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Just a friendly reminder to catch 'Fish' DINING OUT

BY SCOTT AND MOLLY GOODWIN

The Post and Courier

Since being named "New Restaurant of the Year" by The Post and Courier in 2000, Fish seems to have settled into a quiet existence at its Upper King Street location, somehow going unrecognized by many as they flock to nearby hot spots such as Basil, 39 Rue de Jean and La Fourchette. We are here to say that a recent visit to Fish left us scratching our heads as to exactly why this is.

The setting is a lightly modern treatment of a former Charleston single house, with a smaller open bar and dining room space downstairs, an entire second dining room on the second floor and outdoor seating on both levels. Upstairs, the porch affords a bird's-eye view of the action on the street, while the patio downstairs gives us a bit of the feel of sitting in a backyard garden.

The menu is varied, although unsurprisingly fish-centric, the prices are most reasonable, the staff professional and well-trained and the food is good. So why isn't Fish as busy as they can be?

The short answer is that we don't know. We were seated immediately by an attentive and most friendly hostess, given menus professionally printed and attractively bound and immediately greeted by our server. He delivered a description of the evening's "naked fish" selection, in this case the too-uncommon wreckfish, as well as a thorough description of the entree special, a Thai-influenced treatment of grouper with green curry over rice.

We pored over the large wine list, with an impressive 40-odd selections served by the glass, and chose glasses of Peirano Viognier (\$8.50) before we ordered entrees. Happily, the wine worked with both of our choices, the foie gras on savory bread pudding (\$9) and shrimp seiche (\$9). Scott was skeptical about a foie gras appetizer being offered at a mere \$9, but the dish proved to be two large slabs of the liver atop a tasty bread pudding.

Cooking the fatty liver is a balancing act, however, requiring searing and heating it through without melting it into a puddle, and unfortunately, this example was on the undercooked side. He gave up after a few bites, leaving foie gras on an appetizer plate for the first time in his life. Happily, the seiche was excellent, almost entirely composed of shrimp, scattered with fine pepper and onion dice, and carrying the bite of lime and pleasant chile heat.

Wreckfish is found in several of the world's oceans, and, indeed, off the Charleston coast, but seems to be less commonly available than other similar fish, such as grouper. Whether local or not, the very fresh example we were served (\$18) was seared to a delightful golden hue on the outside and retained moisture on the inside, seasoned simply and properly with a touch of salt. Two side dishes were included, and our choices of grilled asparagus - thick spears grilled to

tenderness and bearing lovely, flavorful grill marks - and "risotto of the day," a parmesan and shiitake affair that was a welcome change from plain old rice or potato options. The dinner special arrived steaming in a large bowl, where chunks of grouper swam in a refreshingly spicy coconut milk bath redolent with the flavors of curry paste. We were pleased to discover that "over rice" here meant that the bottom of the bowl held a half-cup of rice, rather than the dish being a plate of rice with a token portion of curry poured over.

Wanting to see what our server would come up with, we left wine for our entree course to him, and he selected a single-vineyard J. Lohr chardonnay (\$11) for the curry, and a mellower and more tropical chardonnay, Four Vines "Naked" (\$8) for the wreckfish. Intelligent selections these, and both worked with the respective dishes.

Pineapple upside-down cake (\$7) was an innovative and largely successful interpretation of the cliché classic, with a wedge of moist, not-too-sweet cake centered in a pool of "pink peppercorn syrup" and topped with a petite scoop of vanilla ice cream. The syrup was a fine twist, offering a new layer of flavor that complemented the cake and pineapple, although chewing on the mildly spicy whole berries (pink "peppercorns" are berries, not true peppercorns) floating in the syrup will have you yearning for dental floss.

The mystery as to why Fish isn't more popular continues for us.

Aside from the clear miss on the foie gras appetizer, everything we ate at Fish was at least good, and at most reasonable prices - entrees here average about \$16 - although wine prices seem a bit high when compared with the menu. The location is smack in the middle of bustling Upper King, the rooms (and outdoor seating) are quite pleasant, the food is good and the service is excellent.

If you haven't been to Fish, you might be missing something.

Fish

Neighborhood Favorite/Night Out

Address: 442 King St. 722-3474.

FOOD: *** 1/2

SERVICE: **** 1/2

AMBIENCE: ***

PRICE: \$\$\$ 1/2

AMBIENCE: Exposed brick and white linen; street-side windows; nice outdoor seating.

SERVICE: Excellent. Professional, informative, timely and unobtrusive.

HOURS: Lunch, Mon.-Fri., 11:30 a.m.-2 p.m.; Mon.-Sat.; Dinner, 5:30 p.m.-10 p.m.

DECIBEL LEVEL: Low to moderate.

PRICE RANGE: Appetizers, \$5-\$11; Entrees, \$11-\$23.

OUR FAVORITES: "Naked" Wreckfish; shrimp sevice; curried grouper dinner special.

VEGETARIAN ALTERNATIVES: Fried green tomatoes; all salads.

WINE LIST: Medium-to-large in size; international; about 100 selections; nearly 50 by-the-glass.

CREDIT CARDS: All major.

WHEELCHAIR ACCESS: Yes.

SMOKING: Yes; restricted to certain areas.

RESERVATIONS: Accepted.

RESTAURANT FACTS: Rating criteria include quality and presentation of food, service and ambience, while taking into consideration the type of restaurant - elegant, night out or neighborhood favorite.

WHAT THE STARS MEAN: * Fair, ** Average, *** Good, **** Excellent, ***** Extraordinary.

PRICE: \$ Least Expensive \$\$\$\$ Most Expensive

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