu is both adventurous and very affordable, and its pièce de résistance is the "sushi pizza." Make a crust that is actually a disk of tempura-battered and fried sushi rice; top it with raw tuna, flying fish roe, and spicy Japanese mayonnaise. It's fantastic.

What, beyond the Hotel Fauchère, might bring a person to Milford? It is full of historical wonders. It's also the northern gateway to the Delaware Water Gap. It's only 90 minutes from New York City, so its remaining so little-known and undiscovered is remarkable.

Start in the middle of town. Right at the main intersection, a couple of blocks from the Fauchère, stands a playful stone building with a steep hipped roof and side mansard roofs designed in 1863 by Calvert Vaux, the coauthor of New York City's Central Park. Originally it contained not only the post office downstairs but also studio space for Hudson River School painters above. Next door is Forest Hall, from 1904, which is the work of Hunt & Hunt, the successors to Richard Morris Hunt. It complements the Vaux building with a hipped roof, dormers, French doors, and a two-story oriel window on the corner, all in what experts call "French Normandy style." James Pinchot, a prominent resident, ordered it up as the summer home of the Yale forestry school, and it is one of the birthplaces of the American conservation movement. A soaring, theatrical wood-paneled auditorium runs its second-floor length. The room was designed to be the school's main lecture hall and now is home to one of Milford's many antiques dealers.

Pinchot made his money in wallpaper in New York City before moving to Milford; his son Gifford became the first head of the U.S. Forest Service, under Theodore Roosevelt. Grey Towers, the Pichots' home on the outskirts of town, is not to be missed. Completed in 1886, the work of Richard Morris Hunt, it's a Norman stone castle, with thick, cone-peaked cylindrical towers at the corners, lavender shutters, and orange awnings. I couldn't go inside when I visited, as it was closed for the winter, but I loved the broad, sloping tree-shaded grounds, now managed by the Forest Service, and especially the "dining pool," where family and guests ate meals under a canopy of wisteria and grape vines around the edge of a sort of raised goldfish pond.

A visitor described the experience in 1942: "The food was brought out by the butlers and placed on trays on thick balsa wood rafts. All the food

floated. There were several floating rafts on the water going from person to person with the food. One was filled with delicious slices of beef, beautifully garnished. Another raft had a tray filled with vegetables, peas, carrots, potatoes, asparagus, lima beans, tomatoes—exquisitely arranged in groups. Another was filled with cut-up fruit—orange sections, grapefruits, grapes, kumquats, pears, apples, cherries, with a center mound of whipped cream."

Milford has a local historical museum, the Columns, with a difference. The Columns was built in 1904 as the summer home of a businessman from Hoboken, New Jersey, and it houses the usual odds and ends of a local historical society—clothing on aging mannequins, a few farm implements, timeworn musical instruments—and one big surprise. Turn right after you enter, and you'll see an American flag stained with the blood of the dying Abraham Lincoln. The stage manager at Ford's theater was from Milford, and his daughter was an actress in Our American Cousin. When the President was shot the two took the bunting flag hung from his box and put part of it under his head as a cushion until he could be moved to a bed across the street. They kept it in the family until it was donated to the county historic society in 1928. I suppose it's as close to a Shroud of Turin as you could get in this secular country.

Walk a little way past the historical society and you may stumble, literally, on something even more extraordinary. When you first head down the few blocks from the Fauchère to the historical society, you pass a crumbling out-of-business hotel in two adjoining Victorian houses called the Tom Quick Inn. Continue beyond that and the Columns, make a left on Sarah Street, and look out for a clump of weeds in the middle of the road enclosing a low metal box and a little plaque that reads, "This is a gravesite and should be respected as such. This monument and its inscriptions reflect a dialog and mindset of the era in which it was first erected circa 1889, which was 94 years after the death of Tom Quick..." But there's no monument, and there are no inscriptions.

There's a centuries-long story behind the mess in the road. Tom Quick, the son of an early settler in the area, "saw his father killed by Indians, and then he devoted the rest of his life to killing Indians," as Sean Strub described it to me. "By the time he died he had killed 99 of them. He even killed babies: He said, 'Nits breed lice.' On his deathbed, he begged to have a hundredth Indian brought to him, so he could die with a nice round number killed."

Quick didn't get that final satisfaction, and after he died, around 1795, local Indians dug up his body and divided it among seven tribes of the upper Delaware. He subsequently was largely forgotten until the surge of patriotism and pioneer worship that attended the centennial of 1876, whereupon he became a folk hero.

The lieutenant governor, one of the founders of the Chicago Tribune, had a monument built, an eight-foot obelisk honoring the "Avenger of the Delaware," with a box at the base holding the few bits of Quick that the Indians hadn't taken. That's the box that's still there. "After World War II, a local guy opened the Tom Quick Inn," Strub says. "Kids here played Tom Quick and Indians instead of cowboys and Indians. Then seven or eight years ago, on the anniversary of Wounded Knee, the monument was vandalized. It was taken for repair to an ironworks that happens to be owned by a descendant of Quick. And it has stayed there. Nobody's been able to figure out what to do with it."

So the other hotel in town is named for a mass murderer. The Tom Quick Inn had "Condemned" signs on its doors when I visited in January, and it was about to be offered for sale at a sheriff's auction. Its fate is as uncertain as that of the Tom Quick monument. But what a joy that this town has gotten its truly great, historic hotel back. Milford, Pennsylvania, has been a treasure hidden in plain sight for the last century. It is overdue for rediscovery.

Rooms at the Hotel Fauchère start at $275 a night. For more information visit www.hotelfauchere.com or call (570) 409-1212. For information about the Columns Museum go to www.pikehistory.org; for Grey Towers, which is open from late May through October, see www.fs.fe.us/na/gt.

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