

Dining In New York City: More Than Just a Meal (Part 2 of 2)

by Jill Koenigs, PassPorter Guest Contributor

[\(Click here to read part one of Jill's culinary tour of NYC\)](#)

Before heading back into Manhattan, we made a stop in Brooklyn for a mid-afternoon snack at the original Junior's (386 Flatbush Avenue Extension at Dekalb Avenue). We were escorted to our table past a delectable dessert case and through what seemed like half a city block of tables. Everything about this restaurant was huge; the menu, the portions and the restaurant itself! After perusing the list of cheesecakes, I finally decided on the carrot cake cheesecake and literally gasped when it was placed in front of me. It consisted of a layer of carrot cake topped by a layer of cheesecake and then topped off with another layer of carrot cake. This creation was then frosted with a delicious cream cheese icing. Junior's knows its cheesecakes!

One of our guilty pleasures in New York City is known simply as "the place with the chili pepper lights" among our group. Since we had newbies with us, we knew that we had to initiate them into the surreal world of Milon (93 1st Ave., between 5th and 6th Streets). The cuisine is Indian, but the experience is out of this world. The restaurant itself is tiny. I am pretty certain that I would come close to touching both sides of the restaurant if I stood in the middle with my arms outstretched. Tables are lined up on either side of the restaurant and patrons are packed in like sardines, so it's not a place for someone with claustrophobia. The real magic of this restaurant is the hundreds of chili pepper lights and Christmas ornaments that hang from the ceiling and wrap you in a warm red cocoon throughout your meal.

In the past, I have enjoyed several wonderful meals, but this year my selection was not my best. I love cauliflower, so when I spotted a dish on the menu highlighting this vegetable I was sold. It was just okay, but I certainly didn't go hungry after our appetizers of vegetable samosas and naan bread served with chutney. My table mates also were more than willing to share dishes such as tikka masala with chicken in a tomato cream sauce and a red snapper that was marinated in a perfect blend of spices.

The piece de resistance of our evening is when we designate one person among our party to be the birthday girl. The birthday girl this year was the person who volunteered to run down to the wine store to buy two bottles of wine for us (they do not sell alcohol at Milon but will

happily open it and serve it for you). At the end of our meal, she knew something was amiss when everyone at the table could not stop smiling. When the lights started flashing, the Indian music began playing and everyone in the room began clapping, she knew something was up. When a dish of mango ice cream with a candle in it was placed in front of her, we had to confess to her that she was our honorary birthday girl of the evening. You just cannot go to Milon without hearing the birthday song -- even if you do have to tell a white lie. When you receive your check at the end of your meal, you almost have to question if you are still in New York City. It is one of the more inexpensive meals that you will find in this pricey city.

Another repeat destination for us every year is Bobby Flay's Mesa Grill (102 Fifth Ave.). We all have a slight crush on the redhead from Food Network fame, so it's fun to visit one of his restaurants. The atmosphere immediately puts you in a festive frame of mind. The large and airy dining room features a beautiful wooden bar on one side and warm, southwestern colors on the walls. Our favorite meal here is brunch, so we were seated at our round table in the middle of the restaurant at high noon. As you would imagine at a Southwestern-themed restaurant, the margaritas are a must. They combine the perfect marriage of sweet and tart with that extra kick of tequila. After we placed our obligatory margarita order, a bread basket filled with blue cornbread and pastries was placed in the middle of our table. I could have made a meal on these alone, but I knew what awaited me with an appetizer and an entree. I started with a barbecue pork quesadilla that combined the smoky sweetness of barbecue with a smooth Oaxaca cheese and crispy tortillas. For my entree, I had grilled mahi mahi with a roasted pineapple chile sauce. The food simply bursts with flavor. Every mouthful is a different experience. Mesa Grill is a bright and bold experience -- from the decor to the fresh flavors of the food, you will not be disappointed.

Believe it or not, the Mesa Grill was not our only fine dining experience that day. The South Carolina contingent had a special evening planned at the [James Beard House](#) (167 W. 12th St.). Coincidentally, one of our local chefs from Columbia, South Carolina was experiencing what must have been the highlight of his career that evening. He had been selected to cook a southern extravaganza at the James Beard House. James Beard was a renowned food writer and chef who left his home as a showplace to cultivate new chefs. Preparing a meal for members of the society is a great honor, so we called it fate and made reservations. The evening was a culinary tribute to the South. We were wined and dined with wines for each course and a menu that consisted of fried green tomatoes, she crab soup, shrimp and grits, quail, and a pecan tart to finish. Half of the fun that evening was hearing the comments from

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our New York City table mates as they tasted shrimp and grits and collards. They were truly impressed and we were proud to call ourselves South Carolinians that night.

Pastis (9 9th Avenue) was our destination for brunch the next day. This restaurant is set in the style of a French cafe - it's loud, busy, bursting with people, and full of energy. Pastis is also great for people watching because it is also a hangout for celebrities. In the past, Tim Robbins, Susan Sarandon and Hillary Swank had been spotted. Today, however, the food and drink were the only stars that we managed to see. Since it was brunch, we all started with a champagne cocktail. We ordered a basket of breads and pastries to start and then we each ordered an entree. I chose a baked pasta dish which served as the perfect comfort food on a cold and blustery day while the rest of my companions ordered egg dishes. As soon as we stepped back outside into the cold day, we spotted our celebrity. Danny Aiello (of Spike Lee's Do the Right Thing and Cher's Moonstruck fame) was shooting a commercial across the street. We stood for a while watching take after take before we continued on satisfied that we got to see at least one celebrity!

Dining for us in New York City is not just about the food - - it's about the entire experience. Nothing makes me happier than to sit around a table with friends talking and laughing over good food and drink. Those are the memories that keep us coming back to New York City year and year.

About The Author: Jill is a proud member of the PassPorter Message Board where she loves writing trip reports about her latest Walt Disney World vacation and exchanging advice with fellow PassPorters. In her real life, she works in the Information Technology department of an insurance company and enjoys reading and cooking. She loves nothing more than being in her happy place with her husband, Thom, and their two daughters, Mary Devall and Maddie.

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