

54th St. (486-9592). (E) AE, CB, MC, V.

43rd-56th Streets, West Side

Adrienne—The Art Nouveau elegance and hush make this a perfect spot for an illicit tryst or a business lunch. A United Nations of flavors, 700 Fifth Ave., at 55th St., in the Peninsula. (247-2200). (M) AE, CB, DC, DS, MC, V.

Algonquin—Draws on its history as the fabled stomping ground of literary giants. The wood-paneled sitting room-like lobby still holds many imaginations captive. 59 W. 44th St. (840-6800). (M) AE, CB, DC, MC, V.

American Festival—Lunch inside this glamorized luncheonette with rotating American folk art. Skaters in winter and a garden in the summer and early fall make for fierce window-seat competition. Seven hours' free parking after 5:30 P.M.

Happenings Mystery Box

"You gotta understand, we're used to having any ingredients we want," explains Casca-bel's chef, Tom Valenti, one of five celebrated alumni of Gotham Bar & Grill called back one recent morning to Alfred Portale's restaurant kitchen to cook with a restricted list of ingredients called a mystery box. "We're being asked to use a muscle in our brain we never have to use."

The mystery box is a traditional cooking-school exercise, but this one contains none of the esoterica found in a culinary academy. Instead, each box is identical and contains fifteen items found in an average New Yorker's refrigerator; at least ten of the items must be used to make one dish (participants also pick two herbs each). When the chefs realize that they're being asked to paint a masterpiece with the same fifteen crayons, the mood turns dark. "Let's just drink the vodka and go home," grouses Tom Colicchio of Gramercy Tavern. "I could have looked in the box a week ago and I still wouldn't know what to make," adds Portale, peering forlornly into his box.

After a twenty-minute gripe-fest, they get to work. Verbena's Diane Forley busies herself grinding rice for pea porridge. Portale rinses the salsa to see whether

Cafe Un, Deux, Trois—This casual French bistro has all the hustle and bustle of its Parisian cousins. Good, hearty regional food at moderate prices. 123 W. 44th St. (354-4148). (M) AE, CB, DC, DS, MC, V.

Charlotte—Offers a refuge from the hubbub and hustle of Times Square. Consistent American cuisine in a postmodern setting. 145 W. 44th St., in the Hotel Macklowe (789-7508). (M-E) AE, DC, MC, V.

Cité—An extravagant French steakhouse, marble and pewter with blazing chandeliers, and a more affordable grill next door. 120 W. 51st St. (956-7100/7262). (M-E) AE, CB, DC, DS, MC, V.

Dish of Salt—Opinions vary but are always strong. Gentrified, dependable Cantonese. 133 W. 47th St. (921-4242). (M) AE, DC, MC, V.

Frankie and Johnnie's Steakhouse—The oldest speakeasy in the city. In the same location in the

the tomatoes can be salvaged (they can't). Arizona 206's David Walzog finds a lime and an Ancho pepper in the box, and one of his herbs is cilantro—out of the blender comes a pair of southwestern-style vinaigrettes. John Schenk of the Monkey Bar prepares parchmentlike sheets of baked risotto, while Valenti grinds a chicken breast for a strudel.

The mood lightens considerably around noon as the dishes begin to take shape. All but Portale, who is



notoriously organized, admit to having made it up as they went along. "I didn't know I was making a soup until two minutes before the deadline," says Colicchio, "and that was because I made a mistake with the sauce."

MANNY HOWARD

Rockefeller Plaza, 20 W. 50th St. (246-6699). (M) AE, DC, MC, V.

Barbetta—Impressive and old-world, this theater-district favorite has space, with a regal dining room and a romantic garden. Serving Northern Italian food. 321 W. 46th St. (246-9171). (M) AE, CB, DC, DS, MC, TM, V.

