

NEW YORK RESTAURANTS

September 13, 2009

Above Standard

With chef Dan Silverman at the helm, the Standard Grill rises above the *faux*-bistro competition.

By Adam Platt



(Photo: Hannah Whitaker/New York Magazine)

It's always been fashionable to compare restaurants to theater. After all, every establishment has a cast (the chef, the wait staff, the patrons) and an intricately designed, carefully lit stage (the dining room). The meal unfolds in three acts (appetizer, entrée, dessert), often with a musical score playing in the background, and the price of admission, when drinks have been included, often exceeds that of a Broadway show. But in reality, a successful restaurant is less like a stage production than an old-fashioned factory. The kitchen is a processing plant that takes in raw ingredients, fashions them into a product, then pushes that product out the other side. The front of the house is a showroom (yes, your friendly waiter is a salesman), designed to move the maximum number of customers through in the minimum amount of time. The trick is to make this prosaic, bottom-line business seem like entertainment. To pull this off in a small setting is harder than it looks. To do it night after night, on a grand, industrial scale, is as close to Broadway, in restaurant land, as you're likely to get.

As restaurant factories go, the Standard Grill, at the bottom of André Balazs's Standard Hotel, in the increasingly overrun fine-dining industrial zone known as the meatpacking district, is an impressive operation. The deceptively sprawling establishment has sidewalk tables for the café set and bar tables for frenetic lounge lizards. And separate from all this is the well-appointed, even intimate, dining room, which has lately become, yes, a theatrical gathering spot for members of the fashion industry and beyond. The floor is stippled with thousands of copper pennies, and the tables are covered in white checked cotton and set, in the now-standard barnyard style, with bowls of small radishes and paper bags filled with semi-fresh bread. I saw Ben Stiller poking at his radishes one evening. The next night there was Anna Wintour, resplendent in a watermelon-colored cardigan, waiting stoically for her friends in the same crescent-shaped banquette.

The chef at the Standard is Dan Silverman (formerly of the defunct Lever House restaurant, uptown), and he has cannily constructed his one-page "American Bistro" menu to suit a range of currently trendy tastes. To help promote the sale of profitable pre-dinner wines and chic retro cocktails (the Speakeasy and Randy Gibson), there are artisanal saucissons and hams "From the Counter" (try the jamón

<http://nymag.com/restaurants/reviews/58954/>

Ibérico), and three elegantly sturdy housemade pâtés, the best of which is a slab of coarsely cut pork pâté, sweetened with sherry. There are oysters piled on ice for the hoary bistro set (Malpeques from Long Island, Fanny Bays from Washington State), steaks and burgers for the meatheads (two steaks, plus an excellent Ranch burger made with a brisket-laden LaFrieda blend), and a series of carefully sourced small salads (baby romaine from Satur Farms, snow peas and radishes with cider vinaigrette, haricots verts tossed with yogurt and crispy onions) designed to be nibbled by Gisele Bündchen and her fashionably thin friends.

But what separates the Standard from other newly tricked-out, *faux*-bistro factory operations in the neighborhood is the unexpected quality of Silverman's cooking. Like the city's great brasserie genius, Keith McNally, Silverman has a knack for making everything on his menu sound good, and most things deliver. The first dish that arrived at the table one evening was a tangy bowl of chilled white-almond soup, which tasted like something you'd encounter in one of the better kitchens of Seville. It was followed by little packets of seared squid stuffed with spicy merguez sausage, and a curl of charred octopus, which the kitchen serves over a mound of soft, barely warm sweet potatoes faintly spiced with chile powder. My scraggly iceberg wedge was a grim disappointment by comparison, and so was the picturesque though strangely underflavored \$14 steak tartare "À Go Go." But for a dollar more, you can get an uptown-quality serving of Hudson Valley foie gras (garnished with a rhubarb compote) or a delicious helping of thin, tube-shaped ravioli stuffed with sweet summer peas.

The entrées are similarly well thought-out and designed, with an eye on profit margins, to be consumed with a whole raft of boutique, Greenmarket-themed sides. I enjoyed my small but elegant serving of halibut with hollandaise and some sweet candy-striped beets (from Satur Farms, again), and my neighbor's crunchy, "flash seared" lamb chops were enlivened with a healthful plate of fresh wax beans tossed with a delicious, though not so healthful, crumbling of chorizo. No side dish could rescue the undercooked pork chop or the drably dated lobster Louis, which looked like it had been beamed in from an elderly country club's menu, circa 1952. But the From the Grill fish items (try the swordfish spiced with ginger, or the flattened rainbow trout with currants and relish) went well with the sugar-snap peas soaked in brown butter, and if you feel like springing for a big-ticket item, call for the opulently fatty, dry-aged "demi-vache" rib eye for two, plus a rasher, or three, of "smashed" new potatoes sizzled in duck fat.

The life expectancy of a chic food factory in the meatpacking district is notoriously short, and despite its ingenious design, the Standard Grill is already showing signs of trouble. If you sit outside, the wait between courses can last into the evening, and the clamorously narrow bar area is generally uninhabitable after 6 p.m. But being a hotel, the restaurant serves a decent lunch (try the smoked-turkey club sandwich) and a proficient breakfast, which has eight styles of organic farm eggs, including shirred with cream, semi-boiled with toast soldiers, and served trucker style, as a sandwich stuffed with melted Cheddar and Kentucky bacon. The dinnertime desserts (soggy peach pie, a perfunctory lemon tart, a few cookies on a plate with a sad little shot-glass-size milkshake) are not so satisfying. The exception is a vat-size chocolate-mousse creation called "the Deal-Closer," designed to be scooped up in a group frenzy with plastic spatulas by Le Creuset. Sure, it's gimmicky. But like lots of the gimmicks in this cannily executed operation, it sort of works.

★★★★★

The Standard Grill (View Menu)

Address: 846 Washington St., nr. W. 13th St.; 212-645-4100

Hours: Dinner Sunday through Thursday, 5 p.m. to midnight; Friday and Saturday to 1 a.m. Lunch daily, 11:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. Breakfast daily, 7 to 11 a.m.

Prices: Appetizers, \$8 to \$14; entrées, \$15 to \$32.

Ideal Meal: Chilled almond soup or merguez-stuffed squid, swordfish or rib eye, the Deal-Closer.

Note: To ease the wait for your table, try the Penny Drop, a vodka-and-ginger concoction served in a battered copper cup.

Scratchpad: One star for style, another for Silverman's substantial bistro cooking.