Nicholas Lander welcomes the return of chef Jonathan Waxman to the stoves of Washington Park, New York

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Washington Park, which opened in the spring, provides several excellent reasons for a visit, as any new restaurant must in these straitened economic times.

The first is a welcome return to the stove for peripatetic chef Jonathan Waxman. Then there is his partnership with Wall Street trader Ray Welland who has not only helped to finance the $1.5 million redesign but also magnanimously folded his extensive personal wine cellar into the restaurant to create a stunning wine list that runs to over 1000 bins. In the hands of Patrick Bickford, an ace sommelier, this is a huge advantage over anywhere else opening at this time. Finally, there is its specific location in Greenwich Village where it is surrounded by a greater density of psychiatrists and psychoanalysts than anywhere else in New York. Washington Park, therefore occupies a distinctive geographical niche in the world of restaurants.

But the most obvious bonus for customers, Waxman, and Welland alike is that this corner site has been a restaurant space since it opened as Amen Corner in 1926. As soon as you walk in you realise that you are in an environment that has been specifically created for eating in, unlike so many more modern creations where the ceilings are too low and the tables too cramped.

The room is L shaped and on two levels. On the higher level by the entrance are about a dozen tables under a sloping roof whose windows are effectively soundproofed against the roar of the Fifth Avenue traffic outside. Three steps down bring you to a horseshoe bar on the left (where food is served) and more tables which those sitting on the higher level can look at through the arched wall. At the end of the left-hand wall is the compact, open kitchen in front of which Waxman stands like a conductor by an orchestra pit.

Comfortable chairs, classy linen and glassware and an acceptable noise level all contribute to the impression that Washington Park has hit the ground running despite opening in what is obviously a very difficult trading year.

Waxman's contribution to this cannot be under estimated as he has been around for some time - as he would be the first to admit. He earned his culinary spurs in Berkeley in the early 1980s before trying to convert initially New York and then London to the charms of Californian cuisine via Jams, restaurants which performed like rockets - fizzing initially before sadly falling to the ground.

Today, wiser, calmer and a little greyer, he has supervised an exciting conversion. As well as the attractions of the ground floor there is a chic wine-enclosed private dining room underneath and a prep kitchen that would not look out of place in a large hotel.

The menu reflects Waxman's culinary experience. It is a simple, daily printed single sheet with some of the less expensive wine selections on the flip side and an overriding emphasis on what is fresh, in season and packed with lots of flavour (as well as comfort signature dishes, understandably a *sine qua non* of New York menus today).

And, again perhaps because of Waxman's experience of American menus in the past which have often read like novellas, this menu is a model of brevity with every dish citing precisely and simply its main ingredients. Choosing what to eat is a pleasure.

We thoroughly enjoyed our recent dinner. Best of the first courses were those that provided a contrast in texture: red pepper pancakes topped with circles of smoked salmon and caviar; a thick twirl of lobster encircling a mound of *haricots verts* and *edamame* and a warm wild mushroom salad. Unquestionably, the best main course was a crisp fillet of sable - a fish caught in the Puget Sound off the Seattle coast - with *bok choi* and lobster mushrooms, all of which were enhanced by a *brunoise* that cleverly incorporated *daikon*, the Japanese radish. Sweetbreads with chanterelles and Malmsey was almost as good and the only off note in the meal was a duck breast that had been split and stuffed with pine nuts but was still raw in the middle.

This new baby has obviously fired Waxman's passion not just for cooking but also for seeking out the best ingredients

and whilst he is obviously very happy right by the stoves in downtown New York, he had some rather wistful thoughts about his stint in England. 'The quality of produce I can buy here is gradually getting better but I still dream of all that wonderful game I used to be able to buy so easily at this time of year when I was in London,' he commented. 'And I don't want to even talk about the British farmhouse cheeses which I miss nearly as much.'

With a broad smile, another long-term trade mark, Waxman headed back to the kitchen to call a late order. If he decides to stay as committed to the stoves at Washington Park as his backer and customers would like, then this restaurant should go from strength to strength. And possibly one day provide a therapeutic alternative to the plethora of consulting rooms in the neighbourhood.

Washington Park, 24 Fifth Avenue, New York 10011
tel +1 212 529 4400, web www. washingtonparknyc.com
Lunch Mon-Fri $22.02, three courses, dinner Mon-Sat $60 à la carte.