Broadway Joe—Located in a townhouse on Restaurant Row, this steakhouse serves a four-teen-ounce prime rib but also delivers fresh seafood and pasta for the omnivore. Hirschfeld caricatures cover the walls, so come find your Ninas while you dine. Free dinner parking. Private parties. 315 W. 46th St. (246-6513). (M) AE, DC, DS, MC, V.

Ciao Europa—Because of its muraled walls and abundant greenery, many feel like they're walking into a castle when they walk into this Italian restaurant. But this is no monolithic Italian: Each week, a regional dish from a specific European country is served as the special. 63 W. 54th St. (247-1200). (M) AE, DC, MC, V.

theater district since 1926. Try the steaks and the chops. Yes, that is Tom Selleck. 269 W. 45th St. (997-9494). (M) AE, DC, MC, V.

Halcyon—Elegant setting and carefully presented food. Pretheater dinner is a bargain. 151 W. 54th St., in the Rihga Royal Hotel (468-8888). (E) AE, CB, DC, MC, TM, V.

Jewel of India—A spicy bargain at lunch. Mother-of-pearl and gold-leaf trimming give this room an elegant appeal. 15 W. 44th St. (869-5544). AE, CB, DC, DS, MC, TM, V.

Koyote Kate's—A Tex-Mex restaurant complete with tables hand-painted with a Native American theme. Lots of steak and chops, pasta, and fresh seafood; caters to a twentysomething crowd with a live band every night. 307 W. 47th St. (956-1091). (M) AE, DC, MC, V.

La Bonne Soupe—Checked tablecloths, steak frites, onion soup, and crème caramel to fall in love with. Twenty years ago, long before New Yorkers knew they loved casual French dining, this mid-town mainstay set the pace. 48 W. 55th St. (586-

7650). (I) AE, MC, V.

Langan's—American food ranges from steaks to crab cakes and seafood. A trendy, well-heeled crowd at the much-frequented bar mixes with theatergoers in the dining room. 150 W. 47th St. (869-5482). (M) AE, CB, DC, MC, V.

La Reserve—Justifiably crowded during precurtain times; stop by during odd hours for sophisticated French offerings and surroundings. 4 W. 49th St. (247-2993/2995). (E) AE, DC, MC, V.

Lattanzi—Reliable Italian in a romantic garden. Go when there's no danger of a curtain rising or falling soon for special attention. 361 W. 46th St. (315-0980). (M) AE only.

La Veranda—Northern Italian food. Traditional music in the background. A quiet place with two private rooms for parties. 163 W. 47th St. (391-0905). (M) AE, CB, DC, MC, TM, V.

Le Patio—Tapas bar and light fare for hotel guests and after-work diners. 119 W. 56th St., in the Parker Meridien (245-5000). (M) AE, CB, DC, DS, MC, V.

Les Pyrénées—French Provençal cuisine. Cassoulet from Toulouse recommended, as well as filet mignon and frogs' legs. A rustic atmosphere. A lot of theatergoers. 251 W. 51st St. (246-0044; 246-0373). (M) AE, CB, DC, DS, MC, V.

Le Rivage—Pretheater bistro, reasonable prices, efficient service, and satisfying fare. 340 W. 46th St. (765-7374). (M) AE, MC, V.

Marlowe—A little cultural melle: an American bistro that looks like a French country inn. Oak-plank floors and low, romantic lighting are soothing. 328 W. 46th St. (765-3815). (M) AE, MC, TM, V.

Nakagawa—Elegant Japanese in the heart of the theater district. Come feast on some sushi pre- or post-show. 7 W. 44th St. (869-8077). (M) AE, DC, MC, V.

Pallo—Authentic Italian cuisine served in a formal atmosphere. The crowd is occasionally *très* international. Tourists and natives agree that the breadsticks are unreal. 151 W. 51st St. (245-4850). (E) AE, MC, V.

Patsy's—If it's good enough for Frank, it's good enough for you. Upscale Italian eatery rooted in the glorious 1950s. 236 W. 56th St. (247-3491/3492). (M) AE, CB, DC, DS, MC, V.

