Hold the Butter

Evan Sung for The New York Times

Emmanuel Verstraeten, owner of Rouge Tomate restaurant and founder of the SPE certification program.

By JEFF GORDINIER
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IF Emmanuel Verstraeten's dream comes true, something different will happen when you open a restaurant menu.

Recipes

Wild Mushroom Stock

Wild Mushroom Soup

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Rouge Tomate's chef, Jeremy Bearman, and Kristy Lambrou, its dietician.

As you cast your eyes over the entrees and try to decide what you're in the mood for, you will notice certain dishes have a squiggly red insignia next to them. SPE, the three letters in that curly logo, stand for Sanitas Per Escam, which is a fancy Latin way of saying "health through food."

If by chance your body is telling you to eat something healthy (and after the indulgences of the holiday season, such a thought might have crossed your mind), those three letters are meant to take the guesswork out of it. They're supposed to convey a message that seems simple, on the surface, even if its execution is complex: Our team of experts has vetted this dish, and you can rest assured that it is good for you. Those experts, brought together by the vision of Mr. Verstraeten, the Belgian entrepreneur behind Rouge Tomate, a Michelin-starred restaurant on East 60th Street, will offer something that a lot of top chefs might not necessarily see as part of their job: a scientific guarantee.

Go ahead — order the terrine of guinea hen with black truffles and foie gras, or the ricotta gnudi, or the chestnut and celery root soup, all of which are on the menu at Rouge Tomate. The SPE team will have fine-tuned the portion size. It will have emphasized what's seasonal. If you order fish, the stamp of those experts will reassure you that they have gone to some lengths to ensure the species you're consuming isn't seen as endangered or rife with environmental pollutants. Their stamp will let you know that each dish is dense with nutrients — vitamins, minerals, antioxidants — and low in salt and "bad fats." In appetizers and main courses, you won't find any cream or butter. As one promotional document puts it, "SPE dishes contain more of what you need and less of what you don't."

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A black mushroom risotto dish.

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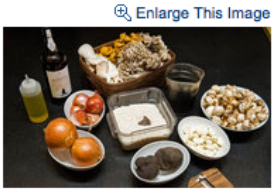

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An array of ingredients for black mushroom risotto.

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Mushroom soup.

And the experts will vouch for something else that's not always automatically associated with health food: deliciousness.

"You'll see this beautiful logo," Mr. Verstraeten, a puckish and ebullient man of 45, said over lunch in December at Rouge Tomate. "What does it mean? You'll know that it's a trusted symbol. It means it's good for you and very tasty."

He dipped a spoon into a rich bowl of mushroom soup. He took a taste. He beamed and mused, "Can you imagine? There is no butter. There is no cream."

That entwining of virtue and pleasure has been Mr. Verstraeten's mission at Rouge Tomate. The Manhattan restaurant (like its older sibling in Brussels) must have one of the few kitchens in the world where the chef, Jeremy Bearman, works in tandem with an in-house nutritionist, Kristy Lambrou, a registered dietitian who has veto power over any recipe that falls short of SPE standards. (This mode of eating has changed the way her taste buds react, Ms. Lambrou said. "I can pick out butter on anything now. It's not that I don't enjoy it, but it really overcomes my palate now.")

In recent months, that mission has been expanding beyond the elegantly belted waist of its flagship. Mr. Verstraeten's dream is to see that crimson logo appear on menus around the world — at fast-food stands and four-star palaces, on cruise ships and in college cafeterias. Should there come a day when a giant global chain like McDonald's signs on, "I'm going to become very rich," said Mr. Verstraeten, who goes by Manu. "That's my target, of course."

From an office on West 44th Street, around the corner from a Shake Shack, a team has been working to spread the SPE gospel of "an objective voice saying this is a healthy and delicious meal, and we have the data to prove it," according to Greg Deligdisch, the company's vice president for marketing. (Sure, you've seen the Heart Healthy logo and the Slow Food snail, but the SPE insignia is meant to represent the next step: a holistic approach to healthy ingredients, preparation, sourcing and environmental impact that ultimately tells the customer, "don't worry, we've got this covered.") Lately they have been making converts. Over the past few months, SPE Certified has landed deals with the University of Massachusetts, Celebrity Cruises and the Hotel Plaza Athenee in New York. For a fee that depends on the scale of the enterprise, the team will collaborate with chefs and tweak certain recipes to make them conform to SPE rules.

"I think we're at the right time to be launching this," Mr. Deligdisch said.

On one hand, he's right. Chronic national anxiety about obesity, cancer and diabetes has made nutrition a perpetual source of debate in every corner of American media. We live in a world of competing, answer-promising dietary camps — vegans, vegetarians, fruitarians, flexitarians, Mediterraneans, people who eat only greens foraged from the commune down the road — and there is an undeniable appeal to the idea of a certification of health that puts many of our collective worries to rest, at least for a few hours.

