

May 2008

review

Yankee Pier

East meets West—Coast, that is—
at the new Lafayette Mercantile's
seafood restaurant.

IT IS FOUR o'clock on a Wednesday afternoon at Yankee Pier in Lafayette, and Juan Navarro is elbow deep in crab. He stands in a corner of the bustling predinner kitchen, his latex-gloved hands cracking crab legs, picking out the fresh meat, and depositing it in a huge metal bowl. It's a station his colleagues jokingly refer to as "seafood detention," and he's got 42 crabs' worth of picking to go.

Navarro's efforts provide the thick, flaky leg meat for crab Louis salads and generously stuffed crab rolls, as well as the fine strips of body meat for crab cakes, soups, and sauces. Leftover shells are thrown into huge stockpots—they'll be the base for the restaurant's deeply flavored bisque.

The painstaking process, says head chef Michael Dunn, is part of Yankee Pier's "dedication to freshness." The Colonial-style seafood house, the fourth in a local chain of Yankee Piers owned by the Lark Creek Restaurant Group, specializes in traditional East Coast dishes—lobster rolls, fried Ipswich clams, New England clam chowder—while featuring the bounty of West Coast waters, including salmon, Pacific sole, and Dungeness crab. Fish here is served in



a straightforward manner, so freshness and spot-on preparation are key.

"We cook things people have eaten their whole lives," says Dunn. "If we don't do it right, it's much more noticeable." He takes the clam chowder as an example. "The thickness has to be just right; the clams can't be overcooked," he says. Similarly, fresh fish, served according to the fishery seasons, is grilled, blackened, or pan-roasted to order. "We don't use sauces, so there's nothing to hide behind," Dunn says.

The ceviche proves his point. Fresh morsels of mahimahi, Pacific cod, and rockfish (or whatever fish is in season) are dressed with just a squeeze of lemon juice, allowing the clean taste of the fish to come through, while mild avocado on top and a sea salt cracker garnish vary the textures. In the same way, crab and lobster boiled in lightly salted water and served with a tin of butter and a lemon wedge let the mild taste and smooth texture of the shellfish stand on its own.

BY APRIL DEMBOSKY | PHOTOGRAPHY BY MELISSA BARNES



As Dunn notes, fish is also served straight up, although house-made lemon-caper or tartar sauce comes on the side, and all seafood entrées are accompanied by a choice of two “market sides,” ranging from fluffy whipped potatoes and savory mushrooms sautéed with garlic, to a fresh medley of rainbow chard and butternut squash, to the aptly named big fat buttermilk biscuit. For dining companions who are not seafood fans, the menu offers plenty of steak and pasta alternatives.

As the dinner hour heats up and patrons begin lining up out the door—sometimes waiting an hour for a table on a weeknight—a row of line cooks works magic in the exhibition kitchen. Dunn monitors every plate for presentation. He double-checks the soup of the day—not enough salt—and helps the line cooks identify oysters: Fanny Bay and Buckley Bay varieties can be mistaken easily. He passes through the kitchen to check on backstage preparation, including a visit to the live lobster box. He picks one up, allowing it a precious moment to stretch out. “I swear I’m going to come back as a lobster or crab in my next life,” he says, shaking his head.

Dunn started his restaurant career in high school as a dishwasher at the now-closed

Strawberry Corner in Alamo, then he studied zoology at UC Davis. After graduating, he decided to stick with the restaurant biz, working at Dublin’s Mini Gourmet for 10 years, then scoring a line cook position at Lark Creek Walnut Creek in 1996. He worked his way up through the ranks of the Lark Creek Restaurant Group, eventually becoming the head chef for the Yankee Pier at San Jose’s Santana Row in 2002, then taking the helm at the Lafayette location when it opened in January.

The menus at the various Yankee Piers are essentially the same, but chefs do experiment with new dishes. The steamed Manila clams, served with cherry peppers and pork belly in an unusual paprika broth, were a chef’s experiment that became a Yankee Pier staple. But, for Dunn, the main challenge of running a fresh seafood restaurant is not the culinary artistry, but finding the freshest seafood that

PREVIOUS PAGE: Fresh fish ceviche with sea salt crackers. THIS PAGE: (clockwise from far left) Yankee Pier’s facade at the Lafayette Mercantile; a cook prepares an oyster platter; butterscotch pudding.

at a glance

WHAT MAKES IT SPECIAL: Uber-fresh seafood from both Atlantic and Pacific waters. Menu changes seasonally in accordance with nature’s provision.

DON’T MISS: Whatever’s fresh. Crab or lobster, in season, or the catch of the day—salmon season should start this month.

THE SPACE: Colonial-style seafood house bustling with servers clad in blue-and-white stripes.

BONUS: The big fat buttermilk biscuit—a moist hunk of doughy goodness served with an intriguing sweet red pepper jam.

WHEN TO GO: For dinner any night of the week—but never without a reservation. Or, for a weekday lunch.

PLEASANT SURPRISE: A comfort food dessert menu, featuring chocolate cream and lemon meringue pies, and sumptuously rich butterscotch pudding.

has also been harvested to preserve healthy fish populations—all at the right price. Yankee Pier adheres to the Monterey Bay Aquarium’s Seafood Watch guidelines, which endorse the use of only seasonal, sustainably raised fish.

This is why salmon lovers may have to wait until late this month to enjoy the fish at Yankee Pier. In winter, Dunn replaces salmon with a list of less common fish such as *monchong*, a medium-firm white fish from the Pacific, and Canadian arctic char, a pinkish salmon cousin with a freshwater trout flavor. Dunn has had to explain this philosophy of seasonal sourcing to distraught salmon fans throughout the winter, the same way he’ll have to console crab fans come summer. “It’s important to serve something memorable, never mediocre,” Dunn says.

CONTACT: 3593 Mt. Diablo Blvd., Lafayette, (925) 283-4100, www.yankeepier.com.

HOURS: Lunch and dinner daily.

PRICE: Appetizers \$5–\$13, entrées \$12–\$45.

ALCOHOL: Full bar. ■