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DINER'S JOURNAL

Spice Market

By SAM SIFTON

Rare is the restaurant that opens without stumbles, its food clear in both intention and flavor, its service unhurried and cool. But Spice Market, which Jean-Georges Vongerichten unveiled about 25 seconds ago on the corner of West 13th Street and Ninth Avenue, appears to be one of the few.

Of course, quality comes at a cost. It seems every slingbacked publicist who ever appeared as an extra on the late HBO show "Sex and the City" has been granted an early reservation.

And because there is a lounge in the restaurant's basement, there is music, anonymous and jittery, with an accompanying thump-thump-thump that is not unlike a headache.

But you suffer for art. And Spice Market is enormous, so a lot of the noise gets lost up in the ceiling. It's decorated in the manner of ABC Carpet & Home, so it's comfortable and luxe and exotic all at once. And the food — tricked up versions of Southeast Asian street grub, prepared by Gray Kunz and a team of talented sous-chefs — is astonishingly good. Busboys could go around the place hitting random customers with rubber hammers, and the restaurant would still be worth a visit.

Musts-to-have: plump, moist chicken samosas served with cilantro-infused yogurt, the interiors fragrant with ginger, onions, cumin. Then, after a short flight to Japan, a long, fiery "lobster roll," that owes as much to Freeport, Me., as to Tokyo. It's served with a dab of mayonnaise amped by Sriracha, an Indonesian pepper sauce, and modulated by dill jelly. From there, try weird perfect craziness for the mouth: a wide pool of coconut juice mixed with kaffir lime into which swim shavings of sashimi-grade tuna and balls of tapioca infused with ancho chilies, chipotle chilies, Thai chilies, cinnamon and Sichuan peppercorns. Splinters of jícama and Asian pear provide textural contrast, along with scallions and roasted red pepper. Just like mom used to make!

Halibut Cha Ca La Vong recalls the Hanoi restaurant of that name, with the fish cooked in a marinade of turmeric and fish sauce, with an herb salad and nuoc cham on the side. Skate Newtown Circus refers to the great Singapore market, where skate is grilled over banana leaves and served with a fiery chili paste topping. And a terrific, addictive pork vindaloo, properly vinegary, comes straight from the home kitchen of one of the sous-chefs, Mohan Ismail, a Malaysian-Chinese who learned the dish from his Thai-Chinese grandmother.

This global village thing has real upsides.

Spice Market, 403 West 13th Street, West Village, (212) 675-2322. Entrees, \$12 to \$29.



March 24, 2004

RESTAURANTS

Fancy Street Food, but What a Street

By AMANDA HESSER

AS you approach Spice Market, Jean-Georges Vongerichten's new restaurant on West 13th Street, the stench of blood and offal from the surrounding meatpacking district intensifies. It's hardly an olfactory amuse-bouche.

One evening, a dining companion said, "You'd think that Jean-Georges would be pumping ginger aroma into the street."

I wouldn't put that past him, but then, given Mr. Vongerichten's capacity for taking pains, the stench could well be part of his plan: an aromatic undertone, evoking the street life of Asia and the marvelous street food that is to come.

Spice Market thrives on such nuance and allusion. It's not short on drama, either. Inside its doors lies another world, a bustling two-story former warehouse transformed by worn teak beams and balustrades, soaring palms and lavender silk lanterns, which stretch from the ceiling down into the basement grotto. The bar is framed in ornate teak stalls, so that people must lean in — as if in a confessional — to place their orders.

A maître d'hôtel with carefully ruffled hair wearing a "Late Night With David Letterman" T-shirt and a sports coat takes your name at the door. Lights from the open kitchen in the rear outline a long row of spectators at the bar. A large canopy, resembling the top of a Chinese bed, creates a shadowy garden for a group of diners. Waitresses in silky persimmon-color smocks, open at the back, sweep through. Howard Stern and a girlfriend amble by. You are in a James Bond movie, a high-end bar in Bangkok, a Vong to the 10th power.

For years Mr. Vongerichten has toyed with Asian flavors and clublike restaurants. Mercer Kitchen serves good food with nods to Asia, but it is dark and unforgivingly loud. A little more than a year ago, Mr. Vongerichten made a breakthrough with Chinese cooking at 66: rather than giving French food an Asian flair, he gave Chinese dishes a dose of his exquisite minimalism. But the dining room at 66 is like a hip morgue, and it has failed to woo serious diners.

Since then, Mr. Vongerichten seems to have had an epiphany. He is not a club owner, but a sensualist. And at Spice Market, he has hit on something new: casual, exotic luxury and food that people want to eat.

