

COURIER-POST

South Jersey's Newspaper | courierpostonline.com

Restaurant review: Sea Salt

Courier Post - Cherry Hill, N.J.

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Date: Aug 14, 2011

Start Page: n/a

Section: LIVING

Text Word Count: 953

Document Text

Tartar sauce perfumed with kaffir lime. Meyer lemon confit. Ceviche. House-smoked trout. Heirloom tomatoes aplenty. Foie gras.

Scanning the opening menu of Sea Salt, a splashy Cape May newcomer in the glam Ocean Club Hotel, I was instantly reminded of Sea Salt, the wee Stone Harbor BYOB that closed several summers ago. And not just because of the name.

The dishes, from their ingredients to style to how they're worded on the menu, brought former chef/owner Lucas Manteca -- he's just a few blocks away at the Ebbit Room in the Virginia Hotel -- so strongly to mind, I expected his blond, tanned face to greet me when I clicked "Meet the Chef" on Sea Salt's website.

Instead, chef Lulzim Rexhepi was staring back at me, eyes dark and lips tightly pursed. He doesn't look terribly happy in this picture, but don't let that fool you; the 35-year-old CIA-bred globetrotter -- Rexhepi has worked at renowned restaurants in France, Switzerland and New York -- has a playful spirit in the kitchen.

For evidence, I had to look no further than his buffalo shrimp salad (\$11), a cast of teeny sauteed-and-Buffalo sauced crustaceans falling overboard a crosscut raft of cool iceberg lettuce. Garnished with Stilton dressed and sweet roasted Jersey corn, it was a funny (and delicious) little intro to Rexhepi's style.

That style is only recently on full display at Sea Salt. When I visited, the gleaming new restaurant was serving an edited version of the full menu Rexhepi would unveil the following week.

The hostesses directed us to the bar when we were 20 minutes early for our reservation and plenty of tables in the sapphire dining room were empty -- so as to not overwhelm the kitchen with too many orders at once, our server later explained -- but there were no other signs that Sea Salt wasn't yet all systems go.

Service was as steady as it was friendly. The flatware shone, and garage-style windows were Windex-ed so clear that even on this overcast night, you could see the waves breaking on the beach across the street.

Even without the sea view, Sea Salt's space is compelling on its own: columns crusted in smooth, white pebbles, luxe chandeliers, hardwood floors. It's a big upgrade from the prevailing design of the Atlas Inn that used to live here; Cape May tourists and locals alike all owe a debt of gratitude

to Rexhepi's uncle, owner Nick Neza, who renovated the hotel top-to-bottom this past year. The conspicuous oceanfront property finally has the style it deserves.

Neza is a local fixture -- he also owns the Hotel Alcott and West Cape Motel -- but before he asked his nephew to a partner in and chef of the hotel/restaurant, Rexhepi hadn't been to Cape May in 16 years.

Now he's getting reacquainted with the town's terroir, finding farmers for his heirloom tomatoes (so gorgeous in a dazzling, unorthodox gazpacho, \$7, made without bread or almonds) and silver corn (scattered with Stilton over the Buffalo rock shrimp). And despite being a relative newbie, he's got the confidence of a local.

There's so much to like about what Rexhepi is doing at Sea Salt, from the house-baked onion focaccia to how vigorously he seasons his salads. I remember the snappy salt-and-peppered watercress more than the lukewarm gems of olive oil-poached tuna Nicoise (\$14) they were meant to support.

He keeps the heads on his prawns (\$27), a gutsy move for the delicate ladies of the Cape might appreciate less than a ravenous food writer. Grilled in this particular entree, the succulent crustaceans appeared with smiles of seared cantaloupe that positively shone with sugary dew. Per Italian tradition, prosciutto joined the melon on the plate, but it was ratty and untreated and distracting; crisped up, broken into shards and showered over the dish, the ham could make much more of an impact.

Skate Milanese (\$25) was the real star of the evening, and probably the best preparation of that fish I've ever had. Crusted on one side with panko laced with basil and lemon thyme, the pan-seared ray wing possessed a breaded crunch as satisfying as my mom's chicken cutlets. For sauce, there's a deceptively light butter situation that mingles with a juicy heirloom tomato salad doused in balsamic. It was a pretty perfect plate of food.

The peaches and cream dessert (\$8) was not so perfect, more of a cloudy mess featuring schnapps-soaked lady fingers, white peach puree mixed with mascarpone and fresh whipped cream all crowded into a martini glass.

I much preferred flourless chocolate cake swirled with house-made raspberry jam (\$8). It wasn't too sweet; funny because Sea Salt's bright, long future in Cape May looks exactly that.

Adam Erace eats like it's his job, because it is. In addition to reviewing restaurants for Courier-Post, the South Philly native dines out for New Jersey Monthly and City Paper. He can be reached at aeracecp@hotmail.com

IF YOU GO

Sea Salt

Ocean Club Hotel, 1035 Beach Ave., Cape May

(609) 884-7000 or capemayoceanclubhotel.com/seasalt.php

Food: 4

Service: 4

Atmosphere: 4

Value: 3

Overall: 4

Appetizers: \$7-\$16

Entrees: \$24-\$34

Dessert: \$7-\$8

Cuisine: American

Recommended: gazpacho, buffalo rock shrimp, skate Milanese, grilled prawns, chocolate-raspberry brownie

Hours: Breakfast daily, 7-11 a.m.; beach service daily, 11 a.m.-5 p.m.; pool service daily 11 a.m.-10 p.m.; dinner daily, from 5:30 p.m.

Late night: Yes

Brunch: No

Reservations: Yes

BYOB: No

Credit cards: Yes (no Discover)

Outdoor Dining: Yes

Live entertainment: Yes (Sunday live bands at the pool, jazz on Thursday)

Wheelchairs: Yes

Parking: Lot

What the stars mean: Five stars is excellent, four stars is very good, three stars is good, two stars is fair and one star is poor.

ID_Code: BZ-108140302

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