

THE NEW YORKER

TABLES FOR TWO | OCTOBER 13, 2014 ISSUE

GOTHAM WEST MARKET

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PHOTOGRAPH BY LAUREN LANCASTER

We live in the golden age of chalkboard wit, but the sign outside Gotham West Market on a recent evening was especially apt: “When was the last time you did something for the first time?” For many of the diners walking out, the answer could have been, Tonight, when I cobbled together a remarkably good meal on Eleventh Avenue, in midtown, at a food court.

The odds are stacked against Gotham West Market, and that's even without considering that it's on the ground floor of one of the glass-box developments that have come to dominate the city's in-between areas. Cards on the market's communal tables advertised apartments in the building (they didn't mention prices, but the average rental is five thousand dollars). As the sun set over the glowing-orange Manhattan Mini Storage on the other side of the street, a cheerful young woman in a branded T-shirt pulled down a projector screen to show episodes of "Star Trek," while two ten-year-olds brawled in the corner. The concrete floors made this all seem even louder than it actually was.

That's what's wrong with the place, but here's what's right: just about all of the eight vendors are at the peak of food-world buzziness, and, most of the time, their outposts live up to the hype. Ivan Orkin, born in Syosset, with the chutzpah to sell ramen in Tokyo, has opened Slurp Shop, a New York branch of his noodles empire. That night's special, a chilled-lemon *shio*, was refreshing and hearty at the same time—Orkin's signature rye-flecked noodles seemed extra-glutinous and chewy, and they swam in a lemon-dashi broth that tasted like a summer's day.

At El Colmado, a tapas bar created by Seamus Mullen, of the West Village's Tertulia, most groups had an order of the devilled eggs, smoky from whipped *bacalao*. There would be no fights over the crispiest bits of *patatas bravas*, because they were served on an unusually generous platter, and were of a consistently golden hue.

Ex-suburbanites delighted in the buzzer system at Genuine Roadside, a resolutely unpretentious joint from AvroKO, the restaurant-branding team that popularized the Edison-light-bulb aesthetic. There were no trendy light fixtures here, but there was a buttermilk-battered-chicken sandwich with apple-celeriac slaw and sambal mayo, served on the sort of soft potato roll that you can squish as flat as a pancake. It was crunchy and coherent—exactly what refined fast food should taste like. The same went for the double-stack burger, made with a Shake Shack-like blend of eighty per cent chuck and twenty per cent hanger, served with American cheese, sweet pickles, and the requisite pale-pink “house sauce.” The meal was nostalgic, as though in a high-school cafeteria, ending with the bussing of trays, the sorting of trash, and a treat to go—sweet-corn-and-black-raspberry ice cream, from the city’s only outpost of Jeni’s, the Midwestern dessert phenomenon. ♦

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