Cultural Daily

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La Jolla's Marine Room: 108 years of Oceanside Dining

R. Daniel Foster · Sunday, October 27th, 2024

The history of La Jolla, its curving seven-mile coastline cradled by bluffs, is synonymous with standout seafood cuisine. Among the iconic eateries is the Marine Room, set along the coast on Spindrift Drive.

That location's unparalleled view of the Pacific Ocean was first recognized by Captain Peter McDowall Hannay (1872-1943) who in 1916 built his four-bedroom roadside inn and restaurant on the site. The Spendrift Inn became a Hollywood getaway and a favored spot for locals. Decades later, William Scripps Kellogg completed a remodel of the establishment that his father started. In 1941, he opened the current Marine Room. A lobster dinner and martini could be had for under $2.



The Marine Room entrance. Photo: R. Daniel Foster

Fourth-generation Kelloggs now operate the restaurant. Earlier generations had installed tempered

glass to withstand the ocean's swells, which during high tide, cascade against the restaurant's floor-to-ceiling windows–a grand show that the eatery bills as its "High Tide Dinners" held during summer months.

The view from the restaurant's window-adjacent tables includes migrating whales and dolphin pods. Recently, a sea lion pup snuck in through the back door during high tide and parked itself in a window booth, presumably for the excellent view. SeaWorld came to the rescue, eventually releasing the youngster back into the ocean.

The aesthetic is all about those views

During a recent dinner, the tide was low, but the view was perfect as the sun sank below the waves. Diners can see out, but those on the beach can't see in. As beachgoers fetch balls and parade just outside your window, it can seem a bit like viewing an art installation.



The Marine Room's clean aesthetic is washed with light. Photo courtesy of the Marine Room.

The Marine Room's clean aesthetic is all about the views. The main room is crowned with beamed ceilings and grounded with a blue and ivory patterned rug. Oak planks are laid in traffic areas. That's complemented by the dining area's white tablecloths.

A lounge offers small plates: Spanish Octopus, Japanese A5 Nigiri, Moroccan lamb, and dry-aged tuna bluefin caparccio, among others.

The meal begins

For dinner, our party enjoyed the Local Bluefin Tuna, Georges Bank Diver Scallops, and Tasmanian Ocean Trout. Among the trio, I favored the tuna and scallops. In comparison to the artful blend of flavors in the other two dishes, the trout seemed a bit ordinary.

The scallops arrived coated with a delicate crisp, the interiors buttery–paired with a sun-dried tomato salad. It was served with a pumpkin seed mole, and miso-glazed pear. The dish was fresh, both in presentation and in flavors. The tuna was served with edamame, pickled ginger, fresno chiles, and togarashi aioli. The tuna was seared exactly right, and the taste was bright and well-paired, especially with the ginger and chile. I picked up hints of the Japanese cardamom, and sansho in the togarashi.



The scallops were a favorite, served with a sun-dried tomato salad. Photo: R. Daniel Foster

Our sides included Wild Mushrooms with black garlic, madira and boschetto (earthy and rich), Golden Beet Salad, which had a great combo of goat cheese, pistachio, and jamon iberico, and Peruvian crudo. The latter was the standout among this trio. The tuna was served with aji amarillo agua chile (Peruvian yellow chile pepper and raw fish with spiced lime juice), mint, cilantro, and boba crisp. The hit of flavor and spice was like a surprise. We raved about it.



The Tasmanian ocean trout was served with coconut salsa macha.



The Peruvian crudo was a favorite, served with agua chile, mint, cilantro, and boba crisp. Photo: R. Daniel Foster

The Marine Room's Executive Chef Michael Vaughn recently joined the restaurant after the departure of Mike Minor, a "Cutthroat Kitchen" winner. Minor had replaced longtime French-born chef Bernard Guillas who enjoyed a 27-year run at the establishment. Vaughn's experience includes stints as an Executive Chef for various hotels, including Omni, Hilton, Waldorf Astoria, and others.

Vaughn's appetizer specials include Yakitori Grilled Broccolini, Kilo Golden Reserve (California white sturgeon eggs), and Charred Poblano Risotto. Main courses: Snake River Farms Filet Mignon and Main Lobster Tail, and Japanese A5 Wagyu Strip Steak.

Vaughn's motto: "Shucking conformity one bite at a time."

The Marine Room also offers catering services and can be rented as a special events venue. It's located at 1950 Spindrift Drive, La Jolla. 858.459.7222.

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