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**T**HE new dining room at the Morgan Library and Museum is a tutorial in the eternal pleasures of capitalism: marble fireplaces, heavy silver and really rich cream sauces.

It's also one of New York's more eccentric fine-dining restaurants, and probably the best museum canteen in New York City. This is an increasingly competitive field, now that The Modern has opened in the new Museum of Modern Art and it is possible to get a surprisingly good panino in the Metropolitan Museum of Art. But there's no institution that joins a menu and a museum as seamlessly. The food served in the dining room that the Morgan family used in the early 20th century is brightly flavored enough to please modern palates but also, with touches like chicken fricassee, lobster salad and shrimp cocktail, telegraphs old-school opulence.

This new-old luxury mirrors what has been done to transform the museum itself, which reopened in April after a renovation that joined the Gilded-Age sprawl of J. Pierpont Morgan's original brownstone mansion to a glass center tower designed by the Italian modernist Renzo Piano. When going to the Dining Room, you bypass the museum's entrance fee but still get to bask in the sunlight streaming in through its 50-foot walls of glass, and inhale the heady scent of expensive new architecture. (To see J.P. Morgan's ornate library or one of the museum's three Gutenberg Bibles, though, you will have to cough up \$12.) The museum's cafe, open only to museum visitors, squats on the floor of the central atrium and serves a more generic menu.

The formal dining room is open only when the museum is open, so lunch is served every day, but dinner only on Friday nights — and then only until 9 p.m., when warning gongs ring and security guards begin sweeping through to nudge you out. "They do have to protect the Gutenbergs," said our waiter last Friday night, as he reassured us that there was time for coffee. "They don't really care about dessert." For many New Yorkers, its abbreviated business hours will knock the Morgan Dining Room out of the running as a serious restaurant, but it offers compensatory pleasures.

The room is not always one of them. It is undeniably cramped, with about 40 seats that occasionally have to squeeze in large parties of Morgan V.I.P.'s — and a bit too bright, with pristine white moldings, track lighting, and one glass wall. All that saves the room from looking like a very elegant operating theater are its modern orange-upholstered loveseats, tall sprays of flowers, and warm wood floors.

But you will find many cossetting antique details on the table, from the menu's typeface to the vial of simple syrup that comes with every glass of iced tea. Several wines are available by the glass or the quartino, a pleasantly indulgent eight-ounce carafe; nonalcoholic options include a bittersweet mix of tangerine juice and tonic water and a very upscale raspberry lime rickey with only a hint of sweetness. The restaurant's chewy olive-salt rolls are New York's most-improved soft pretzel.

Also beyond reproach, over the course of six meals, was the restaurant's green salad. Restaurants often present this as a sop to timid diners, and it's always depressing to see the same mesclun greens you have at home come out of a restaurant kitchen. But here, the chef Charlene Shade uses organic lettuces — full-grown leaves with fresh flavor, not long-refrigerated micro specimens — and the result is soft and sprightly, the nicest restaurant salad I've had in years. A similar attention to detail is evident in most of the kitchen's vegetables, both in their sourcing and in their cooking. For example, the firm-tender green squash that sits under a fricassee of chicken; the pungent Swiss chard that tops a savory tart of ricotta cheese and slow-roasted cherry tomatoes; and a charred heart of romaine lettuce, split and seared brown on the cut face, that works well alongside a filet mignon and more of those sweet-sharp cherry tomatoes.

Cooked lettuce is one of Ms. Shade's borrowings from menus of the early 20th century, which come off here as surprising and often tasty innovations. Those of us who spend a lot of time trolling in new restaurants aren't often served old-fashioned cream sauces like these, one infused with mushroom flavor and drizzled around moist roasted organic chicken, another brightened with lemon and poured over long, floppy twists of pasta. I had almost forgotten how delicious they can be. And more modern dishes, like mussels in a parsley broth, seared striped bass over butternut risotto, and salmon with poached baby vegetables, are just as successful.

Dessert is less of a period piece. Ms. Shade, having worked in the kitchens of Jean-Georges Vongerichten, has mastered the technique for his molten chocolate cake, although she doesn't improve it by adding trimmings like ice cream and blackberries. While I appreciate an organic chicken, I have never before been presented with an organic cookie plate: fortunately, it had other virtues as well, like warm gingersnaps and buttery nut shortbreads. The fruit cobbler, which changes seasonally but is always good, is more of a crisp, with a rumpled, crunchy top.

I wanted to love that beef Wellington — with foie gras, mushrooms, puff pastry and beef tenderloin, how bad could it be? But some dishes, like some musicals, should never be revived. This one, in addition to being overcooked the night I tried it, was drowned in a classic brown sauce that suffered from all the classic flaws: too salty, too meaty, just too...brown. Better to go retro with lobster salad, made of unfailingly sweet and moist claw meat and slices of avocado and grapefruit — a dish that has a whiff of country-club cuisine, but composed here with a play of flavors that keeps it from being just blandly elegant.

And a bargain at \$21; you no longer have to be a robber baron to eat like one.

## The Morgan Dining Room



225 Madison Avenue (36th Street),  
(212) 683-2130, [www.themorgan.org/visit/dining.asp](http://www.themorgan.org/visit/dining.asp)

**ATMOSPHERE** The room, secluded from the museum's public spaces, is too bright and crowded but pristine white walls, a marble fireplace, and some warm modern touches combine pleasantly. The staff is smoothly professional.

**SOUND LEVEL** Can be raucous when the restaurant is full, as it usually is during peak lunch hours. Tables around the perimeter are quieter.

**RECOMMENDED DISHES** Green salad, beet salad, ricotta and Swiss chard tart, mussels, striped bass on squash risotto, salmon with baby carrots and parsnips, lobster salad, fruit cobbler, cookie plate.

**WINE LIST** Brief, but chosen to be food-friendly. Also, some 19th-century cocktails and nonalcoholic specialties.

**PRICE RANGE** Appetizers, \$6 to \$12; entrees, \$15 to \$28; desserts, \$5 to \$7

**HOURS** Lunch, Tuesday to Friday, 12 to 2:30 p.m., Saturday and Sunday, 11 a.m. to 2:30 p.m.; Dinner, Friday only, 5 to 9 p.m.

**RESERVATIONS** Accepted up to 30 days in advance.

**CREDIT CARDS** All major cards.

**WHEELCHAIR ACCESS** Accessible.

**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.