

# Gourmandises

Tasty tidbits of news and views on the Manhattan Dining Scene

By JUDY ROSS

In a city where real estate is at a premium the expansive duplex premises of MERCHANT'S is an amazing yet a volume business probably accounts for a gentle pricing policy that stands in sharp contrast to the luxury of the surroundings and service. For the past four years seductive sofa-seatings, elegant polished-wood tables, romantic lighting and an alert staff that really know their wines, have drawn a steady stream of stylish yuppies bent on very social drinking. They revel in a cutting-edge roster of trendy cocktails and an exhaustive international wine list offering virtually every label by the glass. Cuisine has been only a second thought to this fashion-driven clientele. Some managements would rest content with this thriving and profitable scene-but not Abraham Merchant. Craving legitimacy as a dining destination, he has engaged a chef lately from Windows on the World and activated dashing young Don DeWitt as manager, with a mandate to focus on food. To woo a new public and win a place in the foodie firmament. Don instituted the attractive pricing policy and encouraged the kitchen to turn out international favorites with the chef's original twist.

An impressively serious commitment to fine dining is a menu that suggests complementary wines beneath each listing-with the notable exception of those with a Mexican accent. (We all know beer goes best South of the Border-but we also personally favor certain fruity whites. . . check out the possibilities with your server.) Settle into your sofa, swive a slice of olive bread through a ramekin

palate with a fashionable cocktail or a fine wine from the voluminous list. Consider such starters as four crisply crumb-coated miniature crab croquettes surrounding a hill of aru-



The comfy lounge at Merchant's.

gala; a heaping bowl of mussels in a curry-infused white wine broth dotted with chunks of tomato that transcends every other mussel sauce around town; or dig into tempura-light battered calamari circles, super-tender, and supported by both a warm tomato dip and a powerfully garlicked aioli that was the hands-down favorite at our table.

A plate of six triangle-folded quesadilla tortillas

guacamole, salsa and sliced jalapeno is so generously portioned that it threatens to destroy one's capability to deal with an entree. In fact, the word on all appetizers is "Share!" Entrees are apportioned with more restraint-that is, for a normal good appetite.

Lobster ravioli are surprisingly still al-dente under a mantle of pervasively leek-infused light cream dressing, laced with the textural titillation of shredded shrimp. Giant tail-high whole shrimp in garlic sauce surround an island of mellow tomato-spinach risotto-a most successful contemporary spin on an Italian classic. From our current romance with all things Asian comes a pair of inch-thick, pepper-crusting tuna triangles perched upon a pile of gingered soba noodles laced with veggie strands. In dramatic contrast to this exotic entree, all-American comfort food claims center stage via meaty boned-out short ribs braised to fork-tender richness and stylishly poised atop a mound of eye-opening horseradish-spiked mashed potato. Unlike granny's veggies, the garnish of sliced carrots and slender green beans is startlingly al-dente, creating a provocative counterpoint between past and present cookery on the same plate. Similarly, desserts span the century.

Crumb-topped sour-cream apple pie filled with tart-sweet fruit and sided by house-made vanilla ice cream, is a nostalgic delight; while a fudgy chocolate disc surrounded by dabs of raspberry coulis and fresh berries is strictly today's darling. The Message is clearly that this is a place with something for everyone. . . come for the food and drink, stay for the beat.

MERCHANT'S

1125 First Ave/62 St.

832-1551