

RESTAURANTS

Sam Sifton

'Peter Stuyvesant, Table for Two'

THIS is a city of beautiful restaurants. No one who has lunched at Le Bernardin, or wandered at twilight into the Harrison, or spent a Don Draper evening under the towering ceilings of Eleven Madison Park can deny it. These dining rooms are stages, for both chef and customer. They captivate.

Design matters in restaurants as much as food. Sometimes more. A great dining room can enhance a so-so meal, as at the late Chumley's or the current "21" Club, or it can serve as a minimalist frame for a brilliant one, as at Momofuku Ko or Sushi Yasuda.

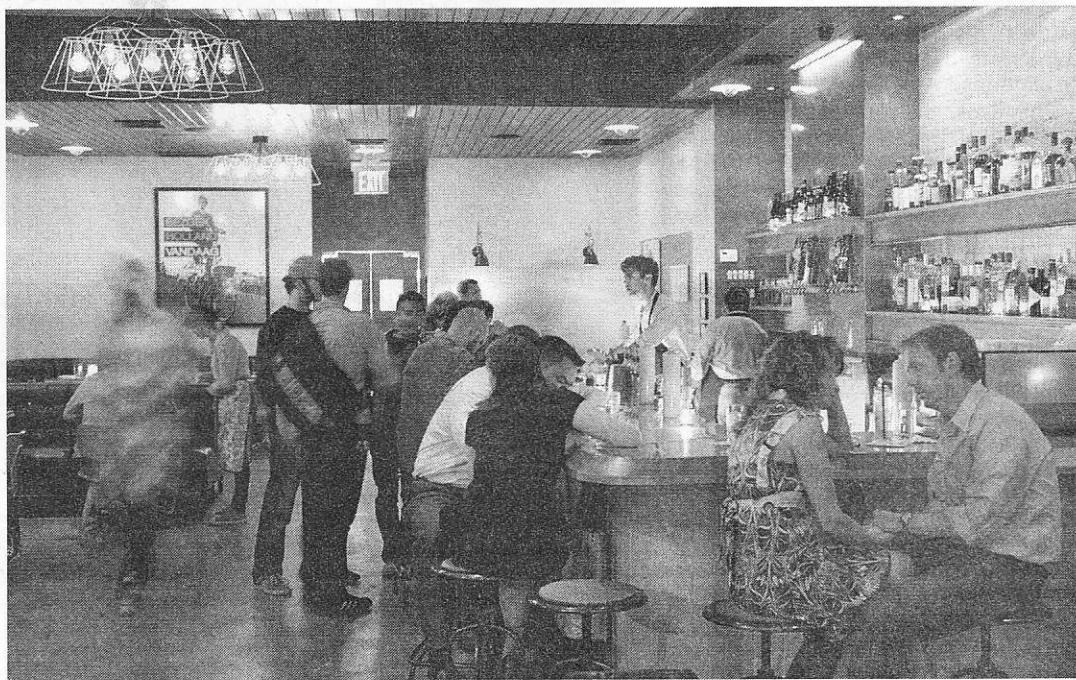
Add modest young Vandaag to the rolls of the attractive: a comfortable restaurant of vaguely Dutch inflection that Brendan Spiro opened in the East Village in late July, in a space by Eric Mailaender of Resistance Design. It is large and airy, high ceilinged, uncrowded and clean. (Most recently the address was Bounce Deuce, a barbecue place that became a noxious, shouty sports bar.)

Vandaag (the name is Dutch for "today") is the sort of dining room you could move into with a couple of tattered leather armchairs, and sit all day, bare feet on the polished concrete floor, reading novels.

Detective-Sergeant Rinus de Gier, the occasionally Buddhist Amsterdam policeman in the novels of Janwillem van de Wetering, would be right at home there.

