



GT Fish & Oyster

RATING ★★★

531 N. Wells St., 312.929.3501

What the stars mean:

★ = fair, some noteworthy qualities;
 ★★ = good, above average;
 ★★★ = very good, well above norm;
 ★★★★ = excellent, among the area's best;
 ★★★★★ = world-class, extraordinary in every detail. Reviews are based on multiple visits. Ratings reflect the reviewer's overall reaction to food, ambiance and service.

HOURS Mon.-Thu., Sun. 4-11PM;
 Fri.-Sat. 4PM-midnight

WHAT TO WEAR Ralph Lauren, khaki and Sperry topsiders for men; blue striped T-shirts and sailor pants for ladies

WHAT TO ORDER Old Money cocktail, shrimp and foie terrine, and peanut butter crunch dessert

WHAT TO KNOW On Wednesdays, oysters are half off from 10:30PM to midnight.

WHO GOES Foodies, scenesters and early bird Gold Coasters

WHAT IT COSTS Oysters \$2-\$3 each; cold and hot plates \$8-\$34; desserts \$7-\$9

A Fish Tale

It's smooth sailing for the latest restaurant from the team behind *Girl & the Goat*, *Boka* and *Landmark*. | By Michael Nigrant | Photography by Anthony Tablier |

There's a certain brand of food writers who write a "woe is me" column every few years. It's usually a checklist about how their work demands preclude them from being Norm- and Cliff-like regulars at the Cheers bar, how too much foie gras has given them a temporary case of gout or forced them to hire a Jillian Michaels-like cyborg to get rid of their jiggly parts. I do not understand them. In fact, I'd like to relieve them of their expense accounts and point them to a job in a basement cubicle.

Still, there is a kernel of truth in their faux melancholy. While I'm still very excited about doing what I do, I don't always get excited by where I'm doing it. After recently hitting four steakhouses in two weeks, well, joining Gwyneth on the macrobiotic bandwagon almost looks like fun. Almost.

So when the assignment came along to cover GT Fish & Oyster, the new River North small plates fish emporium from chef Giuseppe Tentori and the Boka

Restaurant Group, I was primed like a 7-year-old who was just told he's going to Disney World.

I usually feel that reading menus before I hit a place is kind of like skipping to the last page of a novel before I've even started reading. But, off the steakhouse bender, I had visions of oysters and lobster rolls dancing in my head. I needed to see that menu. And, holy cow! Or, rather, sacred marlin! Maybe for the first time in the history of menu reading, I wanted every single dish.

A few days later when I sidled into GT designer Karen Herold's plush gray tufted banquettes, the bill of fare, divided into hot and cold options, was still as engaging. Though, since I was not at Taco Bell, ordering one of everything would not be an option.

Maybe the only thing more exciting than parsing a menu over a glass of Champagne, or in this case mixologist Benjamin Schiller's "Old Money" cocktail (Black Maple Hill Bourbon, Aperol, CONTINUED...

SEA WORLD Clockwise from top left: Snapper carpaccio with hearts of palm, pickled ginger and shiso; the front room at GT Fish & Oyster; the house-smoked king salmon. Below: The Old Money cocktail



...CONTINUED walnut liqueur, bitters, allspice dram and orange oil)—is a healthy oyster slurping.

On any given night GT has a sampling of six different bivalves from the east and west coasts. Though I love them, I am not an oyster expert. Thankfully our waitress knew her *Tatamagouches* from her *Kusshis*. I don't remember those differences, but I do know that the *Kusshi*, tiny, dense little suckers (kind of the Danny DeVito of oysters), packed a sweet and briny punch. They were so good—except for a single fouled, fishy one in the dozen we had—that I didn't bother covering them up with Tentori's zippy sweet apple cocktail sauce.

Our waitress pimped the chowder like it was a Mason jar packed with the fountain of youth, but it was 70 degrees out and we passed. The waiters, who were picked in a competitive face-to-face interview process (check out the videos on the GT website), are pretty dynamic, none more so than the dude waiting on the table next to us—a guy so enthusiastic he makes Don Pardo, the *SNZ* announcer, look like the monotone Ben Stein.

Food and drink decisions made, there was nothing to do but sit back and gaze at Herold's design work. It's a thin strand of fishing line creating a tasteful upscale fish shack and getting stuck with a modern take on Long John Silver's. Herold indulges in some nautical clichés, including hanging an oil painting of a ship touselled about on the angry seas alongside lantern chandeliers made of yarns of thick braided rope. There are even printed sea-inspired quotes on the walls (I've seen this technique at the venerable Red Lobster).

But generally, the two-room restaurant, featuring fierce swordfish skeleton art and gold-plate-trimmed black dining tables, is more appealing to aged-cheddar-seeking foodies than the Cheddar Bay biscuit-loving set. And should proud Australian Crocodile Dundee happen to drop by, he'd be mighty happy with the boomerang-shaped wooden table in the front bar area.

He'd also love the way the intricate inlays of the boomerang table are mirrored in alternating beige and white striations of shrimp and foie gras on a terrine that resembled an edible Mark Rothko painting. Up until today, such a soulful *mélange* of butter and brine resting on a rich square of pillowy brioche would never have been found outside of any place that wasn't Charlie Trotter's.

Tentori, who spent many years working for Chuck, brings that experience to bear on what—on the surface—looks like a ton of other casual restaurants in town. Stephanie Izard and Paul Virant, also of the Boka Group, might be getting all the column inches, but Tentori, with his fine dice of pickled vegetables, tender fresh pastas and bounty of four-star techniques, almost makes those adept technicians look sloppy. Case in point: A bowl of midnight-sky-colored squid ink gnocchi tossed with slightly unfurled verdant fiddlehead ferns on top



of a sweet carrot lobster broth could be inserted into a tasting menu at Alinea on short notice.

While sopping up smoked haddock dip with a spinnaker of fried taro root or dripping smoldering green house-made hot sauce on the tender flesh of mahi in one of Chicago's better fish tacos, it occurs to me: I'm not sure I've had this much reward at any small plates spot in town.

If not for a funky piece of barbecued eel on a slightly under-salted wasabi potato and octopus salad, the meal would have been perfect. The vaunted lobster roll, tasting mostly of dill and mayo, was decent, but at \$22 you could afford two of Tentori's other courses, or almost three of Executive Pastry Chef Kady Yon's nuanced desserts. Her peanut butter crunch, a small tower of silky mousse perched on a crispy chocolate shortbread, ranks up there with the wares of Mindy Segal or Gale Gand.

Schiller, Yon, Tentori and owners Rob Katz and Kevin Boehm are an all-star team of restaurant talent—and this is the kind of lineup you need when you're trying to convert a meat-and-potatoes town to a crustacean-and-chowder city. The verdict so far? GT Fish & Oyster is on its way. ■



WATER WORLD Clockwise from top right: Tuna poke with mango, cucumber and black sesame; the bar area at GT Fish & Oyster; fishnets hanging from the ceiling; the main dining area; more water-inspired décor; chefs shucking oysters