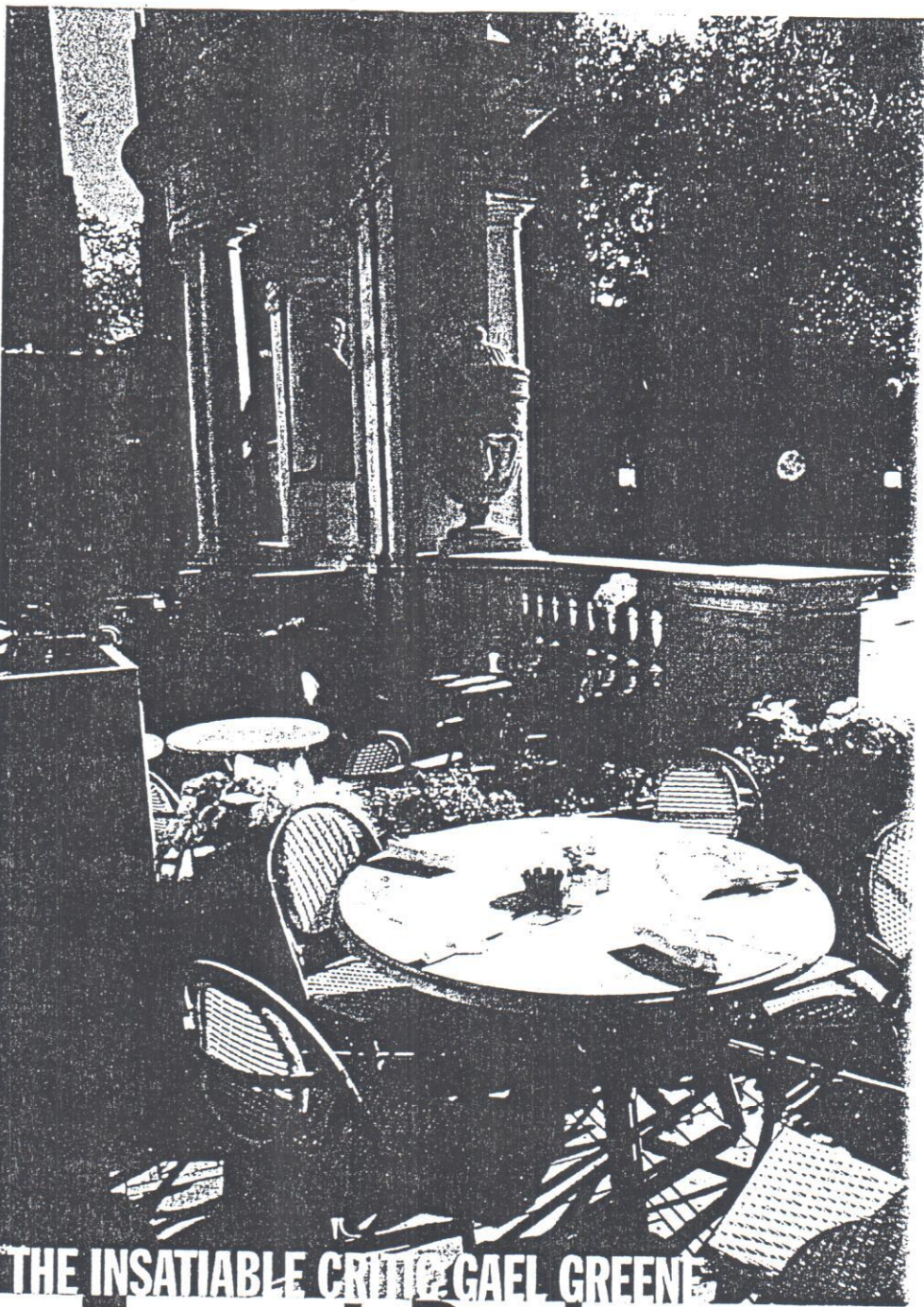


**T**HE STRUGGLE TO BUILD HERE dragged on cruelly for years, and yet seemingly overnight the **Bryant Park Grill and BP Cafe** materialized, the dazzling coda to an urban miracle. Architect Hugh Hardy's mastery of the past participle is reflected in the unexaggerated dimensions of the handsome steel-and-glass pavilion with its woven-aluminum trellis, a nod to the turn of the century. Standing in the glory of this park carved out of what was so recently a littered anteroom of hell, I can imagine I am in a patch of green off the Champs-Élysées, about to lunch at Ledoyen.

All right, so maybe it's not quite the miracle of the Red Sea parting. Forty-second Street has no Place de la Concorde, no Arc de Triomphe (not till Disney moves in, anyway). As an unabashed sentimentalist with an incurable crush on New York, I find the renaissance of this patch of green moving, exhilarating. From inside the pavilion, I look out at the sweep of lawn, pale city bodies absorbing the rays and brown-bagging lunchers. The Grill feels very grand—tall, with stately windows open to the breeze and draped with sheer Roman shades that look like bubble wrap. Designers Cary Tamarkin and Nancy Mah have sheathed the interior in rare woods lacquered to a fine gloss, African movinga, the color of butterscotch. Slate floors, brass doors, the cut-velvet leaf pattern of the banquettes, evoke a vintage, rather European elegance. The colorful patchwork mural, 86 feet of abstract birds by artist Hunt Slonem inspired by the hundreds of birds he keeps in his own loft, seems both playful and intelligent—as is the chandelier in the bar, fireflies with their flight patterns mimicked in curlicues of brass. My guest gasps as a giant dragonfly swoops high overhead, a reality bite. But I rather like it.