Black banquettes and wooden chairs make up the seating, beneath simple wooden tables. Heavy Dansk silverware sits upon them, and sassy plates from the New English, a British design firm. These combine to offer a kind of casually luxe, Wall-paper-magazine feel to your meal. A few posters decorate the walls. Streetlight twinkles through the wide plate-glass window along Second Avenue, and through the smaller ones along East Sixth Street. A long zinc bar takes up part of the northern wall, neat as a gallery, with laboratory stools lined up before it. Vandaag is comfortable. Nothing is out of place.

The bar is an excellent place to start a meal that walks in step with this design, that is both simplicity and elegance combined. Katie Stipe, the restaurant's barkeep, has contributed to Vandaag a winning list of drinks, cocktails that make a strong case for them-



THEO MORRISON FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

NEAT AND TIDY Thought-provoking cocktails are on the menu at the zinc bar at Vandaag.

VANDAAG

★★

103 Second Avenue (Sixth Street), East Village; (212) 253-0470; vandaagnyc.com.

ATMOSPHERE Welcome to the New Simplicity.

SOUND LEVEL More coffeehouse than crowded restaurant.

RECOMMENDED DISHES Pickle pot, pickled oysters, pickled sausages, kale, sweetbreads, chilled cucumber soup, sea-urchin bisque, clams, roasted hen.

WINE LIST A small and moderately priced list of mostly German and Austrian varietals, with draft beers from Belgium, the Netherlands and Scandinavia.

PRICE RANGE Appetizers, \$4 to \$14; entrees, \$15 to \$27.

HOURS Monday to Saturday, 9 a.m. to 4 p.m.; 5:30 to 11 p.m.; and late-night menu to 1 a.m. Sunday, 11 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., and 6 to 11 p.m.

and a hint of absinthe. A Bohemian spritz offers a mix of grüner veltliner and vermouth, a liqueur of elderflowers and another of pine cones, some sparkling wine and grapefruit zest. Both are delicious, refreshing and thought provoking: Who knew?

And while improving on the martini ideal is impossible, Ms. Stipe's Turf War, which combines aquavit, Lillet, maraschino juice, orange bitters and absinthe, with both an olive and a twist of lemon, comes close. James Van Der Bond would approve.

Over at the tables, where a capable, handsome serving staff provides close and almost con-

RESERVATIONS Formal reservations accepted for parties of only four or more, but for smaller parties, calling ahead is recommended; those who call are placed on a priority list to be seated before those who do not.

CREDIT CARDS All major cards.

WHEELCHAIR ACCESS The main entrance is up a small step from the sidewalk, but there is an accessible side entrance. There is an accessible restroom on the dining room level.

WHAT THE STARS MEAN Ratings range from zero to four stars and reflect the reviewer's reaction to food, ambience and service, with price taken into consideration. Menu listings and prices are subject to change.

PAST REVIEWS from The Times with additional capsule reviews:

nytimes.com/dining

pickled sausages that come straight from the neighborhood's still-extant Ukrainian meat markets. Mr. Kirschen-Clark's salad of red Russian kale arrives mixed with nutty green strawberries, sweet onions and caraway — the combination unfamiliar and close to transcendent. (His sea-urchin bisque with little buds of basil and a drizzle of chili oil, served one night as an amuse-bouche, another night as a full-order special, went the distance.) Chilled cucumber soup comes tasting of ginger, mint and gin, with hints of pickled cantaloupe and smoked eel. Sounds awful? It is the opposite.

the Swiss version of soy sauce, now produced in China. A gravlax made with sockeye salmon is also worth ordering, with watercress and shallots, dots of salmon roe and plenty of dill. Bitterballen, a kind of Dutch bar snack that is essentially a fried meatball, is here built from slow-braised oxtail meat, and comes with a biting mustard relish.

There are missteps among the main courses. The lamb shoulder is fatty and the pork chop tough; the restaurant's "ham" burger, a mixture of pork and beef cooked as a roulade, sliced and seared, simply cannot hold up to the preparation.

