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CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK

When Accessibility Isn't Hospitality

By **FRANK BRUNI**

IN my first few visits to Buddakan, one of the flashiest restaurants in Manhattan, I thought I'd taken in every twist and turn of the kaleidoscopic labyrinth it inhabits, every little detail.

But it wasn't until I went there recently with someone in a wheelchair that I noticed, just inside the entrance, an odd door to the left. It opened onto what looked like an empty closet and turned out to be a tiny elevator. That's where my companion was steered, and that's how she got around the four steep steps that others climb from the host station to the tables on the restaurant's upper level.

With a modest column of space, an unremarkable bit of engineering and an ascent of less than 10 feet, Buddakan had given her a path to a meal and an experience like any other diner's.

Or had it?

The elevator deposited her in a grim corner behind the bar where she was trapped by a thicket of cleaning equipment, including a mop and bucket. She waited more than a minute while restaurant employees did what they should have done as soon as she arrived: cleared the way.

As imperfect as that elevator was, she would have welcomed a second one to take her to the main dining room on the restaurant's lower level. She glimpsed that area — larger and more lavishly decorated — down a grand staircase, but she had no hope of getting there.

"Its fanciness reminded me of Oz," she later told me in an e-mail message, "when Dorothy and Co. see it sparkling in the distance."

In the scheme of things the inconveniences and disappointment she endured were arguably minor. But they suggested the ways in which even the most accessible restaurants — and Buddakan, make no mistake, is in this estimable club — fail to accommodate disabled diners as well as they do the rest of us.

I check on restaurants' wheelchair accessibility every week for my reviews for The Times, but even I didn't appreciate the obstacles people without full mobility face until I dined with one of them, which is what I did after Jill Abramson, managing editor of The New York Times, was injured in an accident last May.

While crossing a Midtown street she was hit by a truck. Her left femur was shattered and her pelvis and many bones in her right foot were broken, leaving her unable to walk for more than two months. The long healing process left her hungry — to get out of the house, to eat some indulgent food.

So while she was progressing from wheelchair to crutches to cane, I went with her to four restaurants that said they were at least partially accessible to see how true that was.

At most of them we encountered hosts and servers who seemed earnestly determined to be as helpful as they could.

But we also encountered unhappy surprises and challenging circumstances. And we learned what disabled diners know too well: eating out is almost never easy.

"It's a lot better than it was 20 years ago," said Anne Davis, the program director for legal services at the New York City chapter of the National Multiple Sclerosis Society. Ms. Davis has long used a motorized scooter to get around.

She attributed improvements to the 1990 Americans with Disabilities Act and to local laws that require newly built or extensively renovated buildings to be accessible to disabled people. For restaurants, that means elevators or ramps and restrooms large enough for a scooter or wheelchair.

But older structures aren't subject to the same requirements. Ms. Davis lives on the Upper East Side, and she said most of the established restaurants she visits in her neighborhood have tiny, inaccessible restrooms.

"I dehydrate before I go out to dinner," she said. "I don't drink anything for an hour and a half." She also carries around a 12-pound fiberglass ramp that she uses if a restaurant has a step or two up to its entrance, as many do. If a restaurant has a whole flight of stairs, she's out of luck.

Paula Wolff, who works for the Center for Independence of the Disabled in New York, noted that even new restaurants in full compliance with federal and local laws may be too tightly packed — especially in New York, where rents are high and restaurateurs try to cram people in — for someone in a wheelchair to navigate.

"A place might be theoretically accessible, but is it truly accessible if they don't leave enough space around the tables so that even with people sitting at them, you have a turning radius?" she asked.

Ms. Wolff, who has used a wheelchair for about 30 years, added: "I can find restaurants that are reasonably accessible, but I have to be really loose on that."

After our visit to Buddakan, Jill and I dined at the Italian restaurant Falai, which opened in a tiny space on the Lower East Side in 2005. Although a woman taking my reservation — made under a pseudonym — warned me that the dining room could "get a little tight," she assured me that it and the restroom were indeed accessible.

