



Chef Grant Achatz in the Office NYC, a speakeasy-style venue that he opened in July

## IF HE CAN MAKE IT HERE

*A hero in Chicago. A neophyte in New York. Grant Achatz is going to crack the Big Apple with a pair of groundbreaking cocktail bars.*

by JOE HARPER

**G**rant Achatz is using tweezers to delicately prop a piece of lettuce on a pile of ice. He's squeezed into a small corner of the sprawling 35th-floor kitchen of New York's Mandarin Oriental hotel. There's movement all around, but nothing distracts the 43-year-old chef from his laserlike precision. And right now he needs focus, as he has just opened not one but two ambitious spaces in New York: an outpost of his Chicago restaurant and mixology bar the Aviary and the

adjoining Office, a speakeasy-style bar. Doing both in the span of a few months was a logistical nightmare. “How do you even drive a cement truck down Broadway?” he asks. “Back home, it’s very hands-on—we buy the construction workers cases of beer, they work on Sunday and get things done quickly. It’s just a whole different ball game here.”

In 2005, Achatz, with his business partner, Nick Kokonas, opened Alinea, a temple of molecular gastronomy in Chicago, and the rave reviews came pouring in. So did the reservations, which eventually prompted them to create a ticketing system for securing a table at the Michelin three-star restaurant. Alinea Group now uses it for all five of its restaurants in Chicago—from Next, which regularly introduces a new themed menu, to Roister, a more casual grill.

So why Manhattan, when you’re the king of Chicago? “New York is a beast. I mean, Alain Ducasse got run right out of town,” Achatz says, referring to the French chef’s widely panned NYC debut at the Essex House, which shuttered in 2007. “It’s unpredictable, so there’s always that fear of failure, but I think we consider that a good thing. You have to be scared.” Achatz grew up cooking at his parents’ diner in Michigan and studied at the Culinary Institute of America. He then worked the kitchens of iconic spots like Charlie Trotter’s in Chicago and the French Laundry in Napa Valley, California, and even did a brief stint at Spain’s El Bulli that changed his cooking forever.

“There is a bit of an ego thing to being in New York, because I think a lot of people looked at Alinea and said, ‘You’re just a big fish in a small pond,’” says Achatz, who talks slowly and deliberately. “I like the fact that we’re here. It’s Manhattan—why would you not want to be here?”

The Office NYC focuses on auction-worthy rare spirits—including the largest public collection of vintage Char-



From top: Achatz places a nasturtium leaf onto steak tartare; the vegetable crudités include a sweet pea bavarois for dipping; hidden behind the Aviary NYC is the Office NYC.



treuse—and classic cocktails like the Manhattan. The room, with its wood paneling and deep leather seats, nods to the speakeasies of yesteryear. If the Office looks to the past, though, its neighbor the Aviary is all about the future. Like its Chicago predecessor, the Aviary NYC is an experimental lab with unusual ingredients—served up in, say, theatrical Dale Chihuly-like glassware. Though the

Office mostly offers shared plates, like Achatz’s signature jamón ibérico served on a porcelain candlelit volcano, the Aviary’s menu is more extensive. For dinner, there are dishes like shrimp tempura and *nikkei*-style ceviche, and—unlike in the Chicago location—Achatz will serve breakfast and lunch. “What is the next avocado toast?” he asks, citing the brunch culture of Melbourne, Australia, and traditional Japanese breakfasts as inspiration. He thinks moving beyond American breakfast fare will cater to the clientele of New York, which is more international than Chicago’s. “Who’s to say we can’t have cold fish or tofu in the A.M.? I think we can.” When asked why he didn’t re-create Alinea in New York, Achatz explains that his flagship restaurant’s ever-changing menu makes it harder to control—especially for a hands-on chef like him.

Achatz and Kokonas plan to export the Aviary and the Office to cities such as Tokyo, London, and Las Vegas. But for now, New York comes first. “It’s the most competitive city in the world, right?” Achatz says. Fortunately, he’s got a network of local chef friends like David Chang, Alex Stupak, and even his former boss Thomas Keller, whose Per Se is on the fourth floor of the same building. In fact, Achatz had been borrowing Per Se’s pasta machines as construction finished up. “We have a lot of friends here,” he says. “We like the fact that we now have a really good excuse to hang out with them.” ♦