

RESTAURANTS

William Grimes

Even the Doggy Bags Really Care

On a sultry Sunday night, two men fresh off the plane from Silicon Valley were getting the full Union Square Cafe treatment. "Would you like ice water, Evian or a sparkling mineral water?" the waitress asked. "Ice water?" one man asked, a little fearfully. "Excellent!" the waitress said, as if he had given the correct answer to a tough exam question.

"Now I'll get your water, let you relax a little bit and come back for your order," she said, and sashayed off. The diner turned to his companion and said, with a touch of bitterness, "This waitress is not making me feel like I'm in New York."

If you're looking for that bracing verbal slap in the face that says New York, you're not going to get it at Union Square Cafe. This is a restaurant where the milk of human kindness runs in an unstoppable torrent. It starts the moment you call to make a reservation, and it continues unabated until the door closes behind you, and even after.

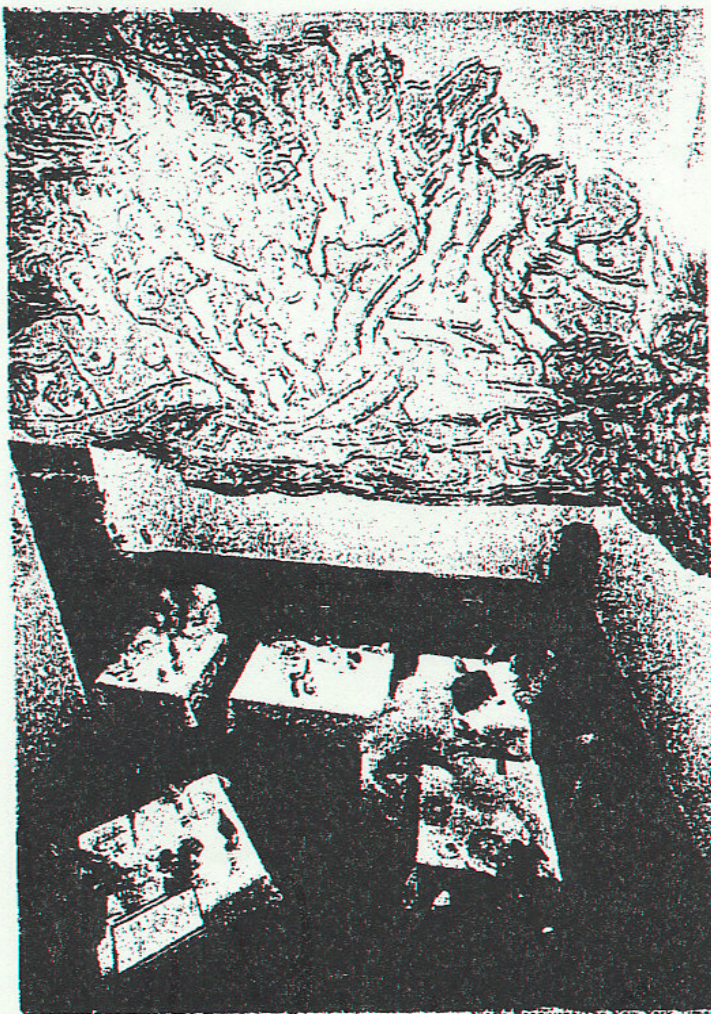
When I opened my doggy bag one morning after eating at the restaurant, I discovered a thank-you note from the chef, in realistically printed script. "I'm delighted that you thought so highly of your meal that you've taken the rest home," it read in part. "Hope you'll enjoy it as much the second time around. See you soon at Union Square Cafe!"

There's a reason that Union Square Cafe in the nearly 14 years since it opened has become one of the city's most beloved dining spots and a top destination for tourists: It treats its guests very well. It makes them feel welcome. It caters to their every whim in an openhanded, Midwestern manner, which disguises a disciplined, highly professional understanding of service that broke the mold in New York. Union Square's pioneering fusion of fine food and wine, casual atmosphere and stellar service has made it enormously influential and hugely popular.