With careful steering, Jill maneuvered her wheelchair to our table. But she took one look at the slender route to the restroom in the back and realized, as she later said, that getting there "would literally have required all diners to stand up and remove the outer chairs to all the tables."

By this point in her recovery she could stand briefly and do what she described as a "zombie walk" if she had someone to hold onto. A woman in our group lent her that help and escorted her to the restroom, which someone unable to abandon her wheelchair might have had extreme difficulty reaching.

Jill was on crutches when we visited our next restaurant, Aquagrill in SoHo, which readily concedes that its basement restroom, reached by a staircase, isn't accessible. Disabled diners are directed to a restaurant next door, Fiamma Osteria.

Jill went to Fiamma but the steep grade of the sidewalk between the restaurants would have made it "impossible in the chair without someone pushing," she observed.

Inside Fiamma she had to enter an elevator that would take her to a lower level. But it didn't initially move, and she had to rap on the door to get the attention of a waiter, who then activated it.

"For a moment," Jill later told me, "I had visions of being trapped in this glass cage as the rest of you dived into the entrees."

Although Aquagrill has a blue sign by its front door that pronounces it accessible to wheelchairs, there's a big step up to the entrance. On the phone I'd been told that a ramp could be provided if a disabled diner needed one.

But when Jill asked our waitress how someone in a wheelchair might deal with the step, the potential scenario the waitress described chilled her. "You could probably get the waiters to carry you," the waitress said.

Being free from the wheelchair was key to Jill's ease and comfort at our last restaurant, BLT Fish. Its main dining room is on the third floor, and like most diners, we got there in a roomy elevator. But the restrooms are on the ground floor, on the far side of an often crowded bar.

She used a cane that night, so she could thread her way through the crowd. For a person in a wheelchair, it would have been a dicier negotiation.

"Someone would have had to ask all the drinkers to clear a path," she later wrote by e-mail. "That would have been embarrassing."

And it would have been just one example of a disabled person's dependence on the consideration of servers and fellow diners, who don't always come through.

Judging from my experience with Jill and experiences she recounted to me, servers generally try to adjust to a disabled person's needs, making available tables up front or coveted seats in sidewalk cafe areas that are especially easy to reach.

But good intentions often met sloppy execution. Jill told me about a restaurant she visited where the only restroom that didn't require the navigation of a staircase was deep within the kitchen. Using her cane, she made her way to it across a perilously greasy floor.

The server who guided her told her that when she was done, she should stay outside the restroom until he returned to fetch her. She ended up waiting five minutes, wondering anxiously if she should dare to attempt the trip back to the table on her own.

At Buddakan, where a restroom on the upper level was indeed fully accessible, hosts and servers couldn't have been friendlier, and when I later spoke with Steve Scott, the restaurant's director of operations, he readily copped to carelessness in regard to the gantlet of cleaning equipment.

The gantlet was back when we left Buddakan that night. In fact the obstructions had multiplied. There was also a bulky service cart — yet another impediment, another way to make a disabled person feel inconvenient and overlooked.

Top Tables for Diners With Their Own Chairs

Anne Davis, the program director for legal services at the New York City chapter of the National Multiple Sclerosis Society, said these restaurants have accommodating employees and restrooms that are accessible to wheelchair users.

AQUAVIT 65 East 55th Street, (212) 307-7311.

CAFÉ BOULUD Surrey Hotel, 20 East 76th Street, (212) 772-2600.

FOUR SEASONS 99 East 52nd Street, (212) 754-9494.

GRAMERCY TAVERN 42 East 20th Street, (212) 477-0777.

MAYA 1191 First Avenue (64th Street), (212) 585-1818.

O'NEALS' 49 West 64th Street, (212) 787-4663.

SIP SAK 928 Second Avenue (49th Street), (212) 583-1900.

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