

BALTHAZAR

80, Spring St. (between Broadway & Crosby St.), Soho

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By now it is already firmly established that Balthazar is not just a restaurant; it is an experience. Its allure lies not on the parts that make up the whole, the soaring, faux-antique room, the beveled mirrors, the smoked glass, the red leather banquettes, the hand-lettered signs, the huge flower centerpiece—it is the whole itself. Just as it is Keith McNally's rose-tinted evocation of a Parisian brasserie—and one that in so doing remains vintage New York—it is both the dream and the dream-come-true.

In my case, it is what brought me there morning, noon and night in the one and a half weeks in the city: after my early morning jog around the Village and Soho (the bread is always great, the power breakfasts the stuff of legend), in that hazy hour right after 5 p.m., between a long late lunch and a fast approaching dinner (a few glasses of wine invariably featured, as did, curiously, a pile of the perfect pommes frites), and at around 11.30 p.m., after dinner in Tribeca or Chinatown, when the panicky half an hour to a quarter of an hour brisk walk into Soho will give you the perfect excuse to pop in at Balthazar for a glass of port or Armagnac and watch the beautiful people be, well, beautiful.

(On our visit, I swear, we tried our hardest to blend.)

Anyway, despite the horror stories you read about the long impossible waits and the increasingly touristy atmosphere, I never seem to have any problem nabbing a table (or maybe it is because I tend not to go in the peak hours). The service is not always stellar but it is polite, if often attentive, and my food always comes promptly. And as soon as I am about to leave, I am already hankering to come back.

And what about the food? While the food is never the main draw, it is always reliably good, with the fabled seafood platter, the frisee *aux lardons*, the onion soup, the goat cheese tart, the steak frites, the roast chicken on mashed potatoes, the braised short ribs and the skate with brown butter and capers topping my list. And while the tarte tatin and profiteroles are justly famous, it was the bread and butter pudding with butterscotch sauce—a serene, cloudlike classic—that took the cake that week.









- Some of the pics in this entry are recent (2019-2021), if only because I didn't take such good pics in 2013.

Other comfort food mainstays

... Pearl Oyster Bar (18, Cornelia St. (bet. Bleecker & W. 4th Sts.), W. Village, tel. 212-691-8211, www.pearloysterbar.com) for mouthwatering lobster rolls slathered in mayo and served on a toasted buttery roll with shoestring fries, pan-roasted oysters, fresh steamers and other simply but beautifully prepared odes to New England in cozy, elbow-to-elbow surrounds...

... Congee Village (100, Allen St. (bet. Broome & Delancey Sts.), Lower East Side, tel. 212-941-1818, www.congeevillagerestaurants.com), for around-the-clock delicious Cantonese fare at unbelievably low prices...

... Lupa (170, Thomson St. (bet. Bleecker & Houston Sts.), Greenwich Village, tel. 212-982-5089, www.luparestaurant.com), for reliably simple and palatable Roman classics in a laid-back, genial, unpretentious trattoria setting (best on a lazy Sunday afternoon: a bowl of *bucatini all' amatriciana*, say, or a basic *spaghetti aglio e olio*, with a nice glass of wine)...

... Blue Water Grill (31, Union Square West (16th St.), Union Square, tel. 212-675-9500, www.bluewatergrillnyc.com), for consistently delish brunch classics and seafood-heavy international brasserie offerings complete with soaring ceilings, grand columns, smooth jazz, premium people-watching and unbeatable location just by the Square. Don't miss the surprisingly flavorful sushi rolls.