

On the brink
of nirvana:
eggs Benedict
at Herbie's

IN SEARCH OF THE Perfect Eggs Benedict

BY KATIE O'CONNOR

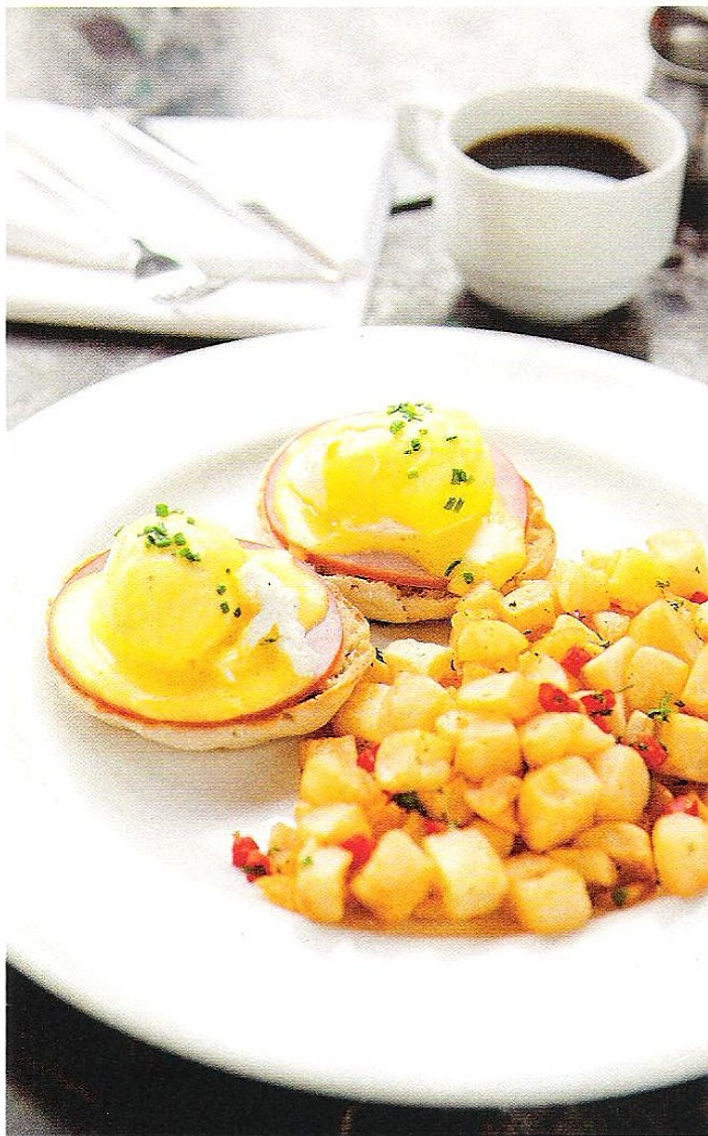
I'm often asked which is my favorite restaurant, and I'm often hard-pressed to answer. The truth is, it depends—on mood, occasion, craving. What do I like to cook? Again, it depends. Favorite dish? Ah, that one I can answer: eggs Benedict, the classic and delectable combination of English muffin, ham or Canadian bacon, poached eggs, and hollandaise sauce.

I blame my mother, who not only introduced me to the dish long ago, but also makes the best version in town, hands down. Her secret, besides perfectly poached eggs, is extra lemon juice in the hollandaise, brightening the buttery, smooth sauce with a lovely light tang.

I make a pretty mean Benedict myself (based on Mom's recipe, of course), but I'm just as happy to go out for brunch on Sunday mornings, in my unofficial quest to find a restaurant version as good as Mom's.

The search has brought its highs and lows. I learned early on to avoid Benedicts on a buffet line; there's simply no way to preserve a runny yolk and silky sauce in a chafing dish, no matter how great the chef. I also learned never to order the dish in a place best known for its slingers (the notable exception being City Diner); I suspect the glue-like stuff most of these spots pass off as hollandaise is gravy tinted with yellow food coloring.

Among the highs are Benedict-esque dishes such as eggs Florentine, where spinach stands in for ham—SqWires' hearty take offers spinach and steak. Or eggs Oscar, Oceano Bistro's decadent tweak that adds asparagus and sweet crabmeat. The



Piccadilly at Manhattan offers several riffs on the dish, including a delicious and homey version where hash browns replace the English muffin. All tasty, all memorable, but not the classic; the search goes on.

I've come close to success, occasionally finding a spot that did the dish proud, only to have it close (oh, Melange, how I miss you!), or as at La Dolce Via, only to find that the dish is excellent, but sporadic on the brunch menu. The version at Scape was oh-so-close, but the buttery sauce, smoky Canadian bacon, and well-cooked eggs just couldn't overcome an English muffin with the texture and thickness of a bagel. The version at Cielo was even closer, save for the inclusion of grilled tomato. My search is nowhere near complete—there are still countless versions to try—but the closest I've found to Mom's is at Herbie's Vintage 72, whose kitchen produces a Benedict with eggs the ideal runniness and a smooth, rich hollandaise with a subtle but noticeable lemony tang. So you'll likely find me here when the Sunday-morning Benedict craving strikes—if I'm not at Mom's.

Katie O'Connor's search for the perfect eggs Benedict continues. Got a recommendation? Visit facebook.com/stlmag to share it.