

The Spirit

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DINING OUT

Getting Everything Right

Merchants on Columbus Ave. gets it

The owners of Merchants NY claim to have created the concept of the "multi-area restaurant" — meaning each of their three locations features a thriving bar, various cozy candlelit dining areas and a virtual living room that certainly puts most "lounges" around town to shame. The Columbus Avenue edition also features a teeming sidewalk dining section all along its front. And so deeply comfortable is the luxuriously appointed living room with its flickering fireplace that I actually saw a lovely young lady who had fallen fast asleep in one of the overstuffed armchairs.

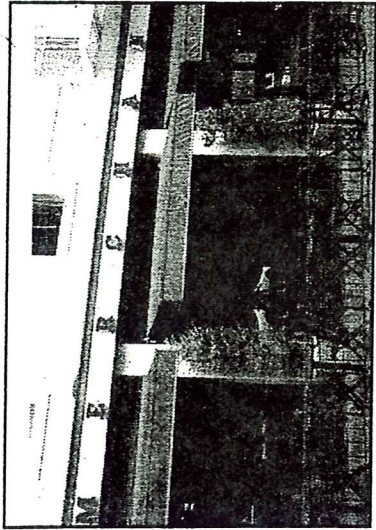
The entire staff, from buspeople (!) to management (but especially the uniformly pulchritudinous wait staff), is so felicitously coordinated and choreographed that, even though the place was "between chefs," the evening we were there, the restaurant and its kitchen moved with absolute steadiness. That's because (as in a Danny Meyer restaurant) each staff member is very carefully selected and exhaustively trained,

MERCHANTS NY

521 Columbus Ave.
at 85th Street
(212) 721-3689
Appetizers: \$7.50-8.75
Salads and sandwiches:
\$7.50-9.75
Entrées: \$12.75-17.50

Zanghi has designed quite an interesting menu that takes you from state-of-the-art renditions of beloved clichés like tuna tartare or steak au poivre to unusual creations such as masala-rubbed salmon filet with cooling cucumber yogurt sauce or pan-grilled trout filets stuffed with garlic-grilled asparagus and leeks, tomato and pignoli soffrito. And for a big change, there is no fear of spiciness in this kitchen.

There is also quite a pride of ample martinis available — 18, in fact, ranging from signature blends like Stoli Vanil vodka, brandy and soda, in a cinnamon-sugar-rimmed glass, to a Dirty Cajun: a briny, bouncy blend of Absolut Peppar, olive brine and pickled tomatoes. I'll leave your vivid imagination the contents of a "Willie Wonka martini-



With a living room that puts many at ease.

ni." There is also a very wide selection of splendid wines available by the glass.

Tuna tartare is kissed with curry and soy sauce, then mounded on a gentle corn relish threaded with diced jicama, apple, cucumber and honeydew melon. I'd never had wasabi granita before, but there it was, scratchy and frozen and dabbed in a lump, as on a plate of sushi.

Crawfish cakes are especially fine. Two carefully fried, pudgy, firm cakes are partnered with a spicy pineapple/mango salsa and a luscious drizzle of smoked tomato butter.

Lime and chili-pressed chicken breast is lightly blackened on the grill, then torn into chunks and nestled onto a deep bed of cel- lophane angel-hair noodles wound with spiced roasted pecans, thinly sliced yellow and red bell peppers, roasted corn kernels and sauced with a truly searing chili oil. The dish, offered with chopsticks, weighs in at just \$9 and would make an ideal and unusual autumn supper on its own.

Paella arrives in a large cast-iron kettle, which is nearly filled with tender, fluffy, long-grain rice fairly breathing saffron. Throughout the rice are over a dozen but- tery young mussels, tender rings of cala- mari, slices of chorizo, chunks of chicken and piping hot jumbo shrimp. The chicken could have been a bit more moist, and the chorizo could have been seared a bit longer, but the seafood really sings. And there's plenty for two at \$16.75 for the pot.

Sour cream apple walnut pie is buttery and firm, studded with brown-sugar- caramelized walnuts, and pan-fried bananas do very well with a scoop of coconut ice cream and a fudgy chocolate rum sauce. The perfect accompaniment to either would be an eau de vie like Jacopo Poli, Amorosa di Pinot grappa, with its stinging, aggressive opening and ironically smooth, lightly licorice finish.

In addition to two well-established ver- sions of Merchants NY on the East Side (First Avenue at 62nd Street) and in Chelsea (Sev- enth Avenue at 17th Street), as you read this, a brand new and quite huge edition, South- West NY, is up and running at 2 World Financial Center (the space that used to house Pipeline). Currently, only the vast out- side space is serving, with "the city's only outdoor lounges," Internet access and all sorts of innovations; the indoor restaurant will open toward the end of September. ■