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\$25 AND UNDER

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A Village Refuge That's a Throwback

HEALTHY implications aside, the smell of tobacco smoke can sometimes be comforting. In the old days, aromas of strong tobacco, leather and perhaps a touch of after-shave conveyed warm and reassuring images of paternal strength. Today, even though I generally abhor cigarette smoke while I'm eating, a tobacco haze sometimes seems perfectly appropriate.

Such is the case at Tavern on Jane, a convivial, impretentious neighborhood bar and grill. The skewed angle of the old floor, the nicotine-laminated brick walls and ceiling, the fireplace and the timeless characters darting back and forth create a sort of cheery Dickensian image, sideboards groaning and all the rest.

Like other old-fashioned taverns, including Walker's in TriBeCa and Ear Inn in the SoHo, Tavern on Jane is a refuge. Regulars have their usual at the bar, and neighborhood residents grab a table and are ready to order, safe and secure as they ritualistically place their cigarette packs and lighters on the table before them.

Clearly, tobacco has a special place here, with the bar area in the large front dining room allocated to smokers. Directly in back of that is a sometimes smoky nonsmoking area, and then curling off to the side, with its own air-conditioning system, another nonsmoking room. But it's cut off from the more bustling areas and feels a little sterile. Tavern feels as if it's been around

forever, but in fact it's only five years old. The owners, Michael Stewart and Horton Foote Jr., the son of the writer, look over the Jane Street Seafood Cafe with the simple aim of creating a friendly neighborhood hangout. They've succeeded, and though the atmosphere tends to outweigh the familiar and unchallenging food, the menu is a reliable step above pub grub.

Tavern on Jane

31 Eighth Avenue at Jane Street, Greenwich Village; (212) 675-2526.

BEST DISHES: Grilled shrimp with sesame noodles, chicken wings, crab cakes, gazpacho, braised lamb shank, grilled pork chops, hanger steak, fish and chips, hamburger

PRICE RANGE: Appetizers, \$2.50 to \$3.95; main courses, \$9.95 to \$18.95.

CREDIT CARDS: All major cards.

HOURS: Monday through Friday, noon to 1 a.m.; Saturday and Sunday, 11 a.m. to 1 a.m.

WHEELCHAIR ACCESS: Restrooms are small and narrow; step in front.

My favorite appetizer, grilled shrimp with sesame noodles (\$8.95), is big enough to be a small main course, with charred shrimp, packing a mild chili punch, perched atop the noodles in a slightly sweet sesame sauce. Menu standards include crisp and meaty chicken wings (\$5.95) with a Buffalo-style blue cheese sauce that could have used a spicier kick, a heaping platter of crunchily fried calamari (\$6.95) and a big bowl of mussels in a tasty sauce of white wine and herbs (\$7.95). Of more interest are the daily specials, like excellent, meaty crab cakes (\$8.50) with a mango salsa and a fine green salad, and a bowl of cooling gazpacho (\$3.50) that tastes like a

garden featuring ripe tomatoes. The same is true with the main courses: Specials like a tender mildly flavored lamb shank (\$14) in a port-wine reduction, and meaty pork chops in an applejack sauce (\$14), big enough to cover the plate, are the best bets. Otherwise, the simplest dishes are preferable, like a beefy, chewy hanger steak (\$12.95), fish and chips (\$9.95) with plenty of malt vinegar, and a good, honest hamburger (\$6.95). Dishes like grilled yellowfin tuna steak with chive oil (\$18.95) feel as if they belong somewhere else, and taste that way, too.

Tavern offers a perfunctory wine list with a few decent bottles under \$25, but it's more of a beer place, with good draft selections like Brooklyn Pennant Ale (\$4.75), Guinness (\$5), Boddington's Cream Ale (\$5). I'd skip dessert; the cakes and pies are not inspiring. But after a meal I wouldn't mind soaking up a little more atmosphere. Maybe have something at the bar, watch a little of the game on television and, if I smoked, light up.