

Grille out-mussels competition

By Mat Schaffer | Friday, August 7, 2009 | <http://www.bostonherald.com/> | Dining Reviews

ROWES WHARF SEA GRILLE: A-

Finally, the waterfront can take pride in a seafood restaurant. It's Rowes Wharf Sea Grille at Boston Harbor Hotel.

BHH executive chef Daniel Bruce has converted the former Intrigue Cafe into a casual, yacht-clubby dining area decorated in marine shades of blue, green and white. It looks out onto a waterfront terrace that is among the city's most popular summertime sites to grab a light bite (there's free entertainment Tuesday through Friday this time of year).

The Sea Grille menu is dominated by fish, and has a handful of pasta, poultry and red-meat entrees. But it is not your typical Hub seafood menu of raw oysters, fried fish and baked, stuffed lobster. It's more international - and more whimsical.

Try Bruce's delightfully gooey peekytoe crab rangoons (\$14), crisp, deep-fried wonton triangles stuffed with lemon-zesty cream cheese, chives and fresh crabmeat. They're a thoroughly uptown version of an unabashedly downtown treat. Maine lobster and vegetable spring rolls (\$15) add luxurious lushness to a humble Asian favorite.

Plump mussels from Blue Hill, Maine, (\$14) get a Flemish/Czech/French makeover, steamed in pilsner, Dijon mustard and a hint of tarragon with thick slices of olive oil-soaked toast for dunking.

Juicy, flash-fried soft-shell crab (\$16) boasts south-of-the-border panache with a warm corn, black-bean and grape tomato salsa. Bruce's traditional New England clam chowder (\$9.50) is outstanding - creamy, briny and loaded with clams. Main courses are equally accomplished. There's a filet of grilled Nova Scotia salmon (\$24), atop nutty heirloom black rice, steamed snap beans and baby carrots and a ladle of buttery pinot noir sauce.

Bone-in, grilled monkfish osso bucco (\$28) is delicious in a savory bouillabaisse broth of tomatoes, fennel, fish fume and saffron. Croutons are slathered with roasted fennel aioli that needs more oomph.

There's a pronounced Thai influence to moist, grilled Atlantic swordfish medallion (\$28) on a mound of jasmine rice in a pool of creamy, curried coconut sauce.

If you like sea scallops (\$28), you'll love them caramelized with sauteed fresh peas, carrots and pearl onions and a generous drizzle of sauvignon blanc and butter reduction. When you cook with top-notch ingredients there's no need to mask their flavors with superfluous gewgaws.

If every dish tastes like it's right off the stove, it's because it is.

"The kitchen is so small we cook everything a la minute," explained Bruce - who spotted me after I'd finished dinner on one of my two anonymous visits.

Nationally recognized for his expertise when it comes to pairing vino and food, Bruce's Sea Grille wine list is characteristically varied and fish-friendly.

The mineral tartness of a carnation-colored 2008 Mas de la Dame Les Baux-de-Provence Rose (\$36) is excellent with the salmon and monkfish. The litchi notes of a half bottle of 2007 Hugel Gewurztraminer (\$30) are wonderful with the swordfish and scallops.

Be sure to save room for dessert (\$9). Especially the white-chocolate-dusted milk chocolate mousse and genoise Charlotte (named for Bruce's daughter, who consulted on the chocolates). Or try the vanilla-custard-filled crespelle crepe with sugared strawberries and creme Anglais.

Open just two months, Rowes Wharf Sea Grille needs to iron out a few kinks, such as providing a bowl for discarded mussel shells or dipping sauce to accompany crab rangoons. Spoons should be de rigueur with soupy dishes. And better lighting (perhaps votives?) so you can see what you're eating after the sun goes down.

The wait staff can get unnecessarily frazzled when the restaurant is crowded.

70 Rowes Wharf (Boston Harbor Hotel). 617-856-7744; roweswharfseagrille.com.

Price: More than \$40

Hours: Sun.-Thurs., 6:30 a.m.-10 p.m.; Fri. & Sat., 6:30 a.m.-11 p.m.

Bar: Full

Credit: All

Recession specials: No

Accessibility: Accessible

Parking: Valet, neighboring garage

SHIP-SHAPE: Rowes Wharf Sea Grille is a catch.

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