

May 2006

Transformed restaurant at the San Diego Marriott is a dining destination

By Maria C. Hunt

UNION-TRIBUNE RESTAURANT CRITIC

May 3, 2006

Though I carry around a mental Rolodex of restaurants, I have to admit I always was vague on the difference between Sally's and Molly's. Both restaurants in downtown hotels are named after the developers' daughters, but the entry ended there.

PEGGY PEATTIE / Union-Tribune

Flavorful medallions of Niman Ranch pork tenderloin with creamy white polenta are among new additions to the menu at Molly's, the fine-dining restaurant in the San Diego Marriott Hotel & Marina.

But I don't make that mistake any more, not after a series of sublime dining experiences created by the new culinary team at Molly's, the fine-dining restaurant at the San Diego Marriott Hotel & Marina.

Over the past several months, chef Brian Sinnott and wine director Lisa Redwine – both San Francisco transplants – have collaborated on pairing uncomplicated, fresh cuisine with complementary and unexpected wines.

Their efforts have transformed Molly's into one of downtown's surest dining destinations, despite the fact that it lacks the sleek decor, waterfalls and sexy bar scene that seem de rigueur for restaurants these days.

the buzz >>>>>>>

MOLLY'S FINE DINING

San Diego Marriott Hotel & Marina, 333 W. Harbor Drive, downtown San Diego; (619) 230-8909. Dinner nightly.

THE FOOD: Modern, seasonal California-Mediterranean fare.

THE SCENE: Low lighting, dark woods and marble lend a clubby coziness.

THE BOTTOM LINE: Starters \$9 to \$14, entrees \$26 to \$36, desserts \$9 (bananas Foster for two is \$24).

DON'T MISS: Pappardelle, scallops, fried squash blossoms, Dungeness crab club sandwich, pork tenderloin.

Look past the circa-1980 smoky mirrored ceiling, and Molly's has a warm, stately feeling, thanks to expanses of wood and chocolate-hued marble trim. The service is attentive but relaxed, making it easy to settle in for a couple of hours.



Steve Pagano, the low-key wine and food expert who runs the hotel, deserves credit for bringing Redwine and Sinnott to Molly's. Pagano created the magical Arterra at the Del Mar Marriott, and he has scored again with Molly's new team.

Redwine (yes, that's really her married name) is one of the friendliest and sharpest sommeliers I have encountered. Her love of wine is infectious; she often works the room with bottles in hand, tempting diners who are interested in trying something new.

On various visits, I would have settled for a food-friendly pinot noir but was glad Redwine suggested a pinot meunier, an [Andrew Lane gamay noir](#) or Pleiades, a red table wine from quirky Sean Thackrey.

Sinnott has an organic style of cooking in which dishes seem to have evolved naturally. Good ingredients are treated just right and combined to their best advantage. More than once at Molly's, I have found myself in the middle of a dish thinking, "This is as good as it gets."

My early favorite Molly's moment was with the satiny, hand-rolled pappardelle noodles and golden chanterelles napped in a buttery herb sauce, balanced by slightly salty pancetta, earthy spinach and tangy peppato cheese. I thought about this dish for weeks.

Squash blossoms stuffed with ricotta are fried into little balloons so airy, it seemed they might float off the plate. A frisee salad and a red-pepper coulis round out this dish, which Sinnott considers his signature.

Equally memorable was the tuna tartare, enlivened by capers and black olives a la nicoise and served on tiny fingerling potato chips.

Scallops and roasted root vegetables might sound mismatched, but the dish offered a brilliant study in contrasting levels of sweetness. Cubes of roasted vegetables were like tiny jewels on a bed of celery-root puree; crunchy wisps of fried parsnip floated above. I wish it were still winter so I could order it again.

Signs of spring

The spring menu brings a host of new dishes, such as a cunningly simple black truffle cheese flan served with an earthy salad of crisp asparagus tips in black truffle vinaigrette with crumbles of a Monterey Jack cheese crisp.

I'm equally fond of the subtly tongue-in-cheek crab club sandwich. Morsels of sweet Dungeness crab spill over brioche toast spread with green goddess dressing; an intensely sweet tomato confit takes the dish uptown.

Advertisement



After one delectable bite of gently seared scallops in lobster sauce with herbed gnocchi, buttery Marcona almonds and sweet peas, I immediately regretted my promise to share the dish with my friend.

The spring vegetable tasting menu is a treat even for a carnivore; the four-part dish offered a buttery saffron pastina risotto with hints of lemon zest and saffron, mushroom ravioli with asparagus, a minted pea timbale, and baby carrots, all white save one, bathed in a honeyed glaze with a sprinkle of Marcona almonds.

Olive-oil poaching gave a halibut a rich, melty quality; it was paired with English peas, buttery potatoes and baby artichokes in a dish that was just too coy and mild.

Lamb loin cloaked in mustard bread crumbs was roasted to a meaty succulence and paired with Bloomsdale spinach, a rare variety that doesn't cook down to mush. As good as those were, the shallot bread pudding on the side stole the show.

One night, a brined Kurobuta pork chop was stiff and chewy, but at least the polenta fries served with it were superb. That dish has been replaced by a Niman Ranch pork tenderloin that captures the flavor pork used to have before it was recast as the other white meat. The medallions are rosy in the center, but don't worry: Pork is supposed to be served that way. Bolstered by creamy white polenta from South Carolina and mushroom and pork cheek bacon in demi glace, it makes for another memorable dish.

My first impression of desserts here is that though they were well-executed by master pastry chef Rudy Weider, they seemed rather high-concept and fashionable compared with the savory menu.

A new dessert menu brings a clever three-berry clafouti that seems like the right idea. The light sorbets are fun, too; they capture the essence of apple or mango. And I'm always a sucker for bananas Foster, which the waiters seem to love flambéeing tableside and offering up with a dollop of nostalgia.

