

EATING DOWNTOWN

MERCHANTS CAFÉ

90 WASHINGTON STREET AT RECTOR
212-363-6000

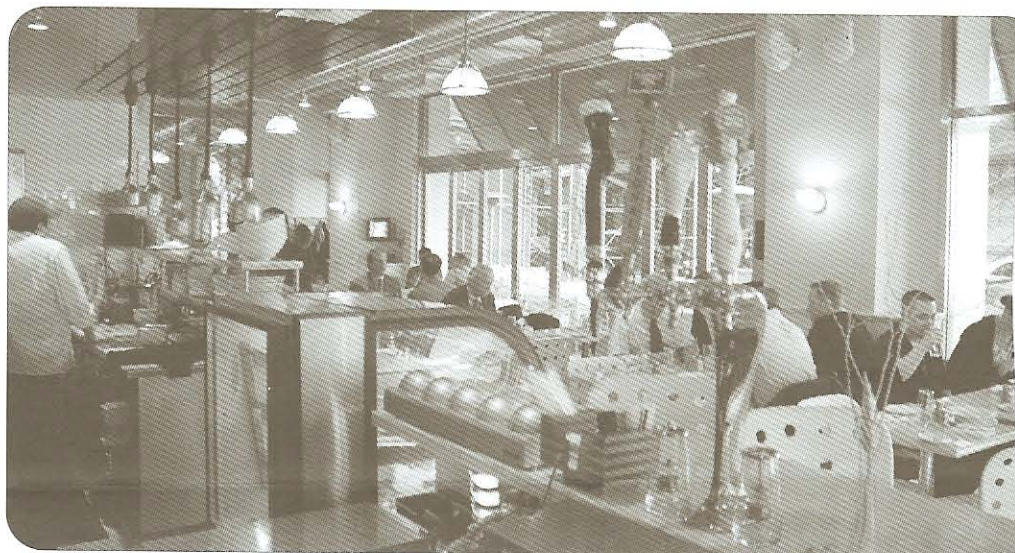
By *Cabe Franklin*

For viewers of "The Office," the NBC comedy about life in a Northeastern paper company, Stamford holds a certain appeal. The show's main characters work in Scranton, in a windowless room of beige walls and dusty blinds. For their counterparts in Stamford, a better-performing division of the same company, everything is nicer — bright sunlight, brushed-metal furnishings, a view of the water. Life is better in Stamford, more urbane without being too gritty.

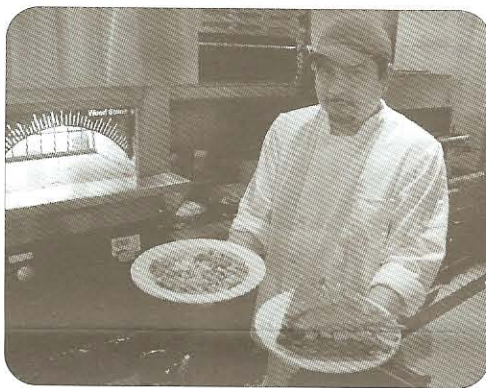
Something about eating at Merchants NY Café, Manhattan's third Merchants outpost (the others are in Chelsea and on the east side), makes you feel like you've left the city, but not that you've gone so far you can't grab a decent meal. There's friendlier service, more space, lower prices, and more general affability than most of us have come to expect from New York restaurants. If the kitchen is sometimes less than dazzling, that has to be recognized as part of the overall picture.

Merchants gets some of its sense of spaciousness by making the most of its corner location, with full walls of floor-to-ceiling windows on its east and north faces. The north windows look out on an inviting patio of seats and shade umbrellas, which will no doubt be packed as soon as temperatures crack sixty sometime this May. The restaurant is set far back from Rector Street to make room for the patio, and this design move gives inside diners a rare sense of openness for a New York streetscape.

The menu is straightforward,



Merchants Café bustles at lunchtime.



Chef Ignacia Romero

with some pasta, sandwiches, salads, and light seafood touches. On a recent visit, a friend and I started with some spring rolls (\$6) and the asparagus and Portobello tempura (\$8). Unfortunately, the spring rolls and the asparagus came out slightly past their prime as fried food: chewy, rather than crisp.

In contrast, the Portobello tempura was a scrumptious appetizer: a perfect blend of light but firm outer shell and juicy burst of flavor inside.

For entrees, we had hoped to order the lobster ravioli with cognac and cream (\$13), but we were told they had run out. (This at 8:30PM a night when the lobster ravioli was listed as special.) We fell back to the flatiron steak with caramelized shallot butter (\$15) and the fettuccine Bolognese (\$10), also ordering a lobster club (\$16) to make up for missing the cut on a crustacean.

Like the Portobello tempura, the steak was a delight: a good cut of meat, cooked perfectly, was tender, juicy, and flavorful from start to finish.

My partner wasn't as lucky with her clumpy, bland Bolognese, although she admitted to being pleased enough with the value at the low price. The lobster club, piled high with Maine lobster, bacon, avocado, sprouts, and tomato, felt overloaded rather than thoughtfully constructed to provide a subtle interplay of flavors and textures, but to be fair, the sandwich is probably better-enjoyed at lunch outside



Manager Ali Webster

on a hot day than at dinner inside on a cold night in February in conjunction with other entrees.

As for the bar, the drinks were generous and the wine list was reasonably made even more so by the waiter's recommendation of a bottle at the low end of the price range, a Camelot pinot noir, which turned out to be an excellent choice. Merchants also has a list of specialty cocktails and may be one of the few restaurants in America that can serve a lychee martini and still called unpretentious.

The original Merchants opened ten years ago in Chelsea, and its late-night kitchen and wood-burning fireplace have made it a favorite relaxation spot for its locals. In Merchants NY Café, downtown has a new place to and relax, which will likely come into its own as temperatures warm up. For now, it's worth the short trip to Washington Street to find the stars on the menu and experience the relaxing vibe of a seaside town in winter.

Merchants NY Café
90 Washington Street near Rector Street
Sunday-Monday noon – 10PM
Delivery Noon to 10PM
Brunch Saturday and Sunday noon to 4PM.
Starters \$4-10 Mains \$10-17

