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## 'SPE' guarantees healthy and delectable

FOOD



A black mushroom risotto dish at the Rouge Tomate restaurant in New York. The SPE certification, founded at the Rouge Tomate, aims to offer diners a scientific guarantee on healthy food. (THE NEW YORK TIMES)

If Emmanuel Verstraeten's dream comes true, something different will happen when you open a restaurant menu.

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 may have crossed your mind), those three letters are meant to take

the guesswork out of it. They are 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 Verstraeten, the Belgian entrepreneur behind Rouge Tomate, a Michelin-starred restaurant in New York, 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 is 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 are consuming is not 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.”

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

“You’ll see this beautiful logo,” Verstraeten, a puckish and ebullient man of 45, said over lunch 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 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, 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. 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 Verstraeten, who goes by Manu. “That’s my target, of course.”

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 tells the customer, “Don’t worry, we’ve got this covered.”

From an office in Manhattan, 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,” said Greg Deligdisch, the vice president for marketing at Verstraeten’s company, SPE Certified.

They are 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,” Deligdisch said.

On one hand, he is right. Chronic national anxiety about obesity, cancer and diabetes has made nutrition a perpetual source of debate. We live in a world of competing, answer-promising dietary camps — vegans, vegetarians, fruitarians, flexitarians, Mediterraneans. There is an undeniable appeal to the idea of a certification that puts many of our collective worries to rest, at least for a few hours.

But we are also living through a period of wild, pork-bellied excess in American cooking.

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,” Hopkins said. “I’m just confused about it.”

As a proud son of the South, 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.