

BEST DRESSED

ZIG ZAG BAR AND GRILL 

Some perverse, unwritten law seems to link the "designed" restaurant with current fashion, and the "undesigned" restaurant with a comfortable but artless aesthetic. That law is broken at the Zig Zag Bar and Grill, a new place in Chelsea designed by Janusz Gottwald & Associates, Architects. The tiny storefront interior reflects a skilled but extremely subtle design hand that lends a feeling of permanence to the space. Spatial trickery is at play here. Yet the atmosphere is decidedly uncontrived. The dim lighting in the dark-wood room is punctuated by the golden glow of hundreds of spotlight liquor bottles; together they promote an unself-conscious comfort. No one is onstage here. There are no icons of high design. Zig Zag's low-key personality gives it the homey ambience of a real neighborhood restaurant, one that has always been there.

In fact, nothing at all was salvaged from the bar formerly at the 23rd Street site; it was gutted and rebuilt. What the architects accomplished was a tour de force of illusion. On one level they created an old-fashioned coziness by using reconditioned solid mahogany tables and 1930s diner seating with burgundy leather upholstery. On another level they gave the space a sense of postmodern ambiguity. The illusion starts at the angled glass storefront. That same angle continues inside, straight through the restaurant. The result is a mystifying composition of perpendicular walls that look angled and angled walls that look perpendicular. Viewed from the entrance the room seems to grow progressively wider as the eye takes in its trapezoidal shape. It's only after some careful contemplation of the space and a look at the architect's model, that the room reveals itself as a rectangle. The owners, Stanley, Allen, and Dana Bernstein themselves admit "It wasn't until we saw the model that we grasped the scheme."

The zigzag motif from which the bar and grill takes its name also begins at the facade, which serrates out to the street. Here the name is announced by a large, blinking neon sign (the architect's one concession, albeit a very effective one, to trendiness). Inside, the long, saw-toothed mahogany bar on the west wall takes over as visual focal point. Convivial groups of people cozy up to each angled nook; the bar's configuration seems to encourage low-key interaction. Ceiling soffits that echo the bar's zigzag pattern, reinforce the visual theme and add a feeling of intimacy. Color and sparkle are added by the liquor bottles that sit out in the open behind the bar on stepped shelves that are lit from the back and below. The reconditioned bar stools, with their sturdy bases painted black and seats covered in burgundy leather, look just right perched on the slate and marble floor. Although new rock music and a busy bar scene keep sound levels hovering at 96 decibels during a busy evening, the feeling of the restaurant is surprisingly unfrantic.

Separated from the bar by a glass-topped, mahogany wall—which looks parallel to the street but actually follows the angled line of the storefront—the 40-seat dining area provides a suitable spot for casual meals. The brief menu consists of grilled entrées, sandwiches, and salads, served on thick, red- or green-rimmed old-style restaurant china. Solid mahogany tables are perfectly sized for conversation. Indirect, incandescent cove lighting casts a yellow glow that imbues the space with a gentle, low light level. This is not the bright "see and be seen" illumination of trendy cafés, but the more relaxing ambience of old-time pubs that encourage conversation. Here there are no visible light fixtures that punch down at you from the ceiling, no wall-mounted fixtures to disturb the clean sweep of the mirrored wall. Even the

noise, which bounces freely from the wood floors to walls and tabletops, seems not to intrude on the congenial atmosphere.

Well-executed details enhance the design. Six small video screens are tucked away in the bar area's front corner, visible but not intrusive. Horizontal bands of antique, pressed tin moldings wrap the entire space and gleam in a pale silver ribbon against the deep-red mahogany. Cream-colored walls are decorated only with a wide expanse of mirror, about three feet tall. The mirror, while it gives a sense of spaciousness to this compact room, is positioned considerably. Diners seated on the long banquette and facing the mirrored wall, can observe the action at the bar behind them, without seeing their own reflections. In the restrooms, however, mirrored walls create infinite reflections, reminiscent of the carnival fun house. They extend the optical illusions that so cleverly coexist with all the homelike elements in Zig Zag's snug little interior. **Regina S. Baraban**

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206 West 23rd Street (between Seventh and Eighth Avenues), 645-5060; **Type of Restaurant:** casual neighborhood bar/dining; **Atmosphere:** pub-like, dark wood and dim lighting, simple and natural; **Architecture:** a series of gradations and elevations that fool the eye, well-crafted; **Concept:** nontrendy design for informal lunch and dinner in the early hours, busy bar at night; **Crowd:** young, local musicians, and photographers. **Reservations:** not necessary.

The egg and dart motifs, from one to three, correspond to fair, good, and excellent. The ratings do not review the food or service. Rather, they reflect the reaction to the design, taking into consideration how well it is integrated into the total concept for the restaurant.