

The Fairfield County Weekly

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By Lorraine Gengo

## **Comfort Zone** The Saltwater Grille is rather Chill

One of my favorite places to eat on a perfect summer day is located on Stamford's Shippan waterfront overlooking the Brewers Marina off Harbor Drive, where wealthy yachties park their petro-guzzling stinkpots. There's a view of billowy clouds and sun glinting off the water and chrome from just about any vantage point in this spot, which has housed a variety of restaurants- from Rusty Scupper days to its more glamorous incarnation as Beacon and the Shore House, both celebrity chef ventures.

The one constant has been that it's a beautiful space in an enviable location, no matter who's cooking in the kitchen or running the front of the house. But in a restaurant that seats 300 on two levels, you've got to sell a lot of latkes (or something else people want to eat) in order to make rent. And therein lies the nub of the problem, perhaps, as to why so many have tried yet have not been able to make a go of it in this off-the-beaten track spot.

The Scupper had the longest run, from the early '80s to late '90s, making its mark as a happy hour singles hangout. While more upscale than the Scup, the newest occupant, the Saltwater Grille, wants to be both a good gathering place for the bar crowd, as well as a respectable New American bistro, serving updated comfort food that's accessible to most palates.

The team of pros assembled to open this newcomer seem particularly well-suited to the task of running a waterfront hangout that's relaxed and fun, yet serious about food. The Saltwater Grille boasts not one, but two G.M.s – Donald Garamella, whose street cred comes from his associations with SoNo's Match and Stamford's Grand, restaurants that are known for their cuisine as well as their vibe; and Greg Perna, who formerly managed Morton's Steakhouse in Stamford, a restaurant known for its high-end service and standards.

The players in the kitchen are led by executive chef Jason Milanese, who comes to Stamford by way of Chicago (Hilton Hotel), Boston (Legal Seafoods), and the Cape (Beach House Restaurant). Pastry chef Sarah Meyer, formerly of Aux Delices, handles the sweet side of the culinary equation.

The menu is familiar yet global, with an emphasis on so-called comfort dishes, including the now-cliché mac & cheese offering. We like that there's artisanal cheeses and charcuterie on the menu, as well as raw bar goodies.

Totally apropos, our visit coincided with the solstice; in fact, we were happily ensconced at a table on the lower deck exactly one hour after summer was officially declared.

By 3:06 p.m., the place was populated by a few lunch stragglers like ourselves and a hearty crew at the bar, who looked like they were just getting started with their evening.

While the chicken “lollipops” (frenched drumsticks slathered with apple barbecue sauce and fried till they are golden) seemed to be the signature starter, the pan roasted shrimp with cheddar grits was calling to us rather loudly. Three fat maple-balsamic glazed shrimp sat atop a pale mound of grits, made all the more comfort-tasting due to the hint of cheddar in them (\$14). The listing this day included an item we can never pass on, in any form: soft shell crab. Here it was deep-fried and served on a bun with lettuce, a slice of tomato and house-made tartar sauce. It came with the best hand-cut, skin-on fries we’ve had in a dog’s age – a guilty pleasure we rarely allow ourselves.

In fact, the whole experience felt like a guilty pleasure, come to think of it. While the rest of Fairfield County had gone back to their office cubes, we were soaking up rays and fat calories, loving every minute.