But littleneck clams in a broth redolent of both aquavit and vanilla, with Aleppo peppers and a tangle of crisp parsnip fries, are excellent, and the hen for two, the breast roasted with lemon and bay laurel, and the leg confited, torn and served on toast, with fried potatoes and dandelion greens, is magnificent, the sort of bird to bring favor back to white meat.

The breast is moist and lemony-fragrant beneath its crisp skin, and combined with a side order of spicy-sweet hete bliksem, or "hot lightning" — crisp fingerling potatoes combined with smoky bacon, slivers of apple and a velvet blanket of strop, a Dutch caramel syrup — it makes for the sort of meal you can wake up thinking about a few mornings in a row.

Mr. Kirschen-Clark provides

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NEW YORK TIMES
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The bar is an excellent place to start a meal that walks in step with this design, that is both sim- plicity and elegance combined. Katie Stipe, the restaurant’s bar- keep, has contributed to Vandaag a winning list of drinks, cocktails that make a strong case for them- selves, rather than simply coast- ing on appletini fumes. Built of the ancient Dutch style of gin called genever — as well as of aquavit; beer from Holland, Bel- gium and Scandinavia; and wine from Germany and Austria — they combine in fascinating ways.

A simple gin cocktail, for in- stance, brings a glass of icy Bols genever, mixed with the reduction of golden ale, bitters, a faint taste and color of kirschwasser



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Over at the tables, where a ca- pable, handsome serving staff provides close and almost con- trol-freaky service, the menu proves to be just as inventive, a version of Northern European cooking refracted through an East Village lens. The chef, Phil- lip Kirschen-Clark, is an alumnus of Corton and WD-50, the Pegu Club and Jimmy’s No. 43. He did not come to Vandaag to serve pea soup and rye bread.

Instead there are fat, barely pickled Blue Point oysters that tasted of the East Village’s once- vibrant appetizing stores, and

pickled sausages that come straight from the neighborhood’s still-extant Ukrainian meat mar- kets. Mr. Kirschen-Clark’s salad of red Russian kale arrives mixed with nutty green strawberries, sweet onions and caraway — the combination unfamiliar and close to transcendent. (His sea-urchin bisque with little buds of basil and a drizzle of chili oil, served one night as an amuse-bouche, another night as a full-order spe- cial, went the distance.) Chilled cucumber soup comes tasting of ginger, mint and gin, with hints of pickled cantaloupe and smoked eel. Sounds awful? It is the oppo- site.

It is best to start with a plate of the house-cured pickles, those sausages and an oyster per per- son, and consume these with your drinks. (Bread? Vandaag charges \$6 for a basket, with a side of juniper-scented gin butter and some lentil spread. That may make business sense. But it comes off as churlish.)

Follow with those soups, if available, and some nuggets of fried lamb sweetbreads, with a vinaigrette flavored with Maggi,

the Swiss version of soy sauce, now produced in China. A grav- lax made with sockeye salmon is also worth ordering, with water- cress and shallots, dots of salmon roe and plenty of dill. Bitterbal- len, a kind of Dutch bar snack that is essentially a fried meat- ball, is here built from slow- braised oxtail meat, and comes with a biting mustard relish.

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Mr. Kirschen-Clark provides Vandaag’s desserts as well as its savory dishes. Many of these are less sweet than the hete bliksem, though no less welcome for that. A stroopwafel is probably best, though, with a cup of coffee, the thin waffle warming in the steam. Eating it in this room is to be thrilled by the unfamiliar, and to experience what the art critic Robert Hughes called the shock of the new. That’s what good de- sign is for, too.

\$25 AND UNDER

Oliver Strand

For a Korean Standby, a Lively New Energy

IF you judge by appearances, New Wonjo Restaurant is the same Koreatown standby it was when it was just plain Wonjo



gol (\$37.95), an enormous stew of spicy sausage, kimchi and vege- tables that the menu says serves two but could easily feed three