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Many visitors to New York come across a street that the city has officially dubbed "Restaurant Row." Between 8th and 9th Avenues in the Theater District, 46th Street boasts more than a dozen eateries that cater mostly to the pre-showtime Broadway crowd. But for those who don't have a musical to catch, downtown offers a crowded culinary strip of its own. Cornelia Street, hidden amongst the crooked one-ways of the West Village, is a pleasant, tree-lined block between Bleeker and West 4th. Unlike on 46th Street, the city street sign makes no mention of it, yet Cornelia Street is New York's superior, however unofficial, "Restaurant Row."

Cornelia Street Café

29 Cornelia St • 212-989-9319



photo: Dave Freedenberg

Cornelia Street Café is the only restaurant on the block with sidewalk seating. With the weather as unpleasant as it has been for the past few weeks, this might not seem like such a good thing. However, Cornelia Street is perfect for people-watching and on weekend nights it can look like a full-fledged

street party, so those sidewalk tables are a real commodity. The food is generally mediocre, but the grilled chicken sandwich on a toasted baguette with melted goat cheese and crispy leeks is one of the best dishes on the whole block. The service is painfully lacking at Cornelia Street Café, but if you're just there to watch the parade of Village characters march by, waiting half an hour for the check shouldn't be a problem.

Little Havana

30 Cornelia St • 212-633-2676



photo: Dave Freedenberg

Fidel's health is failing, and the Cubans of Miami are dancing in the streets. You can celebrate here in New York with a plate of the best ropa vieja (shredded skirt steak over rice and beans) in town at Little Havana. Lidia, the grandmotherly owner/ chef, will almost certainly be in the kitchen drinking a celebratory glass of red wine and cooking away.

Everything is delicious at this truly authentic restaurant, but the maduros (mushy sweet plantains) and the jumbo shrimp ceviche marinated in lemon will actually make your heart flutter. There is space for less than 25 diners at a time at Little Havana, so every seat is filled on occasion. There is only one overwhelmed waitress, but Lidia has some help in the kitchen and she's always happy to come talk with her customers about her take on food, life, and anti-Fidel politics.

Pearl Oyster Bar

18 Cornelia St • 212-691-8211



photo: Dave Freedenberg

When Tony Soprano woke up from his coma, the first thing he wanted to eat was a lobster roll from Pearl Oyster Bar. One bite of that massive roll and you'll understand why. The meat is plentiful to say the least, so once the soft roll is consumed, your plate will still be full of delicious lobster bits that have fallen from the overstuffed sandwich

no matter how careful you try to be. However, Tony did not say he wanted the pile of shoestring potato fries that come with every roll. In stark contrast to the succulent lobster roll they accompany, the fries taste like nothing. Even though the lobster roll usually costs more than \$20 at "market price" and it is served with a side dish that tastes like fried air, Pearl Oyster Bar is worth a visit, especially if you've just awoken from a coma.

Po

31 Cornelia St • 212-645-2189



photo: Dave Freedenberg

Mario Batali opened Po 13 years ago, and the quality he brought is still evident. Though he is no longer associated with the restaurant, dishes like linguini with clams and pancetta, gnocchi with smoked mozzarella, and broccoli rabe with toasted garlic would not seem the slightest bit out of place if they were served at Otto, Babbo, or Lupa. And unlike at those other Batali establishments, Po's prices are surprisingly reasonable. The most expensive entree at Po is \$7 less than the most expensive appetizer at Lupa. Po is a tiny, dimly lit space, and the tables are squeezed in with little space between them, so privacy is a bit difficult to come by. Still, reservations are tough to land because a meal at Po is always scrumptious and the bill is never exorbitant.

Dave Freedenberg worked as a cheesemonger for the Murray's Cheese Shop at the intersection of Cornelia Street and Bleeker. He moonlights as a yellow cab driver and offers Famous Fat Dave's Five Borough Eating Tours at www.famousfatdave.com.