

Wine Spectator

Dining Out | San Francisco

Epic Roasthouse, Waterbar

Veteran chefs give the waterfront a lift

BY HARVEY STEIMAN / PHOTOGRAPHS BY LORI EANES

Through the picture windows of Epic Roasthouse and Waterbar, the new conjoined restaurants on the San Francisco Bay waterfront, the lights of the Oakland hills shimmer seductively on the horizon, Treasure Island looms in the foreground, and the majestic sweep of the Bay Bridge soars overhead. On a warm day, you can take in the view while dining in the shade of a gnarled, century-old olive tree.

But it's not the view that had San Franciscans salivating as delays pushed back the opening from spring 2007 to late fall, and finally to January of this year. It was the anticipation of what would issue from the kitchens of Jan Birnbaum at Epic and Mark Franz at Waterbar. Judging by visits this past spring, the wait was worth it.

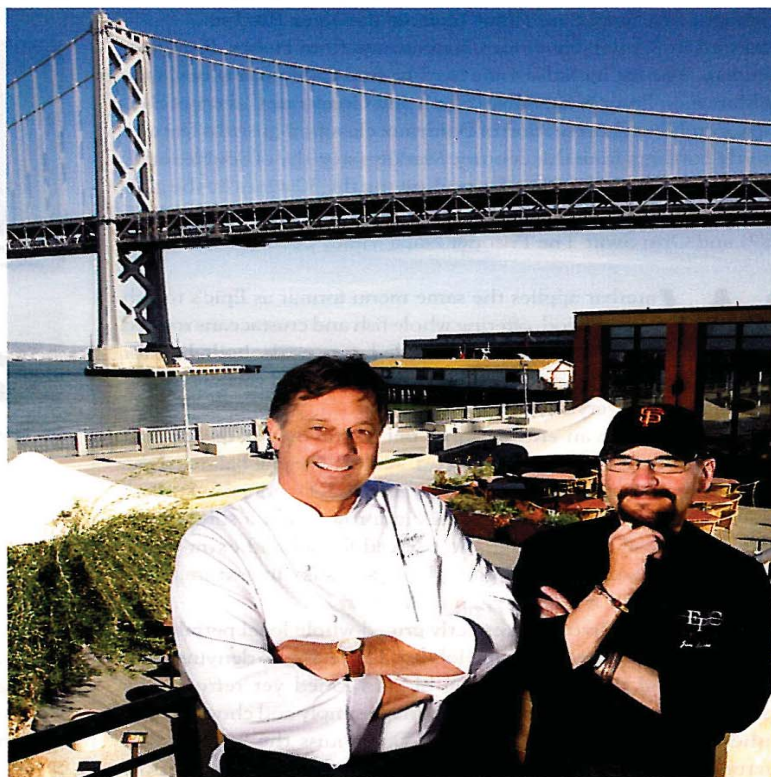
Birnbaum made his name at Campton Place in San Francisco before opening Catahoula in 1994 and, in partnership with Kimpton Hotels, Sazerac in Seattle in 1997. Sazerac is still going strong, and after Catahoula closed in 2003, Birnbaum stayed on with the Kimpton Group as chef advisor.

Franz came to prominence in the 1980s as the executive chef at Stars, one of the prime movers for California cuisine, and has been turning out fine modern seafood at Farallon since 1997. His partner in Farallon, Pat Kuleto, has had much success sharing ownership with top chefs in the restaurants he owns and designs, including Nancy Oakes at Boulevard, Traci Des Jardins at Jardinière and Todd Humphries at Martini House in St. Helena. Kuleto now has the same sort of arrangement with Birnbaum and Franz.

At last count Kuleto has designed, what, about 1,000 restaurants? None of them looks like a cliché, and neither do these two venues, separated by a walk-through patio. They fit snugly on the waterfront as if they've been there for years, with sleek, modern lines and kitchens that take pride of place past the front door. A seawater-pump fire hose dominates the dining room in Epic, and two cylindrical saltwater tanks display colorful tropical fish in Waterbar. Epic also has an upstairs bar with a more casual menu for drop-ins.

Wine racks prominently display bottles at both restaurants, in keeping with wine lists that have about 400 options each and offer more than two dozen by the glass. That should come as no surprise—Kuleto has a vineyard and winery in Napa Valley, and his other restaurants also boast excellent wine programs.

Epic plays on the contemporary steak-house idea, applying a modern chef's sensibilities to an American classic. Everything is à la carte, so diners can mix and match appetizers and side dishes, and the menu



Mark Franz (left) and Jan Birnbaum helm the kitchens of two new San Francisco Bay waterfront venues.

lists as many seafood options as steaks.

