

The New York Times

Sunday July 1, 2007

By Patricia Brooks

I don't know how the Saltwater Grille in Stamford will fare in Mid-January, but with the long summer looming ahead, this newcomer's prime waterfront location couldn't be more appealing. In a local formerly occupied by Beacon Stamford, the marina views are dazzling, especially on a sunny day or starry evening.

As befits a waterfront restaurant, fish and seafood dominate the menu. Dinner specials, which are different daily, are seafood on at least three nights. On a Monday one member of my party enjoyed a crispy-skinned barramundi – an Australian fish like sea bass, farm-raised – with sweet white meat, deboned and seared with a fricassee of mushrooms and asparagus. Wednesday featured skate wing, pan-sautéed with a caper sauce, and Friday a rich, abundant bouillabaisse.

The executive chef, Jason Milanese, formerly of Legal Sea Foods, knows his way around the chilly waters of New England, but adds a few twists of his own. One of these are the Gruyere puffs served oven hot – a delightful and different way to begin each dinner. They are like cheese-accented popovers: airy, cloud-light and absolutely delicious.

Then there is Mr. Milanese's "classic fish and chips." The cod in this old faithful was enfolded in a tempura batter that was lighter, more flavorful and less greasy than the usual coating. Also surprising was salt-and-pepper calamari with fresh chillies. This dish consisted of squid from China in a light, buttermilk-puree batter, jump-started with a few fresh jalapenos.

Another starter of distinction was grilled diver sea scallops served over a red-pepper-and fennel relish. I relished as well the roasted asparagus bisque (smooth and smoky) with a scoop of crab and leek ragout at the bottom of the bowl and piquant echoes of lemon oil. Juicy mussels came with grain mustard, fresh herbs and a big slab of grilled, buttery country bread. Almost all the mollusks were steamed open and sparkling fresh, even though the herb-scented broth was a tad over-salty.

Fresh and lively as the menu is, sometimes a few items are forgotten between the kitchen and the tale. For example, the accouterments of tuna sashimi sounded extra-special – star anise pickles, wasabi oil, ponzu drizzle – but all were missing, and the few naked tuna slices, fresh as they were, didn't compensate for the \$14 price.

A perfectly cooked apple-roasted salmon filet was enhanced with an apple reduction and fennel salad. Almost as enjoyable was one of only two pasta dishes on

the menu: fresh black-pepper fettuccine with rock shrimp and roasted red peppers in a light rose sauce.

Among several meat dishes, the double-cut pork chop was a gargantuan standout, served over maple sweet potatoes and chopped pickled cabbage.

Don't overlook the desserts at the Saltwater Grille. Anyone who can turn out those ethereal Gruyere puffs, as Sarah Meyer, the executive pastry chef, does, can be trusted with the half-dozen sweets. One night I opted for a special bit of decadence: mocha profiteroles, light and eggy, filled with intense espresso ice cream with a dark chocolate sauce. For something even lighter, the Tahitian vanilla bean crème brûlée was both delicate and sweetly rewarding.