

# San Francisco Chronicle

## RESTAURANTS

UPDATE *By Michael Bauer*

### Waterbar: Food matches view

After a recent visit to Waterbar, I tweeted that I couldn't decide whether the most captivating feature was the arrangement of floor-to-ceiling fish tanks inside the restaurant or the bay outside. One follower responded: "I guess the food wasn't exciting enough to hold your attention?"

At one time that might have been true, but now the food almost matches the view at this impressive Pat Kuleto and Mark Franz restaurant beside the Bay Bridge on the Embarcadero.

So much is going on in the space, however, that it's hard to concentrate on the food. There's an expansive open kitchen where the team in white works at warp speed, in contrast to the serene view framed by the windows; an always-crowded bar; and a breezy outdoor seating area that overlooks the water and the sister

restaurant, Epic Roasthouse.

Diners pay handsomely for these primo facilities. Appetizers are in the middle teens, and the least expensive main course is \$29. Waiters note that portions are relatively small so diners might also want to order oysters to start, and a side dish with the entree.

Most patrons don't seem to mind the price, given Waterbar's location and the markedly improved quality of the food under Parke Ulrich. That is, of course, unless you're seated in the low-ceilinged dining room on the far side of the main room. It feels like the equivalent of a back porch.

Waterbar, in fact, is the perfect place for oysters, and you can go with the daily special (\$1 each before 6 p.m., \$2 after) or any of the other dozen or so varieties (\$2.50-\$3.25).

Another good way to start is

with the iceberg salad (\$16), little wedges of baby organic greens, strewed with tiny shrimp and a couple jumbo prawns in an exceptional Green Goddess dressing with a hint of mint.

We also tried the chawan mushi (\$18), where the egg custard is sliced and fanned in a bowl with a broth and local sea urchin; it was like eating creme brulee on a windy day at the ocean. A white-fish entree is braised in red wine (\$29), poured on tableside, and surrounded by batons of root vegetables, all on a raft of mashed potatoes so good that I refused to think about the butter content.

Wood-oven roasted striped bass (\$36), a piece probably not more than 5 or 6 ounces, is served with slightly chewy agnolotti filled with andouille sausage and moistened with a gumbolike sauce. Other options include

## Waterbar

399 The Embarcadero (near Folsom), San Francisco (415) 284-9922 or waterbarsf.com

Lunch 11:30 a.m.-2:30 p.m. Monday-Friday; dinner 5:30-9:30 p.m. Sunday-Monday, until 10 p.m. Tuesday-Saturday; brunch 11:30 a.m.-3 p.m. Saturday-Sunday. Full bar. Reservations and credit cards accepted. Valet \$12 at lunch; \$10 at dinner.

<b>Overall</b>	★★★
Food	★★★
Service	★★★
Atmosphere	★★★
Prices	\$\$\$\$
Noise Rating	▲▲▲

chile-glazed crab legs with shoestring potatoes (\$35), oak-roasted Alaskan cod with Maine lobster minestrone (\$33) and bacon-roasted rabbit (\$32) with gnocchi and black trumpet mushrooms.

It's a crime that Waterbar doesn't offer the dessert menu with the regular menu so diners

can plan accordingly. Emily Luchetti's creations are four-star affairs.

Her strawberry rhubarb crumble (\$10), with a thin streusel coating and a scoop of ice cream, looked underwhelming, but one bite washed that feeling away. The crunchy and buttery and caramel flavors dispersed into the fruit and ice cream, which is some of the best around.

Luchetti is also known for her ice cream sandwiches (\$5) — two meringues half dipped in chocolate and filled with espresso ice cream. They're wonderful.

Service, too, has improved since the restaurant opened a little more than two years ago. The staff knows the wine and the menu, helping make Waterbar a restaurant that defies the odds: Now the food matches the view.