

Merchants Manages to Transcend the Lounge

The First Avenue outpost of the restaurant chain has great food and low prices

By J. Waliman

Abraham Merchant's successful wine bar-cum-restaurant, Merchants New York, has several branches, and my favorite is the First Avenue branch. The upstairs dining room displays a striking design by Larry Bogdanow. You may choose to stop at the inviting bar; opt for the dark, libidinous library in back to the right; or sequester yourself in one of the comfortable booths of the multilevel main room, with its lovely sculptured banquettes sporting colorful suede prints, French windows and a deep-blue, inlaid velvet ceiling. (There is also an intimate cigar bar and lounge one flight below.)

The magnificent martinis are beautifully presented and poured at the table; there is a fine selection of bourbons and sipping tequilas, 20 single malts and 21 choices of beer.

Such indulgence comes at an attractive price, which explains Merchants' popularity. Our more grown-up readers may be well-advised to dine at the uncivilized hour of 6 p.m., when the noise level is low.

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fully presented and poured at the table; there is a fine selection of bourbons and sipping tequilas, 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.

SIDE-DISH

The Line on Wine: Established in 1886, the House of Scialletti is thought to be the oldest winery in the region of Abruzzo, in central Italy. In its homeland, the name "Scialletti" is synonymous with high-quality wines from the hills of Cologna.

Scialletti Sammarco Rosso 1997 is composed of 50-percent montepulciano, 40-percent sangioveo and 10-percent malbec grapes and has an alcohol strength of 13 percent. Bright ruby-red, with a delicate, lingering, flowery bouquet, its grapes are made into wine using the Blachere method, which allows for maximum skin contact to extract the tannins. It is superb with assertive seafood favorites like tuna or salmon or any fish in robust tomato sauce (\$14.99).

Let's not neglect the kitchen. The menu is intriguing; I adored the whimsical presentation of a grilled sugar-cane-skewered shrimp with pineapple-tequila salsa. The ubiquitous calamari is light, grease-free and highlighted with a sweet Thai chili sauce. Sandwiches are a meal in themselves. The tuna burger, a clever play on the tuna melt, is a standout on a doughy bun

Scialletti Sammarco Oro 1995 is 60-percent montepulciano, 20-percent malbec, 10-percent barbera and 10-percent cabernet sauvignon. Its red color and persistent bouquet, reminiscent of wilting roses, make it a fine match for pasta, risotto and light meats, such as veal or chicken (\$30).

Scialletti Sammarco Anniversario 1993, 80-percent montepulciano, 15-percent cabernet sauvignon and 5-percent malbec, is subtle and elegant, with a velvety, dry finish. Enjoy it for that special occasion with medium-hard cheeses, roast beef, lamb or cold meatloaf (\$70).

For the full story, visit lineonwine.com. J. Waliman can be contacted at www.punchin.com or by e-mail: info@punchin.com.

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My favorite entrees were barbecue baby back ribs and citrus-grilled Pacific swordfish. If you haven't considered Merchants as a serious dining venue, you're in for a pleasant surprise.

MERCHANTS NEW YORK

1125 First Ave. (at 62nd Street)
832-1551

Appetizers: \$4-\$11

Salads: \$4.75-\$9

Sandwiches: \$7.25-\$12.50

Entrees: \$11.50-\$16.50

Good, inexpensive wine list: \$22-\$47 (11 choices under \$30)

26 wines by the glass: \$6-\$14

Cocktails: \$8-\$10

Open seven days a week 11:30 a.m.-4 a.m.