But we're also living through a period of wild, pork-bellied excess in American cooking, and asking an acclaimed chef to agree to cutting back on butter and salt in the kitchen feels a bit like asking Pearl Jam to tamp down the volume so that they don't damage the audience's eardrums when they storm the stage. Hooni Kim, a health-conscious veteran of Daniel Boulud's kitchen who now runs the show at Danji and Hanjan in Manhattan, is an early adopter when it comes to the SPE Certified idea. If you dine at Danji,

you'll find three dishes on the menu that have that red insignia next to them: the spicy whelk salad, the poached sablefish, and the tofu with a ginger and scallion dressing.

"Danji was an easy restaurant to get on board, because not much needed to be done," Mr. Kim said. "It really helps that we're a Korean restaurant, because we don't use butter."

For each of those SPE dishes at Danji, the chef found that he hardly had to change the recipes and he liked the idea of "making it easier for customers if they choose to be healthy." But the chef conceded that Mr. Verstraeten might encounter more of a challenge at, say, a French restaurant. "I worked at Daniel and I know how much butter I used," Mr. Kim said. And don't forget the ego factor: It takes an especially enlightened chef who will let someone put his dishes through a nutritional wringer and then tell him how to make them differently.

"If Manu had done that to us, we would've been a little hesitant," Mr. Kim said.

"Hesitant" seems like an apt word. Nearly 10 prominent chefs and restaurateurs around the country begged off when a reporter approached them for their opinions about SPE. One of the few who agreed to talk was Linton Hopkins of Restaurant Eugene and Holeman & Finch Public House in Atlanta.

"I like this idea," Mr. Hopkins said. "I'm just confused about it." Though he applauded the notion of creating nutritional options, the chef pointed out that one man's concept of healthy and sustainable nourishment might clash with another's. Why slaughter a pig, he said, if you're going to restrict the use of the fattier parts?

"What are you going to do with the rest of the animal?" he said. As a proud son of the South, Mr. Hopkins is against "demonizing butter and cream and lard," he said, and he grew concerned that the SPE team's opposition to smoking and chargrilling meats would rule out a realm of Southern gastronomy.

"Barbecue's good food," he said. "I'm sorry, barbecue should be in the pantheon of good food for human beings."

Eating, of course, is about much more than a tidy assemblage of data.

"We don't want our food just to be a nutritional pill," he said.

Eric Ripert, the French-born chef at Le Bernardin in New York, echoed those sentiments. "Since when is butter bad?" he said with a quiet laugh. He added, "Myself, I use very little butter and cream in my cooking style. However, I don't want to demonize certain ingredients."

As for salt, he said the improvisatory reality of kitchen practice might make it impossible to police how much of it line cooks sprinkle on. "How are you going to control the amount of salt?" he said. "Are you going to have little bags?"

Although he expressed respect for the SPE concept — "I am pro-movements," Mr. Ripert said — he sounded unlikely to get on board. "I wouldn't put it in Le Bernardin," he said. "I wouldn't put the little sticker or red dot next to a dish, because it means that the other dishes are not healthy and are not responsible."

Like Mr. Ripert, Mr. Hopkins showed resistance to letting an outside party monitor the way dishes are prepared. "As a restaurateur, I don't need chefs to come into my kitchen," he said.

Ultimately, though, the organizations that are drawn to SPE certification might be the very ones who do want that. Offering healthy options has become a competitive advantage, whether you're trying to attract students to the campus of the University of Massachusetts or vacationers to a Celebrity Cruise trip. Scott

Steenrod, an executive for the cruise line, said that he was initially skeptical about the SPE proposal. What won him over was dinner at Rouge Tomate, where he could see, and taste, the SPE principles in action.

“When I went to Rouge Tomate, that was really where I was blown away,” he said. “The biggest appeal for me, first and foremost, is that it’s delicious.”

In a conference room at SPE headquarters the other day, deliciousness was the issue at hand. A six-person crew, including the registered dietitian Natalia Hancock and the chef Anthony Moraes, an alumnus of Eleven Madison Park, were weighing in on a bowl of pasta salad with pesto.

The University of Massachusetts had sent the SPE team a sample of the oil-seeping pesto that it normally offers in its dining halls, where about 40,000 meals are served each day. Mr. Moraes had come up with an alternative: a kale pesto made with walnuts and roasted garlic. Spoonfuls went around the table on small plates.

“I think it’s beautiful,” said Andrea Canada, another registered dietitian on the team. “I think it could use a little more salt.”

“Me, too,” Ms. Hancock said.

The pesto would go back to the kitchen for a bit more tweaking. If you want to lure students away from chicken fingers, you’ve got to make them crave the alternative. “We can’t go in there and just make everything healthy, because it’s not going to work,” Ms. Hancock said. “It also has to be appealing.”