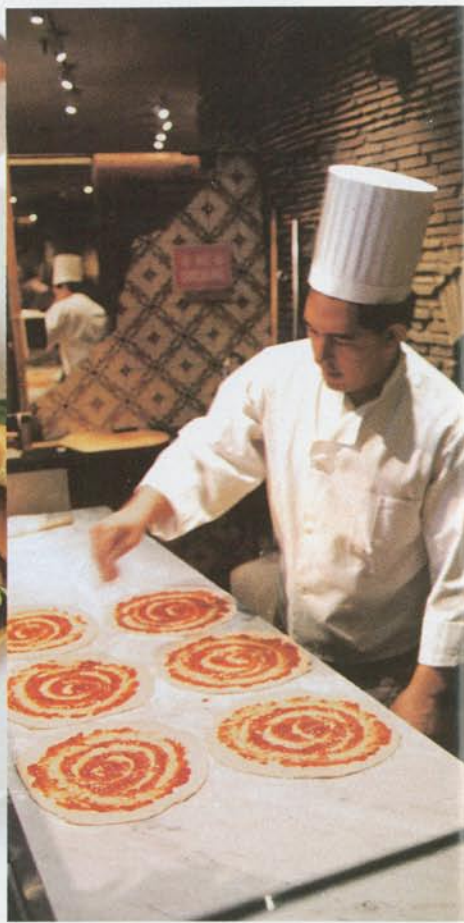
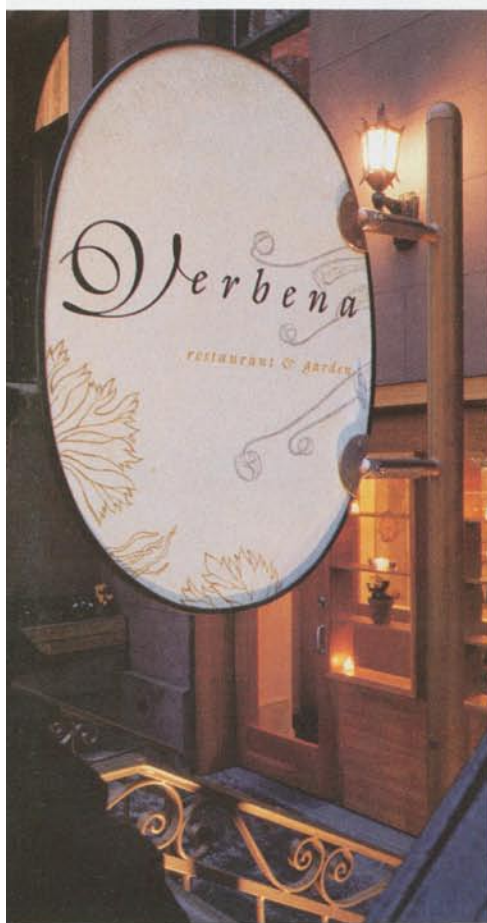


# Spécialités de la Maison

## NEW YORK

VERBENA, THE SEA GRILL, DA NICO  
RANDOM NOTES: KEEPING IT COOL

PHOTOGRAPHS BY RICHARD BOWDITCH



*Diane Forley's townhouse restaurant on Irving Place; mussels at The Sea Grill; Da Nico's pizza preparation*

BY ANDY BIRSH

**A** friend recently recalled that when she was in graduate school, before the advent of the personal computer, everyone she knew—regardless of their chosen field—was also committed to learning to cook. (The present student generation, it appears, spends its free time at the computer exploring the Internet rather than in the kitchen flipping crêpes.) To that brief flowering of intellectuals at the stove, we owe thanks for many erudite cookbooks, culinary histories, and even restaurants that now enrich our lives.

One example in Manhattan of the last is the lovely VERBENA, which opened in September under a young chef-

owner, Diane Forley, who not only came up through the kitchen ranks working for many eminent names in France and New York City but also wrote a senior honors thesis at Brown University entitled “The History of Gastronomy in Nineteenth-Century France Examined Through the Works of Balzac and Flaubert.”

Her restaurant occupies the ground floor and the extensive courtyard garden of a townhouse on charming Irving Place, not far from Gramercy Park. (Upstairs is the separately owned Inn at Irving Place, a deluxe bed-and-breakfast.) Verbena was designed in surpassingly delicate style by Glenn Forley, Ms. Forley's brother, and Natalie Fizer. The interior is spare but luxuriously appointed, prefaced by a glass wall in the entryway in which botanical specimens

are embedded, echoing the herbal theme introduced in the restaurant's name. When the weather permits, Ms. Forley offers a light menu in her handsomely planted garden; Saturday mornings feature horticultural talks conducted by guest instructors, with an alfresco luncheon afterward.

The menu indoors is a highly ambitious seasonal affair made up of dishes that typically unite several intensely flavored elements. I was delighted, for example, by the sautéed fresh New York State duck *foie gras* on her winter roster. It was not only perfectly cooked but also came with lightly crusted stalks of salsify (mild and unctuous), softened prunes, and slow-cooked buttered pearl onions (for sweetness). On the same menu she offered a first course of ultra-light ravioli with a butternut squash filling, fresh sage, and a novel sauce of roasted-orange juice and bits of candied orange zest.

