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## FOOD & DRINK



### TABLES FOR TWO

#### DaDong

3 Bryant Park (212-355-9600)

Dong Zhenxiang, the fifty-six-year-old founder of DaDong (which means “big Dong” in Chinese, a reference to his skyscraping stature) was not born into fortune. The only son in a family of nine children, he took the advice of his father, who counselled him, “You’ll never starve if you are a chef.” Today, the restaurant chain, which has twenty-four branches in China, some of which have been awarded Michelin stars, is synonymous with fine dining and a low-fat duck.

To walk into DaDong’s first international location, steps from Times Square, is a daunting experience, not only because of the formidably tall wooden doors (which are mercifully opened by a well-groomed young man who has been hired to do exactly that) but because, once you’ve entered, the dim lighting, the basalt walls, and the polite reservationist hovering over a rock-shaped desk make you wonder whether you’ve signed up for dinner or a corporate interview.

Let’s get the bad news out of the way: For anyone expecting traditional Peking duck, the DaDong version is a disappointment, though not for lack of effort. The birds, sourced from a specialty farm in Indiana, are smaller than usual, with just the right amount of fat to avoid being too greasy; they are hung to roast in a

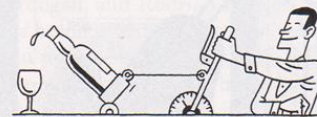
spherical oven developed by Dong. The meat is significantly less flavorful and juicy than what you might expect for ninety-eight dollars (that is, without the optional caviar), but, once you slap on the sweet bean sauce and roll up slices with cucumber and scallions, it still satisfies.

Counterintuitively, perhaps, the best items on the menu are the least expensive. The kung-pao chicken has ethereally tender chunks of poultry and acquires an atomic power by way of whole chili peppers, garlic, and pickled peppers. The braised eggplant is pan-fried and then cooked with soy sauce, sugar, and anise, resulting in little disks that are reminiscent of another Chinese classic, red braised pork.

On a recent weekday night, a few young first-timers, giddy that they’d scored a reservation, took stock of their rarefied company—all slinky bodies in Burberry coats and Chanel boy bags—and made sure to carefully chew the dainty portions they’d been served. They had already decided that the meal fit well with their dieting regimens. One woman, cutting a piece of Kobe beef the size of a matchbox, priced at fifty-two dollars, into small enough chunks that it could be shared, remarked to her companions that the DaDong experience reminded her of a quote she hadn’t heard until she moved to New York: “You can never be too rich or too thin.” (*Dishes \$4-\$195.*)

—Jiayang Fan

### BAR TAB



Lucy’s  
135 Avenue A (212-673-3824)

In 1992, when Ludwika Haraburda Mickevicius was offered this bar—a low-ceilinged dive on the edge of Tompkins Square Park, where she had worked since immigrating from Poland, a decade earlier—she was packing to move to Florida. The owner, who was also Polish, had heard the escape plan and decided that she, too, wanted out. She asked Ludwika—known to regulars as Lucy—to take over the liquor license so that she could retire. “Long time you’ll be happy,” Lucy recalls the woman saying, and so she agreed. Twenty-six years later, not much has changed: the interior looks like an archived “Twin Peaks” set (wood veneer, linoleum flooring, fluorescent red lighting), and, aside from biannual trips to Poland, when she shuts the place down for several weeks, Lucy still works from open to close. A few nights after Valentine’s Day, she stood behind the bar, serving Żywiec beer to a pair of mid-career artists who were lamenting the burdens of polyamory. Katja, Lucy’s granddaughter, stacked crates of P.B.R. and poured żubrówka—a lush rye vodka, flavored with grass from the Białowieża Forest—for tourists. In the back, East Village lifers shot pool, and a man celebrated his roommate’s arrest, which had resulted from a brawl over unpaid rent. Flush for now, he bought a round of Serbian slivovitz (a throat-burning plum brandy) and toasted the N.Y.P.D. in absentia. Lucy calculates end-of-night tabs (cash only) from memory, a practice that rewards endurance. At 4 A.M., she cut the lights and shooed people out with a flashlight. A straggler asked Katja if she’d take over the bar. A voice slurred from the sidewalk, “Katja, darling, I love you!” “I hope not,” she said, and let the door slam behind her.—H. C. Wilentz

