

Rated ★★★



The Biltmore

A high-end modern American-eclectic restaurant in Chelsea

Fifth Avenue (Chelsea vicinity) seems an unlikely location for a high-end modern American-eclectic restaurant, but here the Biltmore roosts. The owners, two auspicious Boston restaurateurs Jeffrey Mills and Chris Medeiros who love food, decided to try their hand in a New York restaurant fortuitously forging a union with Executive Chef, the innovative Gary Robins. Together they do a very commendable job.

Biltmore's leather booth and bench banquettes, elegant marble walls, columns and floors, sparkling crystal chandeliers, scintillating framed mirrors and fireplace (salvaged from the old Biltmore Hotel), complete with lofty wood beamed ceilings, glossy oval black-topped tables and contemporary artwork are intended to create a ritzy, cutting-edge ambience which falls into a sort of vintage Beaux Arts modernism.

A long bar and lounge holds waiting dinners at the front of the restaurant. Scope out the freestanding padded brass cel phone booth offering a modicum of

privacy. The 82 seat dining room is to the rear. Groups of six to eight diners are not unusual here, and the room gets a trifle noisy. However the mood is more animated than abrasive.

A consistent high point of meals here are the desserts which may include dewy fresh seasonal mixed berries--rasberries, blueberries, pomegranate seeds and figs--served with a pitcher of creme fraiche or a sumptuous Asian pear strudel with chestnuts and candied ginger in the mix or a luscious wedge of blueberry cheese-cake.

Although a great many people justifiably rave about the Biltmore, unless chef Gary Robins brings his style, imagination, originality and ingenuity personally to the cuisine, subjectively supervising the kitchen, your experience may not live up to the advance hype. While not bad, the food doesn't equal Robin's careful attention to his architecturally masterful creations. Dishes can be proffered disappointingly cold and close to unpalatable. So be assured Gary is at the helm. After all the food isn't cheap. A 3-course dinner could cost as much as \$70 a person, excluding cocktails and wine.

The menu presents a balanced selection of singularly attractive dishes. Some of the most fascinating are specials such as the outstanding light and delicate, consummately seasoned fried oysters with pickled carrots. Typical menu items include the generously portioned champagne poached lobster salad, a complex, sweetly herbed and spiced concoction imbued with ruby red grapefruit, Thai basil, pickled hearts of palm in an airy flavorsome yuzu vinaigrette. Another classic here is the plum sake poached torchon of foie gras, richly stupendous--perhaps too rich, but ever so silky smooth and pleasing, served with apricot golden raisin chutney with warm brioche, toasted walnuts and fennel-fig. Crab filled crispy breaded fried squash blossom is vigorously spiced with savory mango dipping sauce and sweet corn avocado salad on the side. One

more good appetizer--giant prawns--are deftly wrapped in crisp pan-fried egg noodles. The menu description states red beets which were absent from our platter, but the dish did contain honey-ginger vinaigrette, avocado, tomato salad and mango mint salsa.

Among entrees, crusted seared breast of duck, a signature dish, skillfully sliced benefits from an exquisite presentation accommodating a sauté of chestnuts, turnips, but-



ternut squash puree and roasted black mission figs, the whole copiously flavored but regretfully proffered lukewarm instead of hot, thus falling from grace. A hugely impressive thick 4-chop, fork-tender, succulent spiced rack of lamb with dried fig cous cous, ginger-glazed carrots, braised butter beans, and tomato eggplant chutney surprisingly also falls short of expectations, despite all the fussy frills and focus it received. This world-class creative conception simply could not stand up to being tended cold enough to congeal the marbling in the meat.

Side dishes the likes of somewhat tasty sautéed leeks are average, but the creamy polenta was not only cold but overpowered by gorgonzola cheese.

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A good wine list offers an outstanding selection at prices that range \$35 to \$100 a bottle as well as pouring by the glass. Cocktails are trendy and generous. Service makes up for any kitchen shortcomings due to Robin's truancy.

1/2 Biltmore Room, 290 Eighth Avenue, New York. (212) 807-0111. Serves lunch and dinner. Dinner entrees \$28 to \$39. Reservations advised. Accepts major credit cards.BT**

