

Bill Boggs Corner Table: Parma, an East Side Survivor

This New York restaurant has seen it all

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Boggs (center) poses with bartender Lorenzo (left) and maitre d' Romano at the bar in Parma.

Bill Boggs

There are so many restaurants crowding the streets of the Upper East Side of Manhattan that a visitor from a distant planet, or just someone who doesn't live in New York City, would be convinced that no one in this dense neighborhood knows how to cook. In this dining out-obsessed area, restaurants come and go like buses on Third Avenue. So it's a pleasure to find one that has survived every trend and built a loyal following during a 38-year span.

Parma is a classic Italian restaurant that has much going for it, so let me tick off a few of the things that make it work so well before we even open the menu: a well-dressed crowd, excellent lighting, a good sound level, well-spaced tables that make each meal intimate, a staff of seasoned waiters who are complete pros, the bartender, Lorenzo, who pours an impressively generous glass of wine and serves a huge martini, and Romano, the maitre d', who is authentically friendly and will remember you on your second visit. It's warm, inviting, and very Italian, and open seven days a week from 5 p.m. until midnight. Very few restaurants in this area stay open to midnight.

Each evening, there is a large array of specials that waiters recite from memory. On a recent visit, some of the 10 specials offered were mixed mushrooms with garlic oil; a Spanish salad with tomatoes, hearts of palm, walnuts, and blue cheese with artichoke vinaigrette; lobster ravioli with fresh tomatoes, baby shrimp, and asparagus; Chicken Piazzioli, which is dark and light chicken with fresh tomatoes, mushrooms, and red and yellow peppers. I particularly enjoyed the beautifully prepared and presented branzino almondine. The almonds added texture and the use of olive oil instead of butter helped the dish taste fresher and more zesty than other fish almondine preparations I've ordered elsewhere. Another outstanding special ordered by my dining companion, Jane, was the veal scallopini Bolognese. It is a savory creation that includes prosciutto, mushrooms, and melted fontina cheese. A wonderful mid-winter dish, to be sure.

The quintessentially traditional Italian menu lists some pasta creations that have apparently been keeping customers happy for years — malfatti, stuffed with spinach and ricotta cheese; agnelotti, which is ravioli stuffed with chicken, veal, spinach, and Parmigiano-Reggiano in a tomato or porcini sauce; linguine al pesto; and spaghetti carbonara. Many newer

Italian restaurants have steered away from old-time favorites, and I suspect that the homemade pasta classics at Parma are one of the reasons for its enduring success.

However, you will not go wrong if you steer clear of the carbohydrates and take aim at the wonderful selection of veal dishes. A favorite of mine is the veal scallopini marsala, another example of a satisfying traditional dish. There's calf's liver, a huge veal chop, veal Parmigiana, and saltimboca Fiorentina, sautéed in olive oil with sage, spinach and prosciutto. There are plenty of impressive chicken and fish selections as well. Of particular note is the market priced Dover sole, which is large and impressively and delicately sautéed with lemon, wine, and consommé.

All pasta and desserts are made in the restaurant. The desserts are quite basic — tiramisù or cheese cake — but specials are offered there, as well.

Parma is an example of what it takes to excel as a neighborhood restaurant. There is a real comfort in returning to a place where you are known and where you know the menu but can trust the waiter to steer you in a different direction occasionally. If you go, be sure to order a glass of wine to see what a substantial pour you will get. It is, in fact, that "pour" that impressed me enough to return to Parma with some friends. Nothing annoys me more than a \$12 glass of white wine in a small glass filled about the length of your thumb. Parma uses large glasses and also serves very generous food portions. Well worth a visit.

Parma, Third Ave between 80th and 81st streets, [212 535-3520](#).

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