

PRUNE

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It was a balmy Saturday evening when my daughter and I went to Prune—it was to be her last dinner in NY before we left for Providence the next day, and she was just as excited as I was. At this point she had read, at my urging, Gabrielle Hamilton's superb memoir, and had heard from her friends that her former schoolmate from Jakarta International School, a sprightly, talented young actor who went on to study at Columbia, had spied Jake Gyllenhaal there. My daughter had decided, and quite rightly, that Prune must be the world's best restaurant.

The tiny, pink-hued, much loved neighborhood restaurant was surprisingly only three-quarters full at 8 p.m., making it even more homey, less cheek-by-jowl. We were seated at the second table closest to the patio and to my left was a party of four, each ordering different starters and mains—always a pleasure to watch. To my right sat two middle-aged women, splendidly bedecked as though gearing up to paint the town red, and blissfully sated.

What is wonderful about Prune, aside from its unfussy, self-assured and satisfying comfort food, is the fact that you always end up making friends here, with the people sitting at the table next to you, with the waitstaff, with Gabrielle herself if you're lucky. And so it was that the minute we sat down, one of the ladies to my right told us not to leave without having the granita for dessert. 'It's mind blowing!' she said. When we politely nodded, saying we wouldn't dream of missing it, she launched into a ten minute-disquisition on her dinner, leaving no flurry of flavor or torrent of texture unexamined. And then it was her friend's turn to give us the full account of her dinner, if account was the word—more like an avalanche.

By this time, it was clear to us that Jake Gyllenhaal was unlikely to swan in any time soon. But we were already enjoying ourselves immensely. After the two ladies left and were replaced by a young couple celebrating their first anniversary, and were as such emphatically indisposed to sharing with complete strangers, we almost felt sorry for ourselves.

As if to compensate for the double loss, my daughter ordered as if she were on fire—fried sweetbreads with brown butter and capers to start, and Scottadini lamb chops with rosemary to follow. Feeling, after a week of obsessive eating, my chest pressing on my stomach, I opted for moderation: the head-on scampi with anchovy butter, please, and what are the fish dishes tonight? Branzino? O.K. Is it grilled? Yes. O.K., give me the branzino. What does it come with? Fennel oil and gras eel. *Gras ee!*? O.K. Fabulous. Oh. And we need more greens. Can you throw in the soft lettuces and herb salad as a side? Super.

The couple was sweet. We watched without appearing to watch. It had been the guy's idea, the dinner reservation, the celebratory champagne, the extra-woozy

wine. The girl swooned. Her diamond solitaire glowed happily along. We were all sooo happy for them.

The guy tending our table was super-friendly. We talked about wine and about Gabrielle's book in between his mad dash in and out of the kitchen. The wines by the glass were good. Gabrielle's book is the best. But wait.

The food—where did it go wrong? *Something* was wrong. My scampi was pleasant-tasting if thoroughly unremarkable, and even if there was nothing wrong with my branzino (well-cooked, well-seasoned), it somehow lacked... *soul*.

My daughter, on the other hand, was having a spectacular time, Jake or no Jake. She had ordered well, and that was great, because it had become a sort of a running competition between us, who got to order the better dishes. In any case, since our first NYC dinner at Babbo, she had taken to sweetbreads like it was the only food on the planet truly worth her while that I somehow chose, shockingly, not to introduce her to.

Here, the sweetbreads were softly yielding and expertly breaded, the brown butter predictably delicious, but, again, something was off—there simply wasn't enough of the latter!

My daughter seemed to agree, judging from the way she was scraping for the last licks of sauce barely three-quarters into her meal. But I sensed that she didn't want to concede the point. Her lamb chop however was very fine, and I said so. She smiled a mile wide.

In the end, we didn't have the granita, God save our souls, but we still felt like lingering. I succumbed to a glass of sweet wine, my daughter to something creamy and chocolatey—even if she isn't a chocolate person—and tried to forget that her life, and mine, were about to change forever the minute we boarded that Amtrak train to Providence the following day.

After all, it was 9.30 p.m. on a Saturday evening, and we were at Prune, feeling like we belonged, and there was a lovely, lightly worn luster about the place that struck me as true and fit. Surely that meant something, if not everything, in the greater scheme of things.



Photo taken from the internet