

# DINNER DOWNTOWN

BY ALEX HITZ



MICHAEL GRIMM; COURTESY OF LILLI





**EVERYONE COOL** lives downtown, and everything cool happens downtown—and downtowners rarely come uptown because everything is so much cooler downtown. And vice-versa. Let's just say, I don't go downtown that often without significant hue and cry because I live on the Upper East Side and have now for more than 20 years—and it's a long way off for being such a short way off. Plus, I admit to being one of the un-coolest people I know. Am I missing everything cool? Perhaps. And perhaps not. You tell me.

When a friend offers an adventure, a change, or even a suggestion as benign as, "Let's do something different for dinner," more often than not, I have a full-blown anxiety attack. It's not to say I don't go—I do, more often than I'd like—but what a lot of trouble it all seems. A 45-minute cab ride EACH WAY—\$80–100 in round-trip fares—before I've bought the first glass of wine or dinner is, to me, excessive. And being treated like an infrequent, *l'inconnu* in places that thrive on *les connus*—see note on cool people above—even if the food is superb, frankly, doesn't make me want to sign up for

**Opposite: Balthazar, Keith McNally's landmark restaurant on Spring Street in SoHo, has been bustling since the day it first opened in 1997. Above: At Illi in the Flatiron District, it's all about cold and hot Lebanese mezza and main plates.**



this kind of activity all that often. It's not even an option to me during the holidays, when the travel times already cited become a fraction of the whole—and, as for the solutions of convenience that are Uber, Via, and Lyft, even they aren't immune from that wrong location, that surprise storm, that sudden harrowing blast of wind or snow. Call me a wussy if you'd like, but I'm just not the guy who likes to suffer. I wouldn't say I'm unadventurous—I spend most of my life on the road—but the seduction of a “spectacular” evening downtown falls flat on me nearly every time because rarely, even super-rarely, does it ever fulfill its promise.

Having disclaimed all that, after all these years, there are still some classic and wonderful places that are exceptions to my premise, and my defaults whenever I'm pressed to make the trek. Downtown experts beware! Don't roll your eyes and scoff at my convention because by no means do I suggest that these are the cutting-edgest-bestest-nextest-latest-greatest-of-the-newest, 'cause with the exception of Le Coucou, where I haven't been yet, those probably wouldn't be my thing in the first place. It's not a function of age—I've always been the same—but I enjoy *relaxing* comfortably, *hearing* the conversation of my tablemates, and *recognizing* what's offered on a menu and put forth to me. Suffice it to say, I do not want to discuss my food allergies, and I'm not one for dinner from the science fair.

Ilili is a splendid Lebanese restaurant with extraordinarily delicious food—and, as a plus to the UESers, it's in the more-convenient-than-downtown Flatiron District. The

look of it, for openers, is magical and buzzy, glamorous, a through-composed symphony—with superb lighting and tons of warm wood paneling and mirrors. The “inspired Mediterranean cuisine” they boast of is truly superb: bold in flavor, appeal, and timelessness, and fun to be shared with the table. One feels welcome and comfortable at Ilili even though it's a large restaurant and could be, in the hands of a less adept design and culinary team, unwieldy.

Carbone, an Italian-American restaurant all the way down on Thompson Street, is at once clean and modern with its dark and stylish interior but like stepping in time to a joint in Vegas circa 1960, with a menu that Frank and Sammy and Dean would have loved: Baked Clams, Lobster Fra Diavolo, Ribeye Diana, and Veal Marsala. It's small and cozy and super-expensive but the quality is there. More daunting than the prices are the portions, but it's so delicious you'll wish you could eat all of it.