Birnbaum got his start working for Paul Prudhomme in New Orleans. The Louisiana influence showed up in the excellent baked oyster dishes among the appetizers; in the herb-saint that seasoned escargots served winningly over a silky garlic custard; and in the coriander and coffee beans that were rubbed on a 20-ounce New York strip steak. Dry-aged for 28 days, the meat had a chewy texture and

complex flavors that owed more to the wood fire over which it had been grilled than to the seasonings.

Even better, an aged lamb T-bone chop, about as thick and round as a fist, balanced its hint of gamy flavor against the smoke of the fire and the arugula pesto that garnished it. The menu teemed with ideas that seem to say, "Look how much fun we can have with this food." One side dish resembled found art: a thick cross-slice of a whole cauliflower, grilled and drizzled with good truffle oil. Another side dish made mac 'n' cheese from orecchiette pasta. A baked potato got an extra lift from being roasted in the embers so that its skin came out charred.

For dessert, chocolate soufflé achieved a deep, bittersweet flavor and managed to get light and airy around the crisp rim while remaining gooey in the center. In another nod to New Orleans, rich beignets came with chocolate-laced café au lait—perfect for dipping.

Wine director Nicole Burke's list mixes California wines with imported wines made from the same grape types in varietal categories. Occasionally, a separate heading might highlight Sea Smoke for Pinot Noir, or the Kent Ritchie vineyard in Russian River for Chardonnays from Hobbs, Ramey or Tandem. The list includes some hard-to-find California wines, such as Marcassin Pinot Noir, Alban Syrah and Gemstone Cabernet Sauvignon, while a short section of Bordeaux classified-growths features mostly bottlings from this century. Markups stop shy of double retail. There are about 50 half-bottles, and among the 30 wines by the glass are Haywood Zinfandel Sonoma Valley Los Chamizal Vineyard 2005 (\$9) and Orin Swift The Prisoner Napa Valley 2006 (\$16).

Waterbar applies the same menu format as Epic's to fish and seafood, offering whole fish and crustaceans roasted in a wood-fired oven, grilled over coals, boiled or, for shellfish, chilled. Appetizers and side dishes are à la carte. The service staff made everything flow on our visit.

I could've made an entire dinner out of the oysters on the half shell and seiche section of the menu. Scallop seiche balanced the shellfish's creamy texture with a citrusy marinade; spooned over slices of sweet potato in three little dishes in a row, it got a subtle twist from paprika oil and smoked salt. Shaved fennel and extra-virgin olive oil made sea bream sashimi, plump and silky in texture, more like Italian crudo. It doesn't get much better.

The kitchen delivered a perfectly grilled whole local petrale sole and a juicy, wood-roasted Maine lobster. There was no denying their freshness, and there's something old-fashioned yet refreshingly straightforward about getting them done so simply and choosing side dishes separately, steak-house style. Don't miss the "salt-roasted German butterballs" (small whole potatoes with a creamy interior) or the "dinosaur kale" (Italian black cabbage).

Despite the fish theme, beverage director Steven Izzo's wine list is about half red, half white, with emphasis on Burgundy. He sorts it by region of origin, and it offers as much Burgundy white (Sauzet, Leflaive, Niellon) and red (Roty, Gros, d'Angerville) as California Chardonnay (Kongsgaard, Flowers) and Pinot Noir (Sea Smoke, Dutton Estate). It has plenty of less-than-\$50 options and 30 wines by the glass for experimentation, including Langwerth von Simmern Riesling Kabinett Rheingau Hattenheimer Nussbrunnen 2006 and Lusco



Two seawater tanks that dramatically display colorful tropical fish dominate Waterbar's dining room.



Epic goes beyond the average steak house, offering as much seafood as it does meat.

do Miño Albariño Rías Baixas Lusco 2006, both of which tasted great with all the food.

Epic Roasthouse and Waterbar make dining fun. You get to shape the meal into something that works for you, the menus deliver one smile-inducing twist after another, prices for generous portions stop short of stratospheric, and many of the eclectic wines qualify as values. The restaurants could have simply relied on their spectacular settings and cut corners on the food, but that's not Kuleto's way, and it's certainly not Birnbaum's or Franz's. As long as they run these kitchens, consider the view a lovely lagniappe.

Epic Roasthouse

369 The Embarcadero, San Francisco Telephone (415) 369-9955

Web site www.epicroasthousesf.com Open Lunch, Monday to Friday; dinner, daily Cost Entrées \$25-\$54 Corkage \$25 Credit cards All major

Waterbar

399 The Embarcadero, San Francisco Telephone (415) 284-9922

Web site www.waterbarsf.com Open Lunch and dinner, daily Cost Entrées \$26-\$105 Corkage \$25 Credit cards All major