Rainbow Room—Where troubles melt like raindrops, boasts this perch in the sky. Sixty-five stories up and over 60 years old, its stellar views of New York give it reason to gloat. Romantic, with a solid Continental menu. Jacket and tie required. 30 Rockefeller Plaza (632-5000). (E) AE, DC, MC, V.

Pierre au Tunnel—French the way it used to be (the place is 41 years old), and thoroughly charming. The food won't surprise you, but that is indeed the point; reliable and comforting. 250 W. 47th St. (575-1220). (M) AE, MC, V.

René Pujol—The rustic French food and service are careful and heartfelt. 321 W. 51st St. (246-3023). (M) AE, DC, MC, V.

Restaurant Raphael—Chef Jean Michel Bergou-gnoux redefines contemporary French country cuisine for the nineties in a chateaulike setting. Stenciled floral beams, the fireplace, and the outdoor rear garden set the tone for an intimate, romantic dining experience or a business meal. Near MOMA. 33 W. 54th St. (582-8993). (E) AE, DC.

Ruth's Chris Steak House—A steak cooked in butter is the centerpiece of this successful upscale chain's take-no-prisoners march east across the country. Steak served in a series of connected, muted, and wood-paneled dining rooms. 148 W. 51st St. (245-9600). (E) AE, DC, MC, V.

Sam's—Solid Continental food served up pub-style in the heart of the theater district. 263 W. 45 St. (719-5416). (M) AE, MC, V.

Samplings—Cheerful family-style dining for hotel guests and local business lunches. 1605 Broadway, at 49th St., in the Crowne Plaza Hotel. (977-4000). (M) AE, CB, DC, DS, MC, V.

The Sea Grill—Plush, cozy dining room open to garden tables in the summer and an eye on the Rockefeller Center skating rink in winter. The

...serving team does cartwheels toting crab cakes with two sauces, mint-touched carpaccio of yellowfin-tuna mignon, and swordfish steak at premium prices. Rockefeller Plaza, 19 W. 49th St. (246-9201). (E) AE, DC, MC, V.

Siam Inn—Traditional Thai food served in a Thai-style dining room that is cozy and candlelit. A perfect neighborhood spot when you can make it only as far as the corner for dinner, 916 Eighth Ave., at 54th St., and 854 Eighth Ave., nr. 51st St. (489-5237). (M) AE, DC, MC, V.

Stage Delicatessen—A landmark deli that serves gigantic sandwiches, every one of which is worth returning for, 834 Seventh Ave., bet. 53rd and 54th Sts. (245-7850). (I) AE, MC, V.

Top of the Sixes—A beautiful view and a restaurant to boot. Perched atop the office that houses Universal Pictures's offices. American-Continental food, 666 Fifth Ave., at 53rd St., 39th floor (757-6662). (M-E) AE, CB, DC, MC, V.

Trionfo—Good Italian food in a pleasant setting close to Broadway theaters, 224 W. 51st St. (262-6660). (M-E) AE, DC, MC, V.

'21' Club—The new, old, younger "21" has lost its hauteur at the door but not its toys in the artfully restored saloon. Club classics alongside contemporary whimsy at prices that stagger, but from 10:30, supper is a bargain, 21 W. 52nd St. (582-7200). (E) AE, CB, DC, MC, V.

Victor's Cafe 52—Until the inevitable fall, this is as close to Cuba as you can get—at least in this neighborhood, 236 W. 52nd St. (586-7714). (M) AE, CB, DC, MC, TM, V.

57th-60th Streets

Bruno Ristorante—Attracting regulars for sixteen years, a Northern Italian kitchen and an Art Deco dining room with two fireplaces will make anyone feel welcome, 240 E. 58th St. (688-4190). (M) AE, DC, DS, MC, V.