It's not the food that's settling off the stampede. When Union Square opened, it was one of the first, and the best, of a new breed that Bryan Miller called "international bistro," in reviewing the restaurant in 1989 in *The New York Times* and awarding it three stars.

Union Square has not changed, but the world has changed around it. Michael Romano, the executive chef and part owner, does what he has always done, and done very well, which is to turn out jazzed-up bistro and trattoria fare with utter consistency. What looked like a flashy sports car a decade ago now seems more like a midsize Buick cruising in the center lane at a precise 65.

On sitting down, you will get the



ONE THAT BROKE THE MOLD Almost 14, Union Square Cafe still impresses.

same small dish of Gaeta olives, and they will be superb, firm fleshed, with a subtle winy tang. The wine list is still outstanding and still full of bargains, and good old Billecart-Salmon is still the house Champagne. The signature fried calamari, a dull cliché elsewhere in town, deserve their star billing at Union Square, where the kitchen effortlessly sends out golden brown, crunchy piles of the stuff, perfectly cooked outside and inside and nicely complemented with an incisive, creamy anchovy mayonnaise. The art on the wall is immovably mid-1980's.

Although several foreign accents are heard on the menu, Italian dominates, especially in the pasta dishes, which put many Italian restaurants to shame. Mr. Romano's pasta has a nutty firmness, even in the thinnest

forms, that stamps it as authentically Italian. Crab meat and artichoke tortelli, served with a roasted tomato and oregano butter, is a standout, and although I never found the flavor in the zucchini sauce that features largely in the squash-blossom appetizer, the perfect fazzoletto, or handkerchief pasta, held my attention.

Union Square gets the little things right. A simple salad of red and yellow heirloom tomatoes came to the table cool, not cold, so the beauty of the tomatoes and a fragrant olive oil came through with full force. It's not a big deal, but over the course of a meal, the details add up.

In general, Union Square has mastered the art of pleasing without challenging. The spice-braised lamb, one of the restaurant's recurring daily specials, strikes a mildly exotic

Union Square Cafe

★★★

21 East 16th Street; (212) 243-4023

ATMOSPHERE: Stylishly casual dining in an airy, pleasing room**SOUND LEVEL:** Good acoustics make normal conversation possible**RECOMMENDED DISHES:** Fried calamari, crab and artichoke tortelli, spice-braised lamb, banana tart**SERVICE:** Friendly and sharp**WINE LIST:** Stellar and eclectic**PRICE RANGE:** Lunch, appetizers, \$9.75 to \$14.50; entrees, \$16 to \$18; desserts, \$4. Dinner, appetizers, \$9.75 to \$14.50; entrees, \$18.50 to \$28; desserts, \$4.**HOURS:** Lunch, Monday through Saturday, noon to 2:30 P.M. Dinner, Monday through Thursday, 6 P.M. to 10:30; Friday and Saturday, to 11:30 P.M.; Sunday, 5:30 to 10 P.M.**CREDIT CARDS:** All major cards.**WHEELCHAIR ACCESS:** A dining room and tables near the bar on street level. Stairs to restrooms.

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.

Past restaurant reviews from *The New York Times*, with additional capsule reviews by *Times* critics, are available on New York Today: www.nytoday.com

Mediterranean-Indian note, with mint, a lemon-bāsmati pilaf and glazed carrots, but it is the food equivalent of an ethnic crossover hit, just sweet enough to be mainstream. Lemon-pepper duck, served with a peach-cherry chutney, continues in the same vein, with added sweetness in the pecan-rice accompaniment.

It's no surprise that the desserts aim for an artful blend of homey and exotic, most memorably in the banana tart with a caramel shellac, a Union Square standby. A plum pop-over comes with spicy cardamom ice cream, and a chalky, thin panna cotta is done ice cream parlor style, as a raspberry parfait. The all-America entry on the dessert list is a terrific peach pot pie, surrounded by little clusters of caramel popcorn.

The excitement in New York's dining scene has moved on, which is partly the fault of Danny Meyer, the principal owner, who has since opened Gramercy Tavern, Eleven Madison Park and Tabla. But when it comes to a comfort factor that keeps diners ferociously loyal and sends them blissfully on their way, Union Square still sits on top of the heap.