



A Relaxed Saga

This Relais & Chateaux 2 Michelin-starred restaurant in New York City does not make you feel intimidated, rather invites you to ease in and relish amazing food

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In the grand playground of gastronomy, where Michelin stars and celebrity chefs reign supreme, often the food and dining experience feels slightly pretentious. A fairly recent entrant to the upper echelons of the culinary world is *Saga*, NYC – in this Relais and Chateaux, 2 Michelin-star restaurant, the focus is on making the diner feel like he is at a friend's cosy dinner party not a vaunted restaurant making it a more relaxed and enjoyable experience.

Helmed by none other than Chef James Kent whose experience at Eleven Madison Park earned him generous applause including a spot on The World's 50 Best Restaurants, *Saga* focuses on the best ingredients, authentic recipes and warm hospitality. Go for the seasonal seven-course tasting menu to truly witness Chef Kent's magic as he manages to create some wonderful flavours, textures and unique pairings or on weekdays a quick shorter four-course version. But the amazing food aside, *Saga* is a multi-sensorial experience on many levels.

First of course is the location and there is the breathtaking view. New York rooftops are extensively exploited for their stunning views.

Iconic rooftop bars such as the famous Gansevoort Meatpacking featuring a 45-ft. heated outdoor pool and indoor-outdoor space where guests can enjoy unobstructed, 360° views of the Manhattan skyline and intimate omakase concept, Saishin, are perennial favourites as are observation decks with bars thrown in like Summit at One Vanderbilt.

There is something to be said about dining at the top and *Saga* exploits its vantage point to the fullest.

Perched on a landmark Art Deco skyscraper in the Big Apple's Financial District, *Saga* is a New York story that has to be experienced. The restaurant itself – spread over five floors with a 360° panoramic view, solarium and three large outdoor terraces – is unlike any other dining space in New York.

Two floors are reserved for private suites, with earthy shades of velvet, gleaming marble tables, and sculpted stone that sets the tone for a warm, inviting atmosphere. The main dining room on the 63rd floor has vast windowscapes offering a wraparound view of the skyline. The décor sets the tone for an intimate meal rather than a slick fine-dining institution.

The 56-seat dining room has a warm, eclectic feel – like the *garçonnière* of a bon vivant who's accumulated dissimilar pieces over years of travel abroad – with a mix of contrasting materials including green marble, hand-lacquered furnishings, woven cane, velvet, travertine, brass and bronze.

As we enter on the 63rd floor, from a dedicated elevator, directly into the restaurant, the feeling is similar to entering a full-floor apartment in Tribeca. Originally a triplex penthouse apartment for an oil tycoon we are welcomed by a small lounge backed by a luminous stone and bronze bar, the entirety of the space is only partially visible through architectural screens.

Greeted by a welcome cocktail at the bar, every diner at *Saga* starts their meal with a seasonal spritz. The two cocktails that we enjoyed fall into that category. Sorrel – a melange of spirits from sherry to tequila infused with vanilla, ginger, green apple and tarragon. The Chamomile, cleverly spiked with quince, honey, chamomile and Calvados.

The idea is to welcome diners with a drink, as if they were being greeted at a friend's home. For the welcome drinks, *Saga* presents bright, fresh, seasonal ingredients in a low-ABV format. Every season, four rotating spritzes are on offer that lead with flavours rather than spirits.

In general, the cocktail offering at *Saga* is meant to match the level of quality in ingredients that the culinary team uses in the kitchen. That involves using spirits that aren't often used in cocktails. That doesn't mean all of the spirits are incredibly expensive; rather, they're usually small-batch products that can't be used at higher volume cocktail bars. "We take classic, recognisable cocktails and execute them with the best possible ingredients. We want to offer the ultimate expression of a Manhattan while diners are overlooking Manhattan," suggests a member of the team.

Menus are eliminated here – as courses appear in quiet succession just like at the home of a friend. The aim is to eliminate the standard – come into the restaurant, look at the menu, start the meal in 20 minutes format.

Guests are ushered onto the terrace to enjoy unfettered, sweeping views of the city including the glittering lights of the Brooklyn Bridge before the dinner begins with these refreshing drinks in tow.

As it's a seasonal menu, items change depending on seasons and availability of ingredients. The seven-course menu or the shorter four-course version is just as enticing. The menu at *Saga* is rooted in European technique but draws inspiration from Chef's travels and the diverse cuisine in NYC. Renata Ameni, former executive pastry chef at Manresa, leads the pastry kitchen. To encourage dining companions to share food and commune, certain courses are served communally; others plated individually. Specific courses and menu additions – including Moroccan tea service at the end of a meal – are served on the terrace or at a glass-enclosed chef's table in the kitchen.

Chef has a generous hand and lovers of uber luxury ingredients like royal Sturgeon caviar and oysters will be handsomely rewarded. But he is just as capable in including less-pricey ingredients, but treating them just as lavishly, which is the hallmark of a great chef – elevating everyday ingredients into an art form. The summer vegetables were delicately balanced with Feta and caramelised onions.

The Two-week Dry-aged Duck was my out and out favourite with its Moroccan influenced flavour and chilli honey glaze. Dishes like King Asparagus with Green Almonds and Mole; Ribeye and Sunchoke Tagine and Porcini Custard with fine-dining mainstays, foie gras and black truffle are outstanding options.

A delicate burst of sweetness with the Chamomile Bavaoise and Peach-Chilli Sorbet accompanied by brown butter ice-cream seals the deal, and is the perfect end to this gastro-architectural adventure at the top of NYC.

Note: At the time of going to press we heard of the tragic demise of Chef James Kent. It was announced that Chef Charlie Mitchell would assume the role of executive chef.



Fava Bean Hummus



Strawberry, Champagne, Elderflower



Morel, White Asparagus, Foie Gras



Snow Pea Salad, Garlic Yogurt



The late Chef James Kent



Candy Shop



Two week Dry aged Duck Breast and Confit Duck Leg



Roasted Monkfish, Mussels, Green Laksa, Spring Greens