

J. Walman's Restaurant & Entertainment Report Card, Wednesday, August 25, 1999
As Heard Daily On WEVD, News-Talk Radio

Merchants: A+
1125 First Avenue @ 62nd St.

Abraham Merchant's successful wine-bar/cum restaurants, Merchant's New York, has a new executive chef, Nicola Zanghi (The Four Seasons & the former "Restaurant Zanghi"), & a new chef de cuisine, Parker Stafford (Todd English's Olives & Figs in Cambridge Ma.). The upstairs dining room displays a striking design by Larry Bogdanow. You may choose to stop at the inviting bar, opt for the dark, sexy "library" in back to the right, with its lounge-seating and working fireplace or sequester yourself in one of the comfortable booths of the multi-level main-room, with its lovely sculptured banquettes sporting colorful suede prints, French windows and deep-blue and inlaid velvet ceiling. Such luxury and friendly service comes at an attractive price, which explains Merchant's popularity. Our more "grown up" readers may be well advised to dine at the uncivilized hour of 6 or on a lazy summer weekend. (There is also an intimate cigar bar & lounge one flight below.) The magnificent martinis (alas the knockout "negroni-style" version has vanished), are beautifully presented and poured at the table; there are some 16 bourbons, 20 single malts, and 21 choices of beer, not to mention an appealing selection of wines, many available by the glass. A "caipirinha," the national drink of Brazil, is better executed here than at many Brazilian restaurants around town. A "margarita," Mexico's contribution to the cocktail crowd, is a less rewarding choice. Let's not neglect the kitchen. There's very good food here. Zanghi's menu is intriguing; Stafford's execution is right-on. I adored the whimsical presentation of a chilled calamari salad with honeydew, cantaloupe & watermelon vinaigrette & melon salad-wrap, the "wrap" being a ribbon of watermelon (\$7.25). Tuna tartare, seasoned with soy & madras curry & served with jicama & corn relish was also a standout, a task not easy to pull off with this *deja vous* dish. Even a simple shrimp cocktail was fresh, not iodized & neither over nor under cooked. The 3 sauces that adorned it were complementary (\$8.75). My only problem with a terrific cold "marsala" rubbed salmon with asparagus & "tsatiki" (cucumber-yogurt) sauce (\$9.25) was its temperature (too cold), but hey, I've had the same problem in luxury restaurants. I could only do one main event: Pan grilled trout filets, stuffed with garlic, grilled asparagus & leeks, tomato & pignoli-nut "sofrito" (\$16). A huge portion, this dish was enough for 2. Service was good; I was known. James Beard once replied to the query, "What's the best restaurant in town?" "Any place where I'm known." Mr. Beard made a good case for cultivating a restaurant you like. In this age of the "restaurant-du-jour," it may be the time to reevaluate one's options & stick with the winners. After all, at most trendy joints, the menus & the kitchens are remarkable ditto. Merchants has three locations in NY. We dined at the east side store, 1125 First Avenue @ 62nd St. I wouldn't be surprised to see Merchants N.Y. evolve into Merchant's L.A., Chicago or even Paris. That's a "lounge-cum-restaurant" A Plus on my Restaurant & Entertainment Report Card.