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TABLES FOR TWO



TASTE

1411 Third Avenue, at 80th Street (212-717-9798)—Forget the first impression: Taste is a deli by day, filled with strollers and salad eaters and cappuccino sippers. At three, the place shuts down for a few casual changes (tables get flowers and tablecloths, the bar gets chip baskets) and returns at six as a fine-dining option for a largely local crowd. If you're in a dressy mood, the whole thing can seem like a letdown at first, but have a handful of the house-made chips, take a flier on some wine by the glass—say, the crisp new Mexico champagne—and uncharitable thoughts disappear. Eli Zabar's marriage of wine store and greengrocer has produced a comfy market-menu restaurant with a sophistication that sneaks up on you.

With everything that's available to him, the chef, Scott Bieber, is right to keep things simple: the rooftop-tomato salad, sliced and salted, from Zabar's second floor greenhouse,

tastes as good as roadside tomatoes in August. The baby-spinach salad is positively newborn. This elemental presentation of the food encourages the matchmaking of friend and vegetable, and sure enough, on a return visit, the chef devised a special onion lover's menu of charred cipollini-onion salad, buttermilk-batter onion rings, and a rack of lamb with Vidalia-onion pudding. Of course, the willful onion lover traded the lamb for the aged rib-eye steak, the house specialty, which is suitable in size for a Diamond Jim Brady.

Taste has a wine merchant, Jonathan Laufer from the store next door, **W.I.N.E.**, who has put together a remarkable list of out-of-the-way wines by the glass (Weininger Grüner Veltliner, Muga Rioja, Woop Woop Shiraz) that he will pair with the food, course by course. On both visits, Dorothy Czub, a waitress with a hey-hon manner and the savvy of a river guide, laid out the best paths through the menu and even dropped by after dessert (a lemon-meringue cake that looked like Madame de Pompadour) with a bag of candied grapefruit that extended the nosh-fest through the cab ride home. (Open daily for deli and dinner. Entrées \$19-\$35)

—Kevin Conley