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Grill of your dreams

High Line eatery sets new Standard



**Steve
Cuozzo**
Free Range



THE STANDARD GRILL
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and West 13th streets)
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THE Standard Grill makes the High Line/Meatpacking party whole. In a zone cluttered with cuisine of all kinds, who needs another restaurant with 285 seats? We all do, if it serves food as tasty, spiffily presented and affordable as the Standard's.

This smartly wrought "chop house with New American Grill sensibilities" is worthy of Andre Balazs' High Line-straddling Standard Hotel, to which it belongs. Maybe it isn't as libido-driven as the hotel, where acts of rampant lust at the windows above the park have been reported.

But it's the right eatery at the right time -- a fully realized, Modern American place amid a zoo of forward Italian, neo-Japanese, fancy steak, almost-French and wannabe Mexican joints. Standard Grill's dishes aren't as elaborate as Gramercy Tavern's, as impeccably sourced as Blue Hill's, or as original as Dove-tail's -- but they're the best dishes you'll see at these prices, and often better than similarly conceived ones elsewhere that cost much more.

The Standard sprawls across two rooms and an outdoor terrace. The front room with big, maroon booths of tufted leather feels like the Hamptons, thanks to a rowdy crowd at the bar and a milling horde waiting for seats. The main room is more grown-up -- a cheerful, tablecloth-softened sprawl of booths and tables sandwiched between a gently vaulted ceiling of Guastavino-like white tile and a floor in which 480,000 pennies (count 'em, 480,000) are embedded.

That a mere \$4,800 could take up so much space illustrates how worthless a cent is. But a dollar goes far at the Standard Grill -- a fact playfully, if inadvertently, suggested by the menu's only \$1 item: "a good pickle" from The Pickle Guy that's the most mouthwatering sour number in town.



Fancy a burger and a delicious dill -- or (right) the million dollar chicken?

Executive chef Dan Silverman was the original chef at Midtown's recently closed Lever House Restaurant, where entrees ran well above \$30. At Standard Grill, they average below \$20 (and appetizers around \$10). On my first visit in June, workaday halibut and loup de mer made me wonder if the place was content to do no more than it had to -- namely, to serve dull, decent dishes and count on the hot-button setting to fill the house.

But Silverman must have kicked butt in his smoky, open kitchen, because the food -- especially fish -- got better on each of three subsequent nights. Every cut I've had lately was moisture- and flavor-rich. Swordfish glazed with soy, lime and ginger was remarkably thick and supple for \$19 -- and more than a buck better than the \$18 pork chop that was fervently spice-salted but shy of juice.

The crowd-pleasing menu lays on "global"



tints without making a fuss over them -- Asian herbs here, Spanish sausage there, and even a few French words on the "from the counter" lineup.

Charred octopus with sweet potato and a dose of chillies, and seared squid and merguez sausage brightened with fennel and grapefruit, were ultra-tender, implausibly sophisticated starters for \$11 and \$13. I was wary of "million-dollar" whole roast chicken for two for \$32, but it was a joy -- a small bird given the full-court, garlic-thyme treatment, deftly segmented and buttery.

Pastry chef Frederick Aquino's fun desserts are smallish but satisfying for \$6 and \$7, and appropriate to the vibe. Sour cream cheesecake with blueberry compote and graham cracker crust brings smiles all around. So does a cookies-and-shake trio with an Ovaltine surprise in a tiny malted-milk glass.

Standard Grill just opened an al fresco beer garden as well, although it won't have food (and a proper name) until the fall. But the time to catch the scene is now, in teeming high summer. The High Line's high, the Meatpacking District's packed, and all's well with the world.