

Restaurants

Ruth Reichl

A new meaning for a trendy herb, with plain cooking that can pass for the fancy kind.

Verbena: n. any of a genus of plants of the verbena family, with spikes or clusters of showy red, white or purplish flowers, widely grown for ornament; adj. designating a family of mostly tropical, American, dicotyledonous plants, shrubs and trees including vervain, lantana and teak.

Verbena: A leaf with a lemony flavor and the trendiest herb in restaurants in the fall of 1994.

Verbena: An intimate eight-week-old restaurant on Irving Place that would be, were it a little less expensive, the very model of a modern American restaurant.

Most evenings, Diane Forley comes out of the kitchen to take a walk around the dining room of her restaurant. She looks small and proud in her kitchen whites. Her guests usually look shocked. "She's so young," goes the whisper that runs around the room. "And so pretty."

Ms. Forley appears not to notice the stir she is causing as she chats with this table or that, but every once in a while you catch her casting an appraising eye at some uneaten dish. "Was there something wrong with my butternut squash ravioli?" she seems to be wondering. "Why didn't she finish that piece of bread?"

How could anyone leave the freshly made bread, served still warm with a crock of sweet butter? And there is certainly nothing wrong with the butternut squash ravioli, which has a sweet, surprisingly intense flavor of roasted oranges and sage. It is hard to imagine the person who could resist eating every morsel. Especially in this room, which has the grace and calm of a particularly lovely private dining room.

The light has a dreamy, golden quality. Candles flicker over the fireplaces and on each table, giving the clean, modern room a surprisingly old-fashioned and romantic air. This appealing combination of youth and sophistication is mirrored in both the food and the service. And the clientele: some patrons show up in elegant velvet dresses, others in blue jeans.

Like the dining room, the small menu seems entirely personal. Ms. Forley has worked with a great many chefs, among them Alfred Portale, David Burke and Rick Laakkonen in New York and Michel Guerard, José Lampreia and Alain Passard in France. She seems to have absorbed their philosophies and blended them into a very personal vision.

Her tomato salad is layered with arugula and arrives in one of those tall stacks now popular among New York chefs. It is not pretty or ruffly, as most are, but a straightforward presentation of flavors supported by a thick slice of toast and accented by a bracing tapenade. Where, this time of year, did these tasty tomatoes come from?

The braised mushrooms in truffled mushroom broth are even more unusual. The powerful broth has a scent so autumnal you can almost smell the forest. Angel-hair pasta is curled into the soup, but there is not enough to soak up all the liquid; the only thing to do is pick up a chunk of that good bread and soak up what is left in the bottom of the



Ozler Muhammad/The New York Times

Diane Forley, the chef and owner of Verbena restaurant in Gramercy Park.

Verbena

★★

54 Irving Place, at 17th Street, Gramercy Park, (212) 260-5454.

Atmosphere: The small, beautifully designed room is warm, intimate and romantic.

Service: The young staff is pleasant and professional.

Recommended dishes: Warm salad of shrimp with artichoke griddlecake, layered tomato salad with arugula and tapenade toast, butternut squash ravioli flavored with roasted orange and sage, mushrooms braised with angel-hair pasta in truffled mushroom broth, sautéed striped bass in corn broth with lentils and pastina, chicken roasted with baby russet potatoes, beer-braised ribs of beef with horseradish-scented dumplings, grilled steak with string beans, rum-soaked savarin with chocolate-chocolate-chip ice cream, crème brûlée.

Wine list: The small list is fairly priced and includes a few hard-to-find wines and a pleasing number of half bottles.

Hours: Lunch: noon to 2:45 P.M. Tuesdays through Fridays, until 3 P.M. for Sunday brunch; dinner: 5:30 to 10:30 P.M. Tuesdays through Thursdays, 5:30 to 11 P.M. Fridays and Saturdays and 5:30 to 9:30 P.M.

Sundays. Closed Mondays.

Price range: Appetizers \$6 to \$11.25, main courses \$16.75 to \$24, desserts \$6 to \$7.

Credit cards: All major cards.

Wheelchair accessibility: The restaurant is two steps down from the street, but there is a ramp inside and the restrooms are accessible.

What the stars mean:

(None)	Poor to satisfactory
★	Good
★★	Very good
★★★	Excellent
★★★★	Extraordinary

Ratings reflect the reviewer's reaction to food, ambiance and service, with price taken into consideration. Menu listings and prices are subject to change.

Post reviews. Hundreds of Times restaurant reviews are available on line from @times, an arts and entertainment guide on America Online. Software and information: 1-800-548-5201.

bowl. But the real pièce de résistance among the appetizers is the warm salad of shrimp. This is not shrimp salad as we know it, but a few huge and succulent shrimp stretched across a hefty artichoke-filled griddlecake. The combination of muted artichokes and shrimp is brilliant. A great pile of baby greens rounds out the dish and makes it seem less like an appetizer than a main course.

Ms. Forley is clearly fond of unusual juxtapositions. But she occasionally lets herself get carried away, filling large ravioli with foie gras, shredded duck, grapes and cabbage and serving them in a port-wine-and-chamomile reduction. The taste is medieval in its sweet spiciness, but the dish is so complicated it becomes overwhelming.

The entrees, on the other hand, are disarmingly simple. Roast chicken with baby vegetables and small russet potatoes has the appealing austerity of Shaker cooking. Beef ribs braised in beer and served with root vegetables and horseradish-scented dumplings taste as if they belong in a farmhouse kitchen. Venison is straightforward too, served with sweet potatoes, chestnuts and pomegranate seeds. And there is a wonderful

aged sirloin in a wrapping of thinly sliced mated mushrooms with potatoes and string bean that is an elegant riff on a steakhouse meal.

Striped bass is the most impressive entrée dish that looks like a Minimalist painting, whites and yellows. A strip of fish floats on chunky sea of puréed corn with lentils and pastina. The pale yellow purée looks innocent, but hits the mouth carrying the flavors of coriander, lemongrass, even a hint of chili peppers. This plain cooking raised to new heights.

Portions are generous and many people seem to skip dessert. But it would be a shame to not try the rum-soaked savarin, a huge yeasty dough drizzled with chocolate and topped with a delectable scoop of chocolate-chocolate-chip ice cream. The crème brûlée, which is infused with verbena, is topped with a smooth rich custard topped with a little hat of crinkled tuile sprinkled with edible flower petals. The flowers are a reminder to come spring, the enclosed garden just beyond intriguing mirrored doors promises to be on the pleasantest outdoor spaces in New York City.