

# eat & drink



Cobia collar

## SHORE THING

Spanish influences and seafood abound at new restaurant MFK

“I have nothing against bourbon, pork or dark rooms. I love those places. ... But, we wondered, can we do something else?”

—Scott Worsham, co-owner of MFK

**By Michael Nigrant** | FOR REDEYE  
This past winter's wicked assortment of thunder snow, Siberian temps and polar vortices had a positive summer legacy: "This last winter was so brutal, we wanted to figure out how to open a place that's light and breezy and has a summertime feel," said Scott Worsham, who along with his wife Sari Zernich Worsham (executive director and partner of The Art Smith Company as well as co-writer and executive producer of Charlie Trotter's cookbooks and TV shows, respectively) own recently-opened restaurant MFK on the border of Lincoln Park and Lakeview. "I have nothing against bourbon, pork or dark rooms. I love those places," said Worsham, a restaurant veteran. "But, we wondered, can we do something else?"

The Worshams, along with executive chef Nick Lacasse (The Drawing Room, "Around the World in 80 Plates"), have done just that in creating a Spanish-inflected seaside cafe experience inspired by recent travels. "We spent a month in Spain, including Barcelona, the Basque country and Mallorca, and we fell in love... with the way they live over there."

The Worshams were also smitten with food writer M.F.K. Fisher, the restaurant's namesake. "She's known for simple, clean food and celebrating that in the personal way," Scott said. That's what we're trying to do here is be a basic bones kind of place with low prices, clean plates and a bright feel." The restaurant name also cemented the deal

with Lacasse. "I'm a huge M.F.K. Fisher fan. What a character! ... She's such an influence," he said. "When I saw the name, I knew what this place was all about. The name was probably the thing that sealed me coming onboard."

**The scene:** The Worshams have succeeded in creating the simple clean spot they desired. The petite—700 square feet, to be exact—dining room has a handful of tables and a ten-seat bar. At full capacity, it's small enough that your mom might be able to cook and serve everyone herself. But, your mom's dining room is not trimmed with white-washed walls, industrial metal chairs or sharp-looking hexagonal tile. And it's definitely not a subterranean hideaway below Diversey, a spot built for lunchtime respites from work, romantic evening dates or the perfect meeting spot to start a clandestine affair. "After catering weddings for 300 [at previous employer Pure Kitchen Catering], it's nice to get back to paying attention to small details for a few people," Lacasse said.

**The food:** Like the dining room, Lacasse's seafood-skewing menu is stripped down. He cooks not with stabilizers and powders like many modern chefs, but more like an old-school Spanish chef tending grill on the sea-

shore. A caramelized scallop (\$10) is nestled in a mountain of fluffy grits; its center is tender and slightly raw, like top-shelf sashimi, and its briny, rich flavor is cut by the zing of pickled Fresno peppers. A heaping plate of cobia collar (a tender part of the fish near the cheek), clams and shrimp are strewn about a garlicky broth full of stewed fennel and tomato (\$36). The shrimp, which is raised in Indiana and has never been frozen (a lot of shrimp, even in high-end restaurants, often is), tasted buttery and nutty, like no other I've ever had.

Not everything at MFK is waterborne. There's an addictive assortment of tempura-fried half moons of avocado tossed with hot chili oil, lime and cilantro (\$10). "I came up with the dish when I was at Drawing Room," said Lacasse. "I got a case of what I thought were ripe avocados that turned out to be rock hard. Frying them steamed and softened them." There are also plenty of seasonal vegetables, such as crisp spring peas tossed with shallot, feta and mint (\$10). This was the only dish I had which could have used a tweak; the sweetness of the fresh veggies was overpowered by a heavy dose of acidic dressing.

**The drinks and dessert:** The food-friendly wine list is full of bright whites, lots of roses and lighter reds. I especially liked the Pascal Janvier chenin blanc (\$10 glass, \$40 bottle),

which finishes with a touch of honey flavor. The menu's lone dessert, the Basque cake (\$9), is a salty, sweet wedge of buttery, fluffy crumb that disappeared from my table in less than a minute.

**The service:** During the meal, I noticed our server pouring samples of each wine and tasting them before she poured glasses for diners. She also asked us about the flavors in a dish she hadn't yet had a chance to sample. Ideally, a server gets to taste all the dishes before a restaurant opens, but for a variety of reasons—cost, on-the-fly menu additions, etc.—that can't always happen. I appreciate that the staff here is committed to learning the nuances of what they serve in a way that goes beyond just doing their job.

**Bottom line:** The restaurant's namesake M.F.K. Fisher once wrote, "I still think that one of the pleasantest of all emotions is to know that I, with my brain and my hands, have nourished my beloved few, that I have concocted a stew or a story, a rarity or a plain dish, to sustain them truly against the hungers of the world." Lacasse and the Worshams honor that ideal with their new project. They have managed to create not so much a restaurant, but a comforting and inspiring respite.

REPORTERS VISIT RESTAURANTS UNANNOUNCED AND MEALS ARE PAID FOR BY REDEYE. REDEYE@TRIBUNE.COM @REDEYEATDRINK

**MFK**  
432 W. Diversey Parkway  
773-857-2540  
Heating up