If you're serious about dining downtown, Keith McNally is a name you should know. In 1997 he debuted Balthazar, an open-all-day authentic French brasserie with onion-soup-and-steak-frites fare served in a tiled and glittering salon, which is almost as challenging to get a table at today as it was from the start. Another of Keith's ventures is Minetta Tavern—a '40s haunt of Hemingway, Dylan Thomas, and this writer's stepfather, Robert Shaw—which McNally reimaged as a grill and chop house non-pareil. It's simple, unassuming, and cozy, but don't be fooled by its simplicity: Minetta Tavern is an American

COURTESY OF ILILI; CARNASMEDIA; BILL ADDISON; COURTESY OF BALTHAZAR;  
COURTESY OF DA SILVA; SCOTT MORRIS; MICHAEL GRIMM







BALTHAZAR - RESTAURANT -																													
<b>HORS D'ŒUVRES</b>																													
ONION SOUP GRATINÉE	16.00																												
MIXED FIELD GREENS in a sherry vinaigrette	14.00																												
BALTHAZAR SALAD with burrata, veal, asparagus, fennel, ricotta salata and truffle vinaigrette	18.00																												
ESCARGOTS in garlic butter	21.00																												
ENGLISH PEA RISOTTO with shrimp, macerated cheese and pea shoots	25.00 / 34.00																												
HEHRLOOM TOMATO AND WATERMELON SALAD with marinated feta cheese, pickled red onion, basil seeds and thyme vinaigrette	18.00																												
SEAFOOD CEVICHE	21.00																												
STEAK TARTARE*	22.00 / 30.00																												
FRISÉE AUX LARDONS* chicory salad with a warm bacon shallot vinaigrette and a soft-poached egg	19.00																												
WARM GOAT CHEESE AND CARAMELIZED ONION TART	19.00																												
ROASTED BABY BEETS SALAD with endives, arctic, toasted hazelnuts and Fourme d'Aubert	20.00																												
HOMEMADE CORN AND RICOTTA AGNOLOTTI with crab, spinach and terragon brown butter	23.00 / 32.00																												
OCTOPUS CARPACCIO with romesco sauce, caper berries, eggplant pepper and arugula	19.00																												
HICKEN LIVER AND FOIE GRAS MOUSSE with red onion confit and grilled country bread	20.00																												
<b>LE BAR A HUITRES</b>																													
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<b>ENTRÉES</b>																													
SAUTÉED SKATE with summer beans, radish, roasted pistachio and onion seedbire	30.00																												
GRILLED SULLIVAN COUNTY TROUT with garlic spinach, urtini and kintil salad	31.00																												
SLOW-ROASTED ATLANTIC COD with soft potato, feta, herb-of-the-week mushrooms and bordelaise	36.00																												
PAN-ROASTED ORGANIC SALMON* with ratatouille, black olive tapenade and chicken paric	39.00																												
MOULES FRITES	28.00																												
GRILLED CHICKEN PAILLARD with frites, tomato confit and shaved Parmesan	20.00																												
GRILLED LAMB T-BONES* with garlic scapes, piquillo pepper tabbouleh and carottes-aux-yaourt	42.00																												
HOMEMADE LINGUINI with Maine lobster, slow-roasted tomatoes, basil bread crumbs and lobster jus	35.00																												
DUCK SHEPHERD'S PIE	31.00																												
ROASTED AMISH CHICKEN BREAST with asparagus, Parmesan gremolata and charretelle mushrooms	30.00																												
STEAK AU POIVRE* with spinach and pommes frites	47.00																												
SALADE NIÇOISE* with fresh seared tuna and marinated tomatoes	31.00																												
STEAK FRITES* with sauté of butter or brownise sauce	41.00																												
MUSHROOM AND SWISS CHARD TART with goat cheese and pea shoots	26.00																												
DUCK CONFIT with apricots, Prosciutto carottes, Moroccan almonds and arugula salad finished with pickled apricot vinaigrette	35.00																												
BALTHAZAR BURGER*	21.00																												
À CHEVAL*	22.00																												
BALTHAZAR CHEESEBURGER*	22.00																												
<b>PLATS POUR DEUX</b>																													
WHOLE ROASTED FREE-RANGE CHICKEN with garlic mashed potatoes and seasonal vegetables — for two	73.00																												
CÔTE DE BOEUF* with Balthazar onion rings and fingerling potatoes roasted with onions, bacon and garlic confit — for two	140.00																												
<b>LES GARNITURES</b>																													
POMMES FRITES	11.50																												
HARICOTS VERTS	POMME PURÉE																												
SAUTÉED MUSHROOMS	SAUTÉED SPINACH																												
	ASPARAGUS																												
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This page, clockwise from top left: Evening hours at Carbone, Alex's pick for Italian-American with Rat Pack-era flair on Thompson Street; performative tableside preparation at Carbone; the unwaveringly reliable French brasserie menu at Balthazar; exposed brick and art surround you at Da Silvano, down on Avenue of the Americas; warm wood paneling and mirrors make the interior at Ilili in the Flatiron District; leave room for dessert, like flourless chocolate cake, at Balthazar. Opposite page: From arctic char to trout, fresh fish at Ilili is prepared with Lebanese flavoring, including tahini.