Caviarteria—Right now! That was the cry from customers of this austere, modernist undersea-egg-monger. So a café was built and now serves the impatient crowd a variety of Russian and American caviar and other adventurous fare (smoked wild boar) right on the premises, 502 Park Ave., nr. 59th St. (759-7410). (M) AE, MC, V.

Contrapunto—Join the queue in this good-looking, second-story pastaria for slightly Americanized Italian classics, 200 E. 60th St. (751-8616). (M) AE, CB, DC, DS, MC, V.

Dawat—The Indian address and cooking authority Madhur Jaffrey is a consultant here. You can't miss with tandoori—cooked before your eyes in the big ovens in the back—or any of the more unusual regional specials, 210 E. 58th St. (355-7555). (M) AE, CB, DC, MC, TM, V.

Fantino—Where else but in New York can you be served your Northern Italian fare on china by Gianni Versace? Serving in a luxurious dining room, Fantino delivers as an Italian restaurant should. Try the tuna or the lamb, 112 Central Park So., in the Ritz-Carlton Hotel (664-7700). (E) AE, CB, DC, MC, V.

Gauguin—White-hot scene. Tahitian theme park: living palm trees, recorded birdsong, and the artist's murals. Tropical Asian cuisine and casks of cleverly named knockout drops. The Plaza Hotel, Fifth Ave., at Central Park West (319-0404). (E) AE, CB, DC, MC, V.

Le Bar Bat—They crowd five deep at the bar, stalking one another; young melting-pot faces with briefcases and the curious come to eat, 311 W. 57th St. (307-7228). (M) AE, CB, DC, DS, MC, V.

Le Taxi—Veteran restaurateur Pedro Iso has made a bistro authentic enough to be mistaken for the real thing, 37 E. 60th St. (832-5500). (M) AE, CB, DC, DS, MC, V.

Le Train Bleu—A port in the retail storm. A French railroad dining car of old, with a view of the 59th Street Bridge. Bloomingdale's, 6th floor, 1000 Third Ave., at 59th St. (705-2100). (M) AE, DC, MC, V.

Le Veau d'Or—A proud tradition in the neighborhood, this bistro-style eatery hasn't changed in years, and almost everyone agrees that that's just fine, 129 E. 60th St. (838-8133). (M) AE, DS, MC, V.

Les Célébrités—Plush and old-fashioned, this

Data What's in the Box?

What the chefs used:

Vodka, a chicken breast, red wine, white wine, potatoes, Arborio rice, coconut milk, limes and lemons, a can of Kodak film, dried Ancho peppers, frozen chicken stock, a salmon fillet, phyllo dough, garlic, a jar of salsa.



What they made:

Diane Forley, Verbena
Pease porridge and half-roast salmon carpaccio.

Alfred Portale, Gotham Bar & Grill
Short-smoked salmon, garlic mashed potatoes, grilled fennel, and peas with a citrus vinaigrette.

David Walzog, Arizona 206
Tied salmon with doctored salsa, fried potatoes, and an Ancho vinaigrette.

Tom Valenti, Cascabel
Roast salmon, chicken strudel on braised spinach and risotto, and peas with a citrus vinaigrette.

Tom Colicchio, Gramercy Tavern
Roast-garlic-and-potato soup with oven-steamed salmon and citrus vinaigrette.

John Schenk, Monkey Bar
Roast salmon with garlic, potato, and peas, and coconut stew on a salsa sailboat.

imposing dining room in the Essex House on Central Park South also happens to have a very fine kitchen. Dinner only, 160 Central Park So. (484-5113). (E) AE, CB, DC, DS, MC, V.

March—This small townhouse feels homey and romantic. Try confit and grilled duck touched with sweet and savory chutneys or Atlantic salmon with Middle Eastern spices and aioli, 405 E. 58th St. (754-6272). (E) AE, CB, DC, MC, V.

