


You buying? Great. We'd be happy to eat out at any of these—the best new restaurants in America, serving everything from the best pizza this side of Naples to the ultimate in California cuisine. We'll leave the tip.

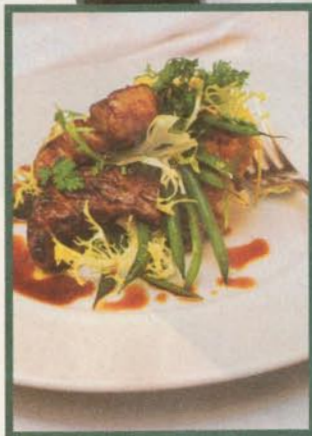
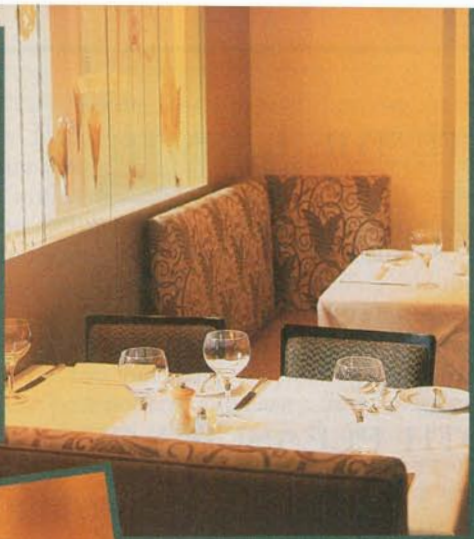
**The
Best New
Restaurants
of 1995**

Cheers!

**By John
Mariani**



A pear in Provence:
At Washington's newest best restaurant.



Fine and mellow: Diane Forley, chef and owner of Verbena, and her dining room; her foie gras with salsify croutons and braised baby leeks.

light touch Montezinos has always demonstrated, and his sauces and reductions are ideal for Boca's tropical heat. This is clearly a niche restaurant, because the town has few dining rooms serving food of this quality, and Angelique draws the kind of visitor who's looking for more than stone crabs and chateaubriand.

Montezinos was one of the first in this country to combine Eastern and Western flavors, and he's a master of the genre, as evidenced by

his superb sesame-encrusted dolphin (note to PETA: *not* the mammal) with wasabi, ginger, peppers, and tamari sauce; or his pork medallions with cinnamon, cumin, lime, and crisp plantains. His "sushi Français" is a French crepe stuffed with tuna and Asian vegetables, and his rendition of a Florida Key-lime pie is a light, French-style lime torte with lemon-lime ice cream.

NEW YORK

OKAY, SO I'M A LITTLE TAKEN with Diane Forley, the chef and owner of Verbena. But, as I told my wife, it's not her youthful, dark-eyed beauty or her shy way. It's just that the woman is an inspired cook whose little townhouse restaurant seems a throwback to a time when streets were named after Washington Irving, and

Verbena

54 Irving Place
212-260-5454

O. Henry, who lived across the street at number 55, was writing "Gift of the Magi" at Pete's Tavern on the next corner. The neighborhood, just off Gramercy Park, still has that genteel feeling, and it has adopted Verbena as its own.

Yet there are no pretensions about Verbena. The interior design is minimal and calming, with decorous references to the herbs Forley uses to such great effect in her food: butternut-squash ravioli flavored with roasted oranges and sage; duck poached in tea with wild cress, sunchokes, and gooseberries; foie gras with salsify croutons and braised baby leeks; grilled Spanish mackerel with dandelion greens; guinea hen with okra, black-eyed peas, and Swiss chard; and creamy desserts made with lush fruits that seem about to burst in your mouth.

In good weather, you might snare a table on the patio out back and finish your meal with a glass of port as you watch a crescent moon curve over the Manhattan skyline.

LENOX ROOM MAY SOUND like a showcase at Ethan Allen Interiors, but the sedate-looking dining room, with its striped banquettes and a romantic nook in the rear, is actually intended to allow some of New York's best-dressed men and women, and a nightly passel of celebrities, to provide the local color. Chef and owner Charles Palmer, who also owns the posh midtown haute-cuisine establishment Aureole and a drop-in downtown bistro named Alva, wanted something in-

Lenox Room

1278 Third Avenue
212-772-0404

between—a place casual enough to attract a regular Upper East Side crowd but serious enough to be a gourmet destination. Together with one of New York's most gracious maître d's, partner Tony Fortuna, Palmer has succeeded admirably. Nowhere else in this tony neighborhood—that is, north of Le Cirque—will you find food of this caliber in an ambience both sophisticated and unintimidating.

Palmer's strong suit has always been his precision, and I can't recall having tasted more perfectly cooked, juicier roast pork loin, here glazed with balsamic vinegar. His casserole of snails and white beans is a paragon of complementary textures, as are the exquisitely crisp, sweet soft-shell crabs in brown butter. Just when you think you've tasted everything, he comes up with a great idea for mascarpone mousse with a crisp almond roulade afloat in pear nectar. It is beautiful food, served by a genuinely affable staff—and, with most entrées about \$20, this is a very good buy in a very dear neck of the woods.

UPON ENTERING AJA (pronounced *Asia*) in New York's Flatiron District, I thought I'd stumbled into the Addams Family Restaurant. The jumble of colored-glass sconces, varicolored Persian carpets, Shaker-style chairs, overstuffed sofas, stained-glass windows, exposed air-conditioning ducts, and an enormous