

Sarabeth's

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It is not uncommon for a restaurant check to have the words “thank you” written on it. It is somewhat less common to find a smiley face, drawn by hand, next to those words.

But at the end of a recent dinner at Sarabeth's on Central Park South, there it was, one of those insistently mirthful marks, simultaneously beaming at me and, to some extent, distilling the Sarabeth's spirit. Like its siblings, this new Sarabeth's traffics in warm and fuzzy and strives in part to be a fluffy afghan of a place.

I know people who find the Sarabeth's restaurants magically sweet. I know people who find them cloying. The dividing lines seem to be just how invested a person is in brunch, just how fast pancakes and preserves make his or her pulse race, and just how much patience he or she has for twee.

Not that Sarabeth's is just for brunch or breakfast. Not for many, many years now, and certainly not on Central Park South.

This Sarabeth's, which opened about four months ago, is by far the biggest of the brood, with more than 175 seats. It has the most upscale dinner menu. And where its siblings have prominently placed bakery counters, it has a prominently placed bar.

It is seriously courting evening - in addition to morning and afternoon - business. So that's when a group of friends and I went.

The menu doesn't promise adventure. It promises heartiness and hominess. And much of the time it delivers.

A restaurant like Sarabeth's should have good braised beef short ribs, and so Sarabeth's did. What's more, the portion

was generous, and the price \$23.

A restaurant like Sarabeth's should know how to treat a chicken breast, and Sarabeth's treated it just right, so that the skin was crisp, the meat moist. A puck of grilled corn pudding beside it represented a pleasant fringe benefit.

Should a restaurant like Sarabeth's produce a great fillet of salmon? I'm not sure, but Sarabeth's produced one that wasn't even particularly good. Dry and devoid of flavor, it was an out-and-out disappointment, as was a side order of soggy fries.

Other entree choices included chicken pot pie, rack of lamb, seared sea scallops and a burger.

Appetizer choices included shrimp cocktail, a classic Caesar salad, a so-called carpaccio of roasted beets. We had a very satisfying mushroom risotto with Serrano ham and truffle oil, a pleasant salad of baby spinach and fried green tomatoes, and a letdown of a lobster salad, which had tough lobster.

Dessert options encompassed chocolate mousse cake, strawberry shortcake and the “CPS banana split.”

Sarabeth's has been designed and laid out so that no matter where a diner sits, he or she should get a glimpse of greenery: perhaps the trees in Central Park across the street; perhaps an atrium with shrubbery and small trees; perhaps the building's courtyard, with ivy and more trees.

Above our table, on the ceiling, was a trompe l'oeil painting of the sky. And right below it hung a lattice of white-painted wood, which looked a bit like a picket fence that had taken flight. It was a very Sarabeth's kind of touch.

—Frank Bruni, September 16, 2005