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BY SHYAMA PATEL
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gry, beef-eating businessmen and the people who love them. At a time when steakhouses were famous for rudeness and hauteur, Benson's made a point of homeliness. The festive air gets pretty thick by the bar, where cigars prevail, but the dining room is devoted entirely to the consumption of prime aged beef and steakhouse standards. • 123 W. 52nd St. (212-581-8888). (E)

Benihana

Long before *low Chef* taught us just how quick-handed knife-wielding Japanese cooks can be, there were the tableside-cooking shows that are still the main draw at this teppanyaki steakhouse. Kids, of course, love it. • 47 W. 56th St. (212-581-0930). (E)

Cité

Ambassador of beef Alan Stillman cops a French accent at this soaring midtown steakhouse known for its wine dinners. Meat is just the hard core of the menu, a document that also includes pan-roasted salmon "chou-croûte," grilled chicken merguez sausage, and desserts big enough for two or more to share. For more casual dining, try the Cité Grill next door. • 120 W. 58th St. (212-956-7100). (M-E)

Del Frisco's

Want to see what mahogany fashioned by testosterone looks like? This is without question the most urbane steakhouse you will ever see, its meat locker filled with terrific beef. Now if they can only figure out how to get their staff up to the level of their surroundings and kitchen. The place is landmark potential. • 1221 Sixth Ave., at 49th St. (212-575-5129). (E)

Johnnie's Italian

This old-world Italian restaurant has been a midtown fixture for over four decades. The menu runs the gamut from basic pastas to chicken, veal, and seafood dishes; the \$14.95 dinner special is a particularly good deal. • 135 W. 45th St. (212-869-5565). (M-F)

La Caravelle

After 40 years, the most neighborly of the city's grand old midtown restaurants has undergone a subtle gastronomic conversion. The service is still impeccable and the luminous green murals are still as luminous as ever, but now you'll find bits of seaweed on your plate (part of a tasty gravlax-and-tuna combination), even golden Chinese scallions mingled with your beef fillet. These changes are generally decorous, although traditionalists can still find comfort in classics like roast duck and the restaurant's legendary truffled pike quenelles. • 23 W. 55th St. (212-586-4252). (E)

Le Bernardin

Criticizing Le Bernardin is like analyzing rainbows. Just try to describe the snapper in coconut milk or the black bass with truffles and celery root. Submit to the sorcery of chef Eric Ripert, the bewitchery of owner and co-creator Maguy Le Coze, and experience the thrilling sensation of having everything perfect. • 155 W. 58th St. (212-489-1515). (E)

Martini's

Convenient for pre- and post-theater dining, with a buzzing sidewalk cafe and rustic homemade pasta, charcoal-grilled seafood, and, of course, multiple variations of the house drink. • 810 Seventh Ave., at 53rd St. (212-767-1717). (M)

Molyvos

Adorned with photos of Greek island life, ceramics, and folk art, this sprawling midtown taverna is a stylishly rustic showcase for chef Jim Bonacos. The window tables up front are ideal for nibbling meze and something from the Greek wine list, but for a true taste of the isles go for something gaudier: the melting lamb shanks, clay-pot-baked with orzo and tomato, or "Aglai's mousaka," unfinishably rich (but still worth the attempt). Desserts offer a few surprises, like the mastic ice cream, a resinous flavor unknown even to Ben and Jerry. • 871 Seventh Ave., nr. 56th St. (212-582-7500). (M)

Pig and Whistle

A business clientele and a coming-and-going-to-the-theater crowd can find Irish specialties—both solid and liquid—here. • 185 W. 47th St. (212-302-0132). Also, 922 Third Ave., nr. 55th St. (688-4646). (M)

Randolph's

Housed in the Warwick Hotel—which William Ran-

dolph Hearst built for his mistress, Marion Davies—this cory restaurant and lounge has a lush, old-world feel and an eclectic menu, from dim sum to a filet mignon sandwich. • 65 W. 54th St. (212-247-2700). (M-E)

Redeye Grill

This place jumps late at night with live jazz, a cacophony of paintings by artists whose latter-day Duvernis Saatchi and Gouliam have yet to discover, and a fine smoked-fish platter, plus the town's quintessential cobb salad. • 888 Seventh Ave., at 56th St. (212-541-9000). (M-E)

Rinconcito Peruano

The seviche at this Peruvian Hell's Kitchen hole-in-the-wall is sublime: tidbits of sea bass, whole shrimp, and squid in an expert lime-juice marinade redolent of garlic, ginger, red onion, cilantro, and pepper. And the caliber of the seviche augurs well for the rest of the menu, which shrinks considerably during the week. (Go on Saturday.) Don't leave without ordering something yellow—one of those national specialties suffused with spicy, marigold-yellow aji pepper sauce. • 803 Ninth Avenue, at 53rd Street (212-333-5685). (S)