Pasta Lovers—Now, who doesn't? With a name that's really a rhetorical question, this spot serves basic Italian fare that draws tourists down from their hotel rooms to dine. And there are crayons on the tables for when the dinner conversation falls short of compelling, 158 W. 58th St. (582-1355). (M) AE, MC, V.

Petrossian—Fast food for the very rich in an Art Deco setting with carved frosted glass, mink-trimmed banquettes, and period bronzes—lean flappers with leaner wolfhounds, 182 W. 58th St. (245-2214). (E) AE, CB, DC, MC, V.

Pierro's on the Park—Italian with a twist of art history. This parkside restaurant features original Art Deco furnishings from the thirties: frosted glass, black lacquer, and original lighting, 150 Central Park So. (541-4090). (M) AE, MC, TM, V.

Rosa Mexicano—Did someone say "fresh-pomegranate margarita"? Indeed someone did. What's more, this spot prepares your guacamole tableside (a south-of-the-border hibachi?). Some of the tastier gourmet Mexican in the city, 1063 First Ave., at 58th St. (753-7407). (M) AE, CB, DC, MC, V.

San Domenico—Toques off to owner Tony May, who may have done more for the cause of serious Italian cooking in New York than any other single restaurateur. His dining room is formal, and the food is wonderful, 240 Central Park So. (265-5959) (E) AE, CB, DC, MC, V.

Above 60th Street, East Side

Alexis—Provençal food delivered in a cozy dining room. Look up and you'll see what's written in the stars: The ceiling features a painting of the astrological signs, 140 E. 63rd St., in the Barbizon Hotel (838-5700). (M) AE, MC, V.

The Boat House Cafe—Rent a rowboat or ride the Venetian gondola before or after dining at this glorious oasis in Central Park. This is the kind of Italian food found only in America, some of it pretty good. There's a new menu for grazers at the waterside bar, Central Park nr. 72nd St. and Fifth Ave. (517-2233). (M) AE, MC, TM, V.

Cafe Chopin—Very casual spot, often warm and candlelit. Featuring Eastern European fare—lots of roasts, goulash, and stuffed cabbage. With live piano music, 339 E. 75th St. (628-7171). (M) AE, DC, DS, MC, TM, V.

Cafe Nosidam—Italian-American fare; a people watcher's paradise. Don't settle for less than the front row, 768 Madison Ave., bet. 65th and 66th Sts. (717-5633). (M) AE, MC, V.

Cafe Metairie—Country French in a rustic farmhouse setting. Blazing fireplace and all... *mon cheri*. And, *sans blague*, they have cooing doves, 1442 Third Ave., at 82nd St. (988-1800). (M) AE, MC, V.

Ci Vediamo—Almost like two restaurants in one, this Northern Italian restaurant has a modern downstairs that caters to a younger crowd and a cozy upstairs where the older crowd likes to linger. Good-size portions and reliable food make this an Upper East Side staple, 1431 Third Ave., at 81st St. (650-0850) (M) AE only.

Campagnola—Country-style Italian fare for the neighborhood—the whole neighborhood, 1382 First Ave., at 74th St. (861-1102). (M) AE, CB, DC, DS, MC, V.

Demarchelier—Feels French and tastes French; on this restaurant-parched turf, that's good enough to draw a crowd, 50 E. 86th St. (249-6300). (M) AE, MC, V.

Deml—This brownstone turned restaurant is one of the cozier spots along Madison Avenue. Candles and roses abound. And there's a fireplace for chilly winter eves and an outdoor terrace for balmy summer nights, 1316 Madison Ave., at 93rd St. (534-3475) (M) AE, MC, V.

Ferrier—Neighborhood hot spot. People-watching, but be prepared to get what you give at this bistro, 29 E. 65th St. (772-9000). (M) AE, DC, DS, MC, V.

Girasole—Regional Italian food. Elegant, medium-size space with private rooms upstairs. Wood floors with girasoles (sunflowers to you, bub) throughout. A neighborhood haunt for the sub-