Ms. Forley's crisp-skinned herbed chicken knows no particular season and should delight Verbena's customers as a main dish throughout the year—whether accompanied by a jumble of wild rice, diced celery root, and chanterelles (as it was last winter) or by other apt foils such as a ragout of spring vegetables. She also achieves ravishingly good results with lamb, which I particularly enjoyed with a croustade of eggplant and an unthickened sauce potently enhanced with rosemary and black olives. A short but astutely chosen list of red wines begs to be consulted for this course (with Ridge Zinfandel Lytton Springs '92, for \$37, receiving this department's nod).

Some diners may find that Ms. Forley's ideas for fish overwhelm the main ingredient. Seared tuna steak, in a very fragrant crust of crushed cumin with such other Middle Eastern flavors as minted cracked wheat salad, did in fact succumb to its seasonings despite being quite satisfying to eat. The same held for ideally moist, firm stewed monkfish with a powerful and delicious "relish" compounded of *chorizo*, *jalapeños*, and capers: not recommended for those who look to fish for subtlety.

However, I would recommend the desserts offered at Verbena to anyone. "Bittersweet chocolate soufflé baked in rum-soaked savarin cake with chocolate chip ice cream" is as wonderful as the menu makes it sound. The eponymous herb verbena finally makes an appearance, in the last act so to speak, as a nearly ineffable but intriguing note in the custard for the house's perfectly made *crème brûlée*.

Evening first courses in the dining room range in price from \$6 to \$12, and main courses run about \$17 to \$26. Desserts are \$7. Prices are generally lower on the garden, lunch, and Sunday brunch menus. Lunch indoors is served Tuesday through Friday from noon to 2:30. Dinner commences at 5:30 Tuesday through Saturday and at 5 on Sundays, and last seatings vary through the week (10:30 most nights, 11 on Fridays and Saturdays, and 10 on Sundays). Sunday brunch is offered from noon to 3. During the garden season, outdoor service is continuous from noon to closing, with tea from 3 to 5. A high-ceilinged private dining room, in what was once a carriage house, has its own entrance into the garden and seats as many as twenty-four.

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## THE SEA GRILL



Something doesn't quite fit about a restaurant called The Sea Grill being situated at the heart of Rockefeller

Center, whose magnificent thirties skyscrapers much more strongly suggest mountains than shore. Those responsible have had to work hard to persuade the public to venture below ground level for sumptuous fish or shellfish meals in this first-class, decade-old establishment. Not that the view isn't interesting here: In the cold months diners look out at the famous Rockefeller Center ice-skating rink. During the warm weather, greenery and umbrella-topped outdoor tables replace the rink, and one may savor fish expertly cooked over charcoal while the huge gilded statue of the Titan Prometheus, bringer of fire to mortals, looks over one's shoulder.

The latest efforts to promote The Sea Grill have involved a topflight new chef and some renovation of the kitchen and the dining room, which retains its spacious, privileged atmosphere. Command of the stove is now in the hands of Edward Brown, who made a name for himself at Tropica Bar & Seafood House (owned by the same parent company, Restaurant Associates) with highly inventive aquatic fare that drew inspiration from the Caribbean, Hawaii, and other sunny places. The physical changes,

made in the spring under the supervision of the original architect, Philip George, had in large measure to do with erasing some features, such as indoor fountains, that smacked of eighties excess. The kitchen is open to view from the dining room, and Mr. Brown is the tall, dark-haired man of mild countenance standing at the center of things, near the glowing charcoal grills that are the restaurant's signature.

Those who thrived on the chef's multicultural flights of fancy at Tropica will be surprised by the conservative bias of The Sea Grill's menu. This change reflects not only the formality of the setting but also the chef's evolution. Having proved that he can fill plates with any number of amusing, spicy, offbeat elements, he has now become interested in a cuisine in which the kitchen's handiwork is less obvious but the rewards to the customer are just as great. For instance, he has lately taken up fresh *rouget* flown in from France, a singularly delicious small fish (known here as red mullet) with enough bones to require a surgeon's proficiency to make proper fillets. At the Sea Grill, the fillets are served simply sautéed with eggplant "caviar" and basil-infused oil, so the exacting labor of the dish is apparent only to those who have tried eating *rouget* on the bone.

The standard elements of a seafood menu—salmon fillets, tuna steaks, crab cakes, lobster salad, and such—are very well prepared here, as are guinea hen and sirloin steak for those disinclined to eat from the waters. But the reason I plan to return whenever possible is to sample harder-to-find items that test Mr. Brown's expertise as a *chef poissonier* (which will be detailed between covers this fall when Clarkson Potter publishes his first book, *The Modern Seafood Cook*). What I'll be after are meaty, sweet spiny lobsters direct from the Caribbean, lightly steamed and then finished over charcoal; or succulent blue-shelled mussels from Prince Edward Island in a broth accented with red Thai curry; or Hawaiian fish such as *onaga* and *opah*, which make ideal summer fare grilled and served with a dab of fruit-and-tomatillo salsa.

This is the season for soft-shelled crabs, of which Mr. Brown is deeply fond. He coats the smallest specimens in a tempura batter and *panko* (Japanese bread crumbs), fries them, sets them over arugula, and drizzles on honey-mustard oil. Larger ones are sent to the sauté pan and (Continued on page 94)