That food is street food — a gastronomical genre that is regarded by some as the best in the world. Only here it is reworked and polished. Egg rolls stuffed with mushrooms gleam under Mr. Vongerichten's touch. Softened shiitake and oyster mushrooms are loosely swaddled in a wrapper that is fragile and

crisp on the outside. A tangy herbal galangal sauce is whipped into a celadon foam. When you dip the egg rolls, the sauce clings in a light, loose layer. Vietnamese spring rolls stuffed with pork, mushroom and shrimp are more rigidly constructed, and are fried stiff. A waiter instructs you to wrap the roll in lettuce with fresh mint and coriander and to dip it in a sweet lime and rice vinegar broth. A succession of stimulating textures and vivid flavors — first the lettuce and herbs, then the crackle of the rolls, with their pillowy filling — flutter on your palate.

Many dishes are street food as invented by Spice Market. If this seems to be taking too much liberty, you must remind yourself of the headwaiter in the Letterman T-shirt. This isn't a precise cultural tour. This is a Vongerichten fantasy.

And in that fantasy, fat tapioca pearls loom large. They are simmered with Thai chilies, Sichuan peppercorns, cinnamon and chipotle, then paired with slivers of raw tuna in a cool coconut broth sharpened with kaffir lime. The dish is eaten with a spoon.

Fried squid is piled atop a salad of papaya, water chestnut and cashews. Sweet shrimp fritters are dotted with crunchy bits of long bean and tempered by a relish of peanut and cucumber cut into minuscule cubes.

Thai chicken wings are lined up on a plate, coated in a hot, sticky sauce, fragrant with chilies, soy, lime and fish sauce. Between the wings, your chopsticks make their way to slices of mango, there for relief.

The chicken wings are one of the few dishes motivated by heat. Mr. Vongerichten uses heat judiciously. In red curried duck, the warmth offsets a rich coconut and lemon grass broth, and in pork vindaloo, red finger chilies balance a powerful blend of cumin, ginger, garlic, cinnamon and cardamom.

It is easy to become overstimulated by all the flavors. No detail eludes Mr. Vongerichten's experimental mind. Even the ginger ale is homemade. An extract of ginger, sugar and lime is blended with club soda — a drink with perfect zip.

There are plenty of good beers and a brief but interesting list of wines, but it would be a shame to miss the cocktails. A blood orange mojito is fresh tasting and herbal, and the splash of acidity makes it an affable partner to the food. It is difficult not to slug it back. Order a Pattaya if you are feeling the need for discipline. It screams with passion fruit but is delicately bubbly.

I found myself reveling over soothing dishes like ginger rice, a dish that was never meant to thrill but does here. The rice is firm, each round bead glazed in oil and fragrant with garlic and scallion. An egg cooked sunny side up with ginger and garlic is flipped onto the rice. As you dip your spoon into it, the egg spreads and coats the rice grains, making them creamy, lovely.

But the dish that explains why Spice Market is such an extraordinary pleasure is Thai jewels. Tiny bits of sweet water chestnut are glazed with tapioca, dyed candy colors like cherry red and lime green. These jewels are blended with palm seeds and slivers of jackfruit and papaya, then heaped onto a nest of coconut ice. It is fruity, nutty, cold and slushy, a wonderful mess of flavors, not unlike Lucky Charms. You won't forget it — and several other desserts are nearly as memorable.

Ovaltine kulfi is dense and malty, like a Snickers bar coated with spiced popcorn and fennel seed. And a chocolate and Vietnamese coffee tart comes warm, topped with a pouf of milk foam. Its chocolate crust is as fragile as a dry leaf and gives way to a deliciously rich, smoky chocolate mousse.

There's more to say but no room to write it. So go. But do not simply flit from your taxi to the door. First, fill your lungs with the aroma of the street — a sensual relic of old New York. Then suspend disbelief and save room for the Thai jewels.

Spice Market

403 West 13th Street (Ninth Avenue), Greenwich Village; (212) 675-2322.

ATMOSPHERE The air of a high-class Thai bar serving polished street food.

SOUND LEVEL A din of music and chatter, diluted by a vast space.

RECOMMENDED DISHES Spring rolls; pork satay; shaved tuna; crunchy squid salad; pork vindaloo; ginger fried rice; chili-garlic egg noodles with seared shrimp; Ovaltine kulfi; Thai jewels.

SERVICE A flutter of skilled servers, some scantily clad.

WINE LIST Brief but tempting. Excellent cocktails.

HOURS Dinner, Monday through Wednesday, 6 p.m. to midnight; Thursday through Saturday, 6 p.m. to 1 a.m.

PRICE RANGE Dinner, appetizers, soups and salads, \$6.50 to \$14; entrees, \$6 to \$29; desserts, \$6 to \$14.

CREDIT CARDS All major cards.

WHEELCHAIR ACCESS Electric lift at entrance.

WHAT THE STARS MEAN:

(None) | Poor to satisfactory

* | Good

** | Very good

*** | Excellent

**** | Extraordinary

Ratings reflect the reviewer's reaction to food, ambience and service, with price taken into consideration. Menu listings and prices are subject to change.