St. Andrews

In what might be New York's only full-fledged Scottish restaurant, the bartenders wear kilts, the scotch is single-malt, and the décor revolves around pictures of famous golf courses. The hearty steak-and-seafood menu features rack of lamb and brook trout stuffed with crabmeat and Irish oatmeal in a scotch-whiskey sauce. • 120 W. 44th St. (212-840-8410). (M-M)

Town

A delightful sensation takes over the moment you descend into Town—that all too infrequent feeling when you know you're going to be glad you came. From a front desk actually focused on you to a room aglow in plush, sleek romanticism, Town revels in being all grown up. But the real forte is chef-owner Geoffrey Zakarian, who, eschewing gimmicks like chili peppers from around the world, prepares subtle, sophisticated dishes like tuna in ramp-and-sea-urchin sauce, and duck steak with buckwheat pilaf. • 15 W. 56th St. (212-582-4445). (M-E)

Trattoria Dopo Teatro

Famous for its signature open ravioli of lobster and lamb, the menu also offers an across-the-board selection of regional Italian specialties. The dining room is decorated with Italian cinema stills and single-minded connoisseurs, and private parties can pursue their passions in the wine room, the grappa room, or the cigar lounge. • 125 W. 44th St. (212-869-2849). (M)



57th-60th Streets

Bouterin

It wasn't enough for Antoine Bouterin to re-create the Provençal food of his childhood. He furnished his dining room with country antiques, potted herbs, and assorted tchotchkes as if it were a farmhouse in the shadow of the Queensboro Bridge. And his menu pays loving tribute to pre-fusion French comfort food with its "old-fashioned onion soup," vegetable soup au pistou "my Grandmother's way," and "old-fashioned roast chicken and potatoes." • 420 E. 59th Street (212-758-0323). (M-E)

Gabriel's Bar & Restaurant

Just four blocks from Lincoln Center, this acclaimed Northern Italian favorite of theatergoers and neighborhood regulars is unimpeachably comfortable and culinarily sophisticated at the same time. Hearty dishes include gnocchii in duck ragu, braised short ribs with a semolina custard, and wood-grilled tuna with fresh horseradish. The hot chocolate has a cult following. • 11 W. 60th St. (212-956-4600). (M-E)

The Manhattan Ocean Club

Savor your seafood in an elegant dining room decorated with Picasso ceramics. A pictorial menu features a dozen or so smiley-faced fish. Preparations range from classic (Dover sole meunière) to creative (grouper with roasted pineapple and black peppercorns). Or have the chef prepare your fish any way you like. • 57 W. 58th St. (212-371-7777). (E)

March

Expanded seating and a rooftop terrace aren't the only new developments in this ultra-romantic Sutton Place townhouse. Co-owner-chef Wayne Nish has shed his obsession with Japan and found a new exuberance with a little more cream and butter. The tasting menu begins in a truffy, buttery haze of vegetable fricassee, then segues into the tenderest Muscat-scented lobster on lobster polenta and the amazingly moist chicken in spice-mulled pear cider, before climaxing in wonderfully rustic lamb shoulder with fennel purée and an acid hit of preserved fennel. Don't forgo dessert. • 405 E. 58th St. (212-754-6272). (E)

ONe.p.s.

Alan Stillman, along with executive chef David Burke and designer Adam Tihany, has rewired the Plaza's Edvardian Room. Tihany has colored the oaken walls caramel and put huge scarlet lampshades on the chandeliers, and the irrepressible Burke has concocted a whimsical menu that includes a foie gras-spiked burger and a rack of lamb accompanied by shepherd's pie. The mosaic floors and ceiling remain untouched, and the view of Central Park is as grand as ever. • 1 Central Park Sq. (212-583-1113). (E)

Shelly's New York

The latest restaurant Shelly Fireman has created in his own image inhabits the space that was originally an Automat. Only the assimilative Fireman would offer towering shellfish platters alongside newfangled chicken chow mein, barbecued ribs, and a burger crowned

Opening

Haus Blend

As any bleary-eyed tourist knows, art appreciation requires intense concentration, a riveting audio guide, and an espresso or two. Now, with the opening of Café Sabarsky at Ronald Lauder's Neue Galerie New York, fatigued Museum Milers can caffeinate up after viewing the Klimts and Kokoschkas upstairs. Lauder recruited Wallis's Kurt Gutenbrunner (pictured) to run the Viennese-style kaffeehaus, and the Austrian chef is clearly in his element—an elegant room furnished with reproductions of Josef Hoffmann sconces, Adolf Loos bentwood chairs, and Otto Wagner fabrics. Besides the coffee and tortes (Sacher and linzer), there's Bavarian ham with horseradish for breakfast, goulash and strudel for lunch, and chamber music on Sunday after-

noons. (1048 Fifth Avenue, at 86th Street; 212-288-0665.)