

food + drink



Waterbar's sea-centric menu is full of flair and, although not cheap, isn't killingly expensive either.

GUARDIAN PHOTOS BY RORY MCNAMARA

Fish out of water

By Paul Reidinger  
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Waterbar is, obviously, a seafood house, but it doesn't shout this fact in your face. The building is handsome in a generic way, and the interior décor is notable mostly for its artful blend of bustle and hush. There is water to be seen — the bay, to be precise, viewable through gigantic plate-glass windows, although your eye is likely to be drawn upward to the Bay Bridge, which looks particularly massive when observed from almost directly below and does set the mind to hoping that all these seismic retrofits will do the trick.

Inside, there's more water, held in two tall glass columns that are, in effect, aquariums. A curious effect of these watery columns is that they, like the bridge, carry one's glance upward, to colorful fish swimming near the ceiling. The fish are glancing right back; are they marveling at their on-high view or wondering when their luck will run out?

Waterbar, which opened early in 2008, is the fraternal twin of next-door Epic Roasthouse, and it's the kinder, gentler sibling. The tone of the place is a little less assertive, prices are more modest, and the maritime menu probably raises fewer ethical and environmental

hackles than Epic's meat-driven one — although not *no* hackles, since the tale of the world's collapsed and collapsing fisheries now includes a chapter about our very own king salmon. I was surprised to find skatewing (\$30) offered, since skate is a flat-out "avoid," according to the Monterey Bay Aquarium's Seafood Watch service. Since it's typically brought in from the East Coast, it also casts a larger-than-ideal carbon shadow. On the other hand, it is fabulous: a fan of ribbed white flesh, pan-seared to a crisp gold, splashed with a (too-salty) morel consommé, and plated with gnocchi, morels, English peas, and a pair of braised scallions.

Chef Parker Ulrich is a protégé of Farallon's Mark Franz, and the pedigree shows. Seafood cookery benefits inordinately from a bit of flair, and Ulrich brings that flair. Exhibit A: the skatewing, which, after hesitating, I asked for and enjoyed. Another major example would be the grilled local sardines (\$13), a set of plump, whole fish, nicely charred and plated with a celestial bread-crumble salad, golden and crunchy yet fragrant with mint.

Whole fish, including petrale sole, actually make up an entire subset of the menu. But petrale, a local favorite, might also recur as filets at the heart of a three-course prix

fixe (\$40), preceded by a sprightly green salad with pickled onions and crumbly bits of goat cheese and followed by a slice of lemon pound cake (slightly dry, intensely lemony), garnished with a strawberry dice and a puff of whipped cream. The fish itself was expertly cooked had been minimally fiddled with, although I was disappointed to notice that the accompanying ensemble (peas, gnocchi, braised scallions) was virtually identical to the skatewing's.

Soups can be both fancy and less so. In the former category: a sumptuous lobster bisque (\$9), poured tableside from a porcelain chalice over a lump of lemon chantilly cream and a clutch of tarragon leaves, which drift in the resulting thick sea like a school of exclamation marks searching for their dots. (The pouring, incidentally, is done by a member of a service team that practically swarms at key moments. When you first sit down, there is only one server, smiling and asking about drinks, but when the food starts to emerge from the kitchen, it's brought and presented by a cast of ... well, several, if not thousands.)

On the plainer side we find a clam chowder (\$9), made with top-neck clams, ample chunks of bacon and potato, and plenty of cream. There's nothing subtle about this

dish; it's like running your pile-driver of a fullback straight up the middle on third and two and picking up eight yards. It's good, in the full, unvarnished sense of that word.

I sound a gentle cautionary note as to items (other than alcoholic drinks) that are served at room temperature or lower. Coins of braised octopus (\$16) — not quite room temperature, not quite chilled — were a little rubbery, although tasty. And the bread in the tirelessly replenished basket was both tough and under flavored; perhaps that was why the accompaniments included not only butter but a small dish of sea salt.

Still, Waterbar is lovely and worthy, a place that, despite its deluxe location and big ownership names (Pat Kuleto, Jan Birnbaum), offers something like value. Not many view restaurants can make that claim. *www*

WATERBAR

Dinner: 5:30-10 p.m.  
Lunch: Mon.-Fri., 11:30 a.m.-2 p.m.  
Brunch: Sat.-Sun., 11:30 a.m.-3 p.m.  
399 The Embarcadero, SF  
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