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Devon Seafood Grill: Five Hours of Fish

— *Andie Thomalla*

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I'm still in that post-adolescent, pre-"adult" space where, full-disclosure, free food is a major motivational force. So the prospect of a media dinner at Devon Seafood Grill (not to be confused with Devahhnn the street, but rather pronounced after the British seaport) was tempting. But tempered with skepticism. I've walked past the place since it's opened, but have always allowed myself to assume the worst about it. So close to the Mag Mile, so bright and trendy looking -- I assumed it had to be Cheesecake Factory with fish. Which was unappealing on a couple different levels. But the gratuity got the better of me, and I signed on to cover the event. Not to spoil the ending, but I was dead wrong, and Devon is in fact a great alternative to other tourist-trapping Gold Coast restaurants, and probably deserves more tourist and local attention than it currently gets. More details below the fold.

To accompany me in sampling the summer menu at Devon the Restaurant, I decided to bring along Devon the Person, also pronounced like the British seaport -- a man who once described a particular coffee roast as tasting "like going through tunnels," who introduced me to Glenn's Diner, the unexpected but lovely seafood (and cereal) outpost near the Montrose Brown Line stop, and who's never been one to keep his opinions to himself.

Things started, as they always should, with drinks. The cocktail menu is long and interesting -- equal parts fun and fancy, as one would expect in such a lovely, liquid space as Devon's lower level bar. The bar and private room in which we dined are both sort of earthy and subterranean feeling, cool and dark with modern touches, smooth lines, and elegant naturalistic elements, like the embedded stone sinks in the restrooms and lighting fixtures evocative of jellyfish floating overhead. It would all be a little chilly if not warmed by glowing woodwork and golden light.

On the menu, pages of snacks alternate with pages of drinks, interspersed with long descriptions of house specialties, like the French 75, named after a gun and popularized during the French Revolution (so you just know you're in for a ride). A brut champagne is spiked with limoncello and

Hendrick's gin, a combination that sounds medicinal but tastes wonderfully refreshing and subtle - like a less breakfast-y mimosa. And with a plump maraschino cherry at the bottom to boot, like a sugar chaser. We also tried the surprisingly sweet but refreshing Cucumber Dill, another Hendrick's based concoction -- though truly, when it's on the menu, who can possibly resist this most summery of gins? Especially if one has what amounts to an *African Queen* style taste for the stuff. Guilty. Devon also offers a few absinthe-based drinks (oooh, edgy!) notably a champagne concoction called Earnest Hemingway's Death in the Afternoon. Yeah, that's a typo, though maybe they were just trying to convey the man's genuine, unaffected interest in booze. Unclear.

The other notable feature of the bar menu is the happy hour listing -- twice a day during weekdays, all day Sunday, prices plummet. Oysters go half-price, or even cheaper, at \$1 a piece, appetizers go to \$5.50 a pop, and fancy drinks to \$6.50. Not bad at all. Two windows of opportunity (4 - 7pm and 9pm - 12am) sweeten the deal that much further.



So on to the food. All seven courses of it, supplemented by sweet, tangy drop biscuits every step of the way and well-paired wines, the most expensive of which topped out at \$58/bottle, slightly up from the most affordable \$25-\$30 range. First up was tuna tartar, which both our hostesses for the evening and executive chef Scott Barrow admitted to be their favorite item on the menu. I am all about sushi, but have never really been able to get it up for tartars -- they're always too processed, too finely minced, and end up reminding me a little too much of whatever I fed my cat that morning. Devon's take, however, involves some sizable hunks of charred, cold, sashimi grade tuna, finally bringing the pleasure of the first bite back to a dish I'd long given up on. The char on the fish adds extra character even beyond the meaty texture, as does the broken wasabi sauce's contrasting spots of mild cool oil and hot vinegar and spice. I wouldn't say I've been converted, though I'd certainly order this dish again.



Lobster bisque was up next. Poured individually table-side, which always feels like a more legitimate way to eat soup, it's a classic recipe and familiar taste. All sherry and cream, sharp cheese notes, and that pervasive seaside aroma. Touches of tabasco add some back-of-the-throat heat and compliment the sweetness of the flakes of lobster. And the final appetizer was a Caprese style mini-salad, the only non-seafood dish of the night aside from dessert. Nice, with interesting garnishes of pickled onion and fennel, bits of crispy prosciutto, basil oil and a roasted red pepper sauce that thankfully don't overwhelm a dish that really makes its reputation on a few simple ingredients.



Three entrees were brought out to taste, starting with the most seasonal, a wild, line-caught striped bass prepared with a buttery corn sauce and sort of late-summer veggie and pancetta hash (pictured way up top). It's a summery plate, all sweetness and gentle textures, though I almost wish the flavors had been toned down just a little in favor of the bass itself. The fish was cooked perfectly though, delicate with just the right amount of rougher flavor from the grill. This was followed by a seared Chilean seabass (pictured here), and our server reminded us all of the fish's original incarnations as the bony toothfish and, even more potentially offensive, slimefish. If you're going to trot out all the nasty names your entree has been called, you're probably pretty confident you've overcome them. And it was a great dish, with sage-accented potatoes gratin, a strongly vinegared dijon sauce, and creamy leeks. This was apparently also a seasonal presentation, though it was hearty enough to be much more appropriate autumn fare -- sort of a richer version of fish and chips. More gastro, less pub. And again, quality ingredients and a well-treated piece of seafood, apparently freshly flown-in from Hawaii. And finally, there was a filet oscar, topped with a Maryland-style crab cake. The steak was great, perfectly medium-rare and still juicy enough not even to require saucing. The topping was much more crab than breading, as it should be, with a strong parmesan flavor that almost did in the sweetness of the seafood. But overall, a good dish -- and good to know Devon can do steaks just as well as seafood (and presumably out of combination as well).



And then it ended, as it always should, with dessert and, more importantly, sweet red zinfandel and cold, fruity ice wine. And scotch. Though evidently, if you ask for a whiff of your dining companion's scotch and make a face, they become extremely disinclined to let you taste said scotch. *My bad*. Sheesh. Dessert itself was a molten lava chocolate cake, always that perennial final act, though this particular version had a nice sort of orange essence to the dark chocolate, which interesting. There was a nice carrot cake as well, which was heavier on the sugar than the cream cheese and had a nice weight to it, but was otherwise pretty standard. The wines (and scotch) seemed to be the stars of the final course.

The conclusion, after five hours of debauchery? After more omega-3 fatty acids than I usually consume in an entire year? After being feted and feasted and fawned upon with other members of our local food journalism scene? (What up, [Chicago Bites](#) and [Chicagoist](#).) Devon the Restaurant is NOT in fact Cheesecake Factory with fish. It's not tourist-pandering, nor prohibitively priced, and stands out as a pretty great downtown restaurant. "I'm totally taking my mom here next time she's in town," declared Devon the Person. And without a media pass. Now there's the mark of a good restaurant.

Devon Seafood Grill
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