Often the only way to get a restaurant open is to open it, ready or not. And this one will be settling in for quite a while. The roof garden, with a small seafood menu from its own separate kitchen and the best view of HBO's Monday-night movies this summer, was to open today. So no sober critic would dare to make final judgments yet. But all of us who loved the California clarity of Jonathan Waxman's food at Jams have high hopes here. Recruiting Waxman as an executive troubleshooter and menu consultant was a sign of the restaurant conglomerate Ark's ambition. If that wasn't hint enough, Michael Weinstein's winning move to capture Lutèce signaled Ark's coming-of-age. And the menus here are smartly succinct, unlike the long-winded inventories at most Ark canteens. Grill entrées are tagged a moderate \$10 to \$20, and more casual options—sandwiches and salads—are sharply discounted in the Cafe (from \$5.50 to \$15).



THE INSATIABLE CRITIC GAELE GREENE

# Forget Paris

*This alfresco dining scene could be in the Bois de Boulogne, but—zut alors!—it's in Bryant Park.*

Yet in just three days, with Waxman himself on the firing line, there are pleasures. Intense clams and mussels roasted in an iron pan, a first-rate Caesar with Parmesan croutons and a crisscross of anchovies, duck-and-shrimp dumplings, and lemony tuna tartare. Slices of soy-ginger-lime-marinated skirt steak layered on sourdough toast with peppers and tomato are so good, we're overlooking the soggy bread. The more serious New York steak is even better. Here are the beloved Waxman fries: Soggy or crisp, they're sensational. Soft-shell crabs plumped with sweet-potato purée are lush and crisp. Basil oil and garlic give an



**THE INSATIABLE CRITIC**

edge to grilled chicken. Sweet Manila clams come tossed with tomato, olive, and sweet peppers on precisely al dente linguine. And our vegetarians feel pampered with scallion pancake in a curry-spiced stew of eggplant, tomatoes, garlic, and new potatoes with wheat barley. A smooth, fruity Saintsbury Pinot Noir from Napa amplifies the cheer. True, we're dining almost alone in a room that seats 200—royalty in a verdant paradise.

New York is warm with a gentle breeze, inching toward summer, and we're sheltered under the big market umbrella alfresco at the Grill, sipping iced tea late the next day just as the kitchen surrenders to the crush. Behind us, the hostess is apologizing to a quartet ready to exit after waiting an hour with no sign of lunch—she invites them back as guests of the house. A second table gives up, too. Knowing that I'm recognized, I worry that the passion to please me is paralyzing the system. It's only day four, and guess who's coming to dinner? Nine hundred early birds. (And not that many New Yorkers have stumbled yet on this oasis. Nor has Ark trumpeted its arrival.)

I'd like my fried calamari hot on its hill of greens and perhaps a livelier vinaigrette on all these salads. I'm opposed to cooked vegetables that taste raw. And a more generous offering of the splendid rolls from Ark's own Columbus Bakery seems called for here. Still, there's no dimming our cheer in this setting—till the jackhammers begin ripping up 40th Street, and we're forced to pick up our plates and scurry inside. Ah, there's that dragonfly again. A pet already, and practically a design element. Now, with the house nearly empty, the kitchen comes to grips with itself—sending out fusilli perfumed with morels, shiitake, and caramelized onion. The molten chocolate soufflé disappears in a flash, and one of my guests is so taken with the homey, old-fashioned brown-butter cake, she's asked for the recipe. A manager offers to fax it.

Sad to say, the Cafe kitchen tonight is limping. We've missed the classical-music concert at six, and security has already closed the rest of the park. There is a lone homeless man on a bench along the path tying and retying his unmatched shoes, balanced, it seems to me, by the black-tie magnificence of gentry celebrating the library's birthday, dropping by on stretch wheels and making a detour to peek at the new beanery. Service is slow and confused—no surprise this early in the shakeout—but we're happy loitering over plantain chips to dip into excellent eggplant purée or even the tricolor chips with decent guacamole. Big-band music wafting above and a sandwich of grilled vegetables on remarkable focaccia with potato salad are the only high. Best not to speak of the stolid meat loaf, lackadaisical chicken, and leathery baked fish on untoasted sourdough.

Will the sprawling BP Cafe and its bar that stretches to 42nd Street under the leafy plane trees ever get serious shelter—a tent to protect it from the rain? "We're moving very slowly," says Ark chief Weinstein, who began this odyssey eleven years ago and has learned a lot about politics along the way. "When all the institutions involved see that we respect the park and the past, we may discuss that issue."

For now, let's send a bouquet of Bryant Park's great fries to everyone in the band of civic boosters, dreamers, preservationists, and entrepreneurs who schemed this dream—Andrew Heiskell, Marshall Rose, Dan Biederman, Parks commissioners Henry Stern and then Betsy Gotbaum. The restaurateurs who tried and failed to get the project built. The guardians of the library and the past—all of them heroes.

*The Bryant Park Grill and BP Cafe, entrance on 40th Street, between Fifth and Sixth Avenues (840-6500). Monday through Thursday 11:30 a.m. to midnight, Friday till 1 a.m., Saturday and Sunday 11 a.m. to 1 a.m., brunch 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. A.E., D.C., M.C., V.*