

Where To Dine

RESTAURANT REVIEW | STREETSIDE SEAFOOD

Fruits of the Sea

For more than a decade, Birmingham's Streetside Seafood has been making waves with its fresh and imaginatively prepared fare

By: Christopher Cook | Photographs by: Joe Vaughn

Here in the Midwest, we tend to take fish restaurants for granted. In fact, they are something of a recent modern miracle that owe their existence to state-of-the-art refrigeration, storage and shipping methods.

A generation or two ago, to truly enjoy the freshest fish, it required travel to where it was caught, whether it was freshwater perch or whitefish from the Great Lakes, the lobsters of Maine, bluefish from Long Island, cherry stone clams off New Jersey and Connecticut, or the Ahi and Ono tuna of Hawaii.

Fish houses not near water were viewed with a certain suspicion, as if the fish couldn't possibly be that fresh. And, often it was, as a good friend used to describe it politely, a little tired.

But the technology to get it here absolutely fresh has increased our range of choices. We can get various grades of tuna, mackerel, turbot, wolf, halibut, cod, sockeye salmon, stone crab, seasonal soft-shell crabs, mussels from both coasts, and a steady stream of just about anything.

In the 1980s and 1990s, knockoffs of the old American fish houses of Boston (Legal Seafood), Philadelphia (Bookbinder's), New York (Lundy's in Brooklyn) and Baltimore (Obrycki's) started showing up in inland cities: Chicago's Shaw's Crab House and Tom's Oyster Bar here, for example.

Today, getting fresh fish is no longer an issue. The issue is: Who's cooking it and what do they do with it?

There are many fish restaurants around metro Detroit, some with big names and high prices, but very few actually cook fish well.

One that does is Streetside Seafood in downtown Birmingham, across from the city hall, a thin corridor of a place that seats only 50 diners and serves some of the best seafood around.

Bill Roberts, who also owns Beverly Hills Grill, opened Streetside Seafood in 1995, modeling it after Tom's Oyster Bar. "We had run that location since 1983 as a breakfast and lunch spot, but then coffee shops began proliferating, and they were really having an impact on us," Roberts says. "So, we came up with this idea of a neighborhood fish place. ... And it has been packed from the day we opened."

Interestingly, good fish houses seem to share the same DNA, no matter where they are located. They're invariably casual, tend to be dark inside, often with an ebony-woody look, and white tile floors. They are bustling places with servers always on the fly, and crowds waiting for tables. And

they just can't possibly be good fish houses without the chalkboard menu.

They also tend to be very loud. So loud that if Pythagoras had quantified it in a theorem, it might go something like this: The level of noise in a restaurant is directly proportional to the sum of the quality of cooking of the fish and the enjoyment of the customer.

All of which well describes Streetside Seafood, where on most weekday nights a wait for a table can stretch to 45 minutes. Still, that hardly seems to keep the faithful away.

Walk into Streetside Seafood any evening and you're instantly smacked by the cacophony from around the copper-topped bar, crammed with people waiting for tables and from the sky-lighted and bare brick-walled dining room directly behind it.

The walls are softly washed by two banks of halogen lights accenting several kitschy, mounted trophy fish that have been sprayed with a metallic paint for a brushed aluminum look.

Service is precise, efficient and attentive, and in two visits to Streetside Seafood at dinner, there wasn't a single dish or dessert we tasted that didn't qualify as either good or exceptional. The only plate questioned at our table, a paella, was not challenged for the cooking but about whether it was properly named. Was it really a paella? Or was it more like a lighter jambalaya?

"What I like about seafood is that it's so adaptable," says Chef Sharon Juergens, a Schoolcraft College culinary arts program graduate who was sous-chef to Rick Halberg at Emily's in Northville and also to Mary Brady, chef-owner of Diamond Jim Brady's in Novi. "Seafood lets you be so much more creative" than other foods, Juergens says.

Among the first courses we tried was a Seafood Martini, a fresh, zingy salad served in a namesake glass. Basically, it's a mix of lump crab tossed in mayonnaise, lobster dressed in a wasabi vinaigrette, tossed with diced cucumber and red bell pepper.

Streetside has the best Oysters Rockefeller that I have had around Detroit in years. Spinach is a key ingredient in the dish, and it tends to be a problem if the spinach isn't properly drained of its water. The oyster ends up swimming in a green pool and dilutes the sauce. Streetside's version is only slightly moist, but the stuffing is firm and bound together by a small amount of chopped smoky bacon, breadcrumbs, cream and a dash of Pernod or ouzo, to give it a slight licorice flavor.

Another delight is the Cornmeal Crusted Lobster Cake with a spicy rémoulade sauce, notable for how light and un-dough-like it is. The rémoulade sauce was (thankfully) made from the correct base: mayonnaise and mustard, with jalapeño pepper added. Many restaurants these days are using tomato sauce or ketchup instead of mayonnaise and incorrectly calling it "rémoulade."

Also recommended is a lightly blackened catfish dish served with tartar sauce and scrumptious oven-baked redskin potato slices rolled in oil, salt and pepper and cooked until they are puffy inside, and a very well-prepared sautéed lake perch with mixed rice and broccoli.

But the winner was a sautéed halibut served with black beans and mix of wild and long grain rice, which was cooked almost "al dente," if that term can be applied to rice, slightly undercooked. Perfect.

In addition to a daily changing choice of fish, Streetside Seafood offers a Parmesan-Crusted Chicken Breast with artichokes and mashed potatoes, and a Pepper-Crusted Filet Mignon with a mushroom and port demi-glace and gratin potatoes.

There are only six items on the dessert menu. All are exceptional. Not to be missed is the Walnut Bourbon Pie, the Mixed Berry Pie and the Key Lime Pie. When asked what he thinks makes Streetside Seafood so successful, Roberts says that in one way, it's space.

"Because of the limitation of size and the small kitchen, we can't store much fish," Roberts says. "So, we're limited on our menu. We can't have 50 species up there. We have to have fewer, and it forces us to turn it over quicker."

Juergens says she buys 45 pounds of fish every morning for the specials on the chalkboard and, "I want to sell it all that night." Which helps one to understand why the fish always seems so fresh at Streetside Seafood.

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