PLATS DU JOUR	
<b>MONDAY</b> PORK CHOP "GRILLADE" 39.00	
<b>TUESDAY</b> WILD STRIPED BASS "MAQUE CHOUX" 35.00	
<b>WEDNESDAY</b> HALIBUT EN PAPILOTE 41.00	
<b>THURSDAY</b> DORADE GRILLÉE 41.00	
<b>FRIDAY</b> BOUILLABaisse 48.00	
<b>SATURDAY</b> BRAISED SHORT RIBS 45.00	
<b>SUNDAY</b> HOMARD GRILLÉ 40.00	





Chez L'Ami Louis, and, like its Paris counterpart, the food and clientele are formidable and powerful. And so's the wine.

It would be irresponsible of me to write about downtown restaurants without mentioning Graydon Carter and The Waverly Inn, the one I like the best of his restaurants. Another New York institution, The Waverly Inn is a speakeasy and super-exclusive in its reservation-granting. Rumor has it there's a list, and if you're not on it when you try, forget it. The food is plain and well-prepared, and while not extraordinary or inspired, the atmosphere is so inviting and charming it almost doesn't matter. This is a gin joint from the '20s and not to be missed.

I love Il Cantinori for many reasons—not the least of which is that when the weather's right, you can sit outside. The Northern Italian fare is passable, but the scene is super-charming, warm, and inviting. And its waiters know the regulars and have been there for years. The maître d', when given a name that he may or may not know, always replies, "Of course," and it's a really wonderful favorite of mine that I enjoy every time I go. Dinner at Il Cantinori is simply a great evening.

Da Silvano is a really fun Italian joint with delicious simple food and a cozy atmosphere. The only trouble about the restaurant is that for years, as rumor has it, members of the staff would call in scandalous stories to Page Six about its guests. Then again, maybe guests wanted it that way. Until

you yourself get played, it's fair to say you never exactly know who's playing whom.

I choose to write last about Raoul's, an Alsatian New York institution in SoHo, because as an adult it was my first downtown restaurant experience. I am certain as an UESer I am not alone because it is legendary. It's everything a downtown restaurant should be: dark, mysterious, its very walls marinated with life. The bistro menu is simple and good but it's the place that gets you. The magnetism and romance pulls you from whatever day you've had, in whatever traffic you've endured to get there, and invites you to relax, to enjoy. Take note: there's no gluten-free section of this menu and never will be.

For one reason or another, every restaurant on this list is special to me in one way or another—but the permeating lesson here is atmosphere. Experience. In every case, simplicity—a straightforward message, or vision. Uncomplicated quality. There is no trendy gimmick to hide behind in any of these places, and, by the same token, each one is a classic in its own way. As you venture out—through the trouble and consideration that a trip from uptown to downtown will undoubtedly bring—ask yourself what on earth is wrong with having a good experience in a great atmosphere even if the menu doesn't have kale, quinoa, or kimbachi? To me, absolutely nothing. ♦



