

## Epicurious Eating: The Marine Room

### King of tides

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When he isn't appearing on morning television shows or exploring gastronomy overseas or autographing copies of his newly released *Flying Pans* cookbook, Chef Bernard Guillas is planted squarely in the kitchen of La Jolla's famed oceanfront restaurant, The Marine Room. And the meticulous cuisine that lands under the chins of his guests is nothing short of royal.

Born into a family of butchers and bakers in Brittany, France, Guillas arrived to the Marine Room in 1994 with a toque-full of cooking experience gained at notable restaurants in France, French Guyana and Washington, D.C. Although it was along this exclusive swatch of La Jolla shoreline where he especially began meshing his French technique with a kaleidoscope of cooking styles from other countries. Dozens of awards later, Guillas is a celebrity chef, charmingly driven, but sans the inflated ego that prompts other chefs to rest on their laurels or jump kitchens.

Marine Room's seaside perch serves as the crown jewel to Guillas' menu, executed in conjunction with chef de cuisine Ron Oliver, who also co-authored the globally inspired *Flying Pans* cookbook. If the ocean view alone fails to enchant, then the tidal swells lapping right below (or against) the dining room's reinforced windows will leave you hypnotized.

The restaurant is situated so close to the water's edge that it feels (and smells) as though you are dining *on* the Pacific rather than alongside it. At night the cresting waves are illuminated by spotlights to show off their frothy white caps. Severe high tides and winter storms impart extra drama, to the point where a quintet of spinach-wrapped oysters layered intricately with lobster mousse and topped with various caviars could seem like a footnote.

But it doesn't take long to refocus on the myriad flavor profiles inherent to the dishes, such as an ambitiously adorned pumpkin seed crusted blue crab cake. The creation is both stunning and over the top, with the crabmeat somewhat overwhelmed by La Quercia cured ham rather than by its tangerine lace and acai berry infusion. My companion felt the bedding of buckwheat noodles was unnecessary, while I welcomed their substantial starch contribution.

Only recently have more San Diego restaurants started adding beef cheeks to their menus, although cosmopolitan chefs like Guillas are no stranger to these jowl muscles that turn wildly flavorful when braised. As an appetizer, he augments the ultra-tender cheeks with Japanese winter squash, plus richly textured king trumpet mushrooms that sat well in a moat of late-harvest Syrah jus. But the spectacle doesn't end there. Resting atop the cheeks was a puck of glistening foie gras, nearly the size of the anise-spiked crabapple serving as a tangy garnish. Now you know why the dish costs \$19.

A visit to The Marine Room isn't complete without a dive into Guillas' lobster bisque, which offers deep notes of sherry coupled with the starring ingredient. On the current menu, he's floating in it bits of pancetta, enoki mushrooms and a mini pastry tart filled with Meyer lemon cream. But even without the accoutrements, the bisque ranks regal.

Our main courses were equally elaborate and complex. Tasmanian steelhead, which mimics salmon in taste and color, was roasted in pecans and gooseberries and served with saffron-endive confit and Christmas-y tasting tangerine bulgur. The fish stood well to those tart-spiced flavors, although we weren't sure initially about the encircling dark jus containing a base of herbal Italian liqueur called Amaro. The liquid, poured onto the plate tableside, seemed a better fit for steak. But as my companion pointed out justly after experiencing the combination, "You can get away with it on this kind of fatty fish."

Free-range veal osso bucco was served with candied root vegetables, pine nut gremolata and a side of polenta harboring hints of Gouda cheese, but with a wee too much cumin. The tall-standing shank was braised in Marsala, resulting in soft, tasty meat, albeit a smidgen drier than we expected.

Far juicier than we anticipated were elk and venison filets served as a single entrée. The game meat was dusted in Australian watteseeds — an excellent culinary maneuver given that the tiny seeds sport a bitter flavor similar to coffee and dark chocolate. Preserved rhubarb and tart cherries played a fine supporting role, not to mention the passionate connection made between the meat and a puddle of full-bodied Port gastrique spiked with cacao nibs.

Slugging down our second glasses of Leal Lavanda, a smooth meritage wine offering wisps of clove and white pepper, we arrived at the finishing line with dulce de leche caramel cheesecake and apple-cherry cobbler mantled with coconut crème fraiche and hazelnut crumble. The cobbler scored the dreamier of the two.

Service was flawless, meeting up to the standards of a white-linen dining room with killer ocean views. Starting later this month, the wait staff will offer diners three-course prix-fixe menus containing dishes from *Flying Pans*, which takes readers on a culinary romp around the world. Surely, the "live" samplings will supply Marine Room guests with additional food for thought.