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Eye of the Storm

by Robin Rinaldi

Devon Seafood Grill

225 S. 18th St.

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Cuisine: Seafood

Prices: \$18-\$85

Hours: 11am-midnight, seven days a week

You know how it is on a Saturday night. You've got some friends over, you're having a few beers, it's time to eat. It sure would be nice to get a spontaneous table for four at Rouge or Bleu overlooking the Square, but the two times you've attempted this lately you were greeted with 1) so much noise (at Rouge) that conversation with anyone at your table proved impossible, and 2) a stunning hostess (at Bleu) who looked at you with the weary disdain reserved for the reservation-less.

It's enough to make you break from the pack and head next door to Devon Seafood Grill. With the same location and same outdoor tables, all that's missing is the hip quotient. Good thing you never let that come between you and a big plate of food.

And the plates are big at Devon, heaving with most any fish you could crave, including eight varieties available in a simple grilled preparation and more than a dozen others wearing the familiar reductions and glazes. The menu is updated daily based on what's fresh, its backside dedicated to a long, mostly Californian wine list. A few chicken and steak items are thrown in for aquaphobes.

Devon's space, likewise, is surprisingly spacious. Perhaps because of its neighbors' jewel-box dining rooms, it feels absolutely luxuriant to follow the hostess through the large front bar, down into the main dining room and around a corner to a quiet booth. Tile lines the floor and the high arched ceiling. Bottles of white wine sit chilling in marble basins. The overall effect is cool and cushy.

Our waitress provides the best service I've enjoyed this year. She knows the menu top to bottom, reassures us she's eaten every item on it and anticipates our concerns before we have time to ponder them: The gumbo's very hot, the crab cakes low on breading. She never hovers, but always appears when we need her.

Sipping an Italian Pinot Grigio while munching on Devon's sweet biscuits, delivered from a still-warm baking sheet, is a happy way to await a meal, but the first course arrives quickly. A plate of tender fried calamari distinguishes itself with crispy slivers of carrot and jalapeno slices gracing the mix. The sweet-and-sour dipping sauce is fine, but we favor the Creole rémoulade for its spicy creaminess.

The house salad passes muster, with toasted pine nuts and salty feta cheese offsetting its honey-balsamic vinaigrette. A salad of fresh mozzarella and pear tomatoes is colorful and pleasing, if not stellar, but the grilled focaccia triangles that frame it are smeared with a smashing basil-walnut pesto that rescues the plate from ordinariness.

The gumbo is served traditionally, a scoop of white rice over which the waitress ladles the dark stew brimming with chicken, sausage, shrimp, beef and the usual veggies. The heat warning is not an empty threat. It's difficult to speak for a few seconds after each spoonful, but it's a pleasant sort of pain.

The entrees range from good to outstanding, so let's approach them in that order. A thick broiled cut of Chilean sea bass glistens fresh and opalescent, but lacks flavor. (Am I the only one who's noticed that this popular, overfished species needs a seasoned grill or a nutty crust to counter its abundant fleshiness?) In this case, a Chardonnay *buerre blanc* proves too delicate and subtle to do the job. The companion roasted garlic mashed potatoes are thick and potent, but the Chinese long beans are much too crunchy.

A pan roast of Maine lobster and shrimp arrives in a bowl of fragrant lobster consommé engulfing an island of risotto studded with succulent shiitakes and cilantro. The shellfish has been dulled by a minute of overcooking, but the combination works, thanks largely to the perfectly textured rice.

The waitress was also right about the Maryland crab cakes: The usual binders have given way to chunks of rich crustacean. The Creole *rémoulade* that accompanied the calamari provides a tangy complement, and a light tartar sauce touched with mango a refreshing one.

But the star of the evening is a Block Island swordfish, grilled and tasting like a good steak, accompanied by equally meaty sautéed mushrooms, diced red peppers and garlic mashed potatoes. We're all digging into it long after our stomachs have signaled the two-minute warning.

Thusly satiated, dessert would be impossible if not for a praline-like almond cannoli stuffed with chocolate mousse, mounted atop a disc of diced strawberries while a few fat black-berries stand guard.

As we exit toward the park, are we awe-struck? No, but we're full, pretty much impressed and quite satisfied, whereas nearby we might have still been standing at the bar.