



THIS WEEK'S REVIEW

Tryst Sweetly, Discreetly

Posted Wednesday, Feb. 6, 2008 @ 12:00 p.m.



Sally's has a long-standing reputation as one of San Diego's most romantic destinations for lovers. It's an outbuilding behind the Manchester Grand Hyatt at the edge of Seaport Village (so, fans of antique rock, you'll be sneaking to Sally's through the alley). It's got plenty of warm-weather outdoor seating and views of cityscapes and bayscapes from the picture windows of the interior. Until recently the menu was modern French, through a series of French-born chefs who knew and mentored each other in an unbroken succession and invariably moved on to Bertrand at Mr. A's in a stately, continuous procession.

Two years ago, the hotel management decided to switch the cooking style to Asian-fusion, with a stronger focus on seafood (always featured, but less intensively than now). With the arrival a few months ago of German-born chef Sarah Linkenheil, the French line is broken. The ambience has subtly changed, too, in an apparent attempt to skew younger. Whatever the canned music was when I ate at Sally's a few years ago, I didn't notice it. This time it was edgy modern rock, a more abrasive sound, and played much louder. I went to Sally's expecting a Valentine's Day destination for serious couples.

I'm sure (at least I hope) they'll make some adjustments for the occasion with mellower, more sophisticated sounds, but on an ordinary night I'd now see it more as a destination for an impressive first date or a serious third one.

It's not so easy to change identities, and possibly not even a good idea. If Sally's is trying to capture the Gaslamp crowd, it doesn't seem to be working very well. Our fellow diners midweek were scarcely the notorious Japengo Thursday-night set, nor the Stingaree weekend gang — who probably wouldn't feel quite at home at civilized Sally's in any case. There were a few tables of thirtysomethings but more silverbacks, who were probably as annoyed with the music as I was. Sally's was always a relaxing place for conventioners to avoid the Gaslamp meat-market scene, as well as a place for loving locals to tryst sweetly and discreetly. But the management still has some good instincts: At one point during my dinner, a large party (8? 12? who's counting?) entered and were carefully seated at a table well away from other diners — a considerate strategy.

Aside from the ice-cold (near-frozen) butter that came with the table bread, our starters were nearly all vibrant and arresting — although I missed the raw oysters and cold seafood platter of the old days. A “Napoleon” of raw ahi, lightly cured salmon (gravlax, not lox), and avocado, layered with a few thin fried wonton crackers, was silky and ultra-fresh. Everything in the combination, down to the soy-oyster sauce and furikake seasoning mixture (sesame, seaweed, dried shrimp), worked in perfect harmony. The portion is generous enough to share with a friend or a sweetie, every bite a blast of maritime freshness.

An Asian lobster salad, on the other hand, is more salad than lobster — a busy plateful of Napa cabbage, red Belgian endive, mandarin orange sections, “lightbulb” tomatoes, sweet onions, and fried wonton-skin croutons in a sweet, fruity papaya vinaigrette. Now and then you can even find a bite of lobster hiding under a cabbage leaf, but doing so is no occasion for rejoicing. The bulk Pacific lobster meat, which arrives frozen, has lost its flavor in the chill and tastes almost neutral. (A week later, I met very similar lobster in a pot pie at Urban Solace in North Park, so it must be going around right now, like a winter cold.) The menu is about to change and

incorporate a fresh lobster dish, so this and other preparations involving crustaceans are likely to improve.

An appetizer plate for two includes nearly all the remaining starter choices. Sally's famous crab cakes (with King and Maryland blue crab) seem unaltered by time and chef changes — still refined and delicate, lightly coated, with almost no filler. They are pretty much the definitive crab cakes of San Diego, even when miniaturized for the sampler platter. Tempura prawns are sweet and tender, robed in a mere whisper of batter.

A Hunan duck quesadilla, a thin flour tortilla rolled around a filling of duck and smoked Gouda, is cut into conical sections like a sushi roll and plated over a daub of wasabi mole, wherein the wasabi is so subtle you can't really taste it. "This is very delicate," said one of my tablemates approvingly. Pacific lobster bisque, our least favorite part of the sampler, arrived in two demitasse cups, but without spoons. At the bottom of each cup were small cubes of unidentifiable starchy solids — Kabocha pumpkin, the menu told us. Spoons would really help. (I have visions of desperate Heimlich maneuvers to dislodge slurped-up pumpkin pieces.) The soup itself is rather thin: It could pass for a light Mediterranean tomato-seafood broth, a base for a bouillabaisse rather than a bisque. Apparently, it, too, suffers from bland-lobster-meat issues.

It's almost a given that restaurants with great starters will slump a bit on the main course. Here, one of our entrées was sublime — the others, not. As I learned from one of Sally's previous chefs (after he decamped for Mr. A's), unlike the Marriot chain (with Arterra and Molly's), the Hyatt group has not yet seen the wisdom of investing in local, seasonal, and organic ingredients — although the current chef is pushing toward use of naturally raised meat and poultry, where the flavor difference is unmistakable. It's not as bad as Sysco veggie medleys, but in small ways, if you've been eating at top local destinations, you'll probably notice the slight fall-off in flavor from what you'd expect at this price point.

The star entrée was black cod (aka sable), among the finest and fattiest of all fin-fishes. It arrived tenderly poached in a subtle broth of orange, miso, and bonito, a gentle, perfect dish. Accompanied by rice, baby favas, and pea greens, it was deeply sensuous.

Moonfish (Hawaiian opah) is a pretty critter with flashing rainbows of opalescent skin when it's alive, a scuba diver's darling. When I tasted it a few years ago, fresh caught and cooked to tenderly translucent (not opaque) at a Honolulu seafood restaurant, it was a rare treat — but like its compatriot ono (or “oh, no!” as some local chefs call it), it seems to lose a lot in transit. Here, the faintly smoky garlic crust, with a butter sauce flavored with vanilla and mirin (Japanese sweet cooking wine), sounded pretty to the palate, along with accompaniments of baby spinach and wasabi mashed potatoes (the latter proving very lean, with just a tiny wasabi kick) — but the precious fish was cooked through to relatively well done, moist only at the very center, and that's all she wrote. It wasn't because the chef has had problems with conventioners sending fish back for more cooking (although she's appalled when tables ask for halibut “well done”) but that she herself prefers opah cooked this way, at least after its long air journey. (She finds it too chewy when lightly cooked, and indeed, it may be, served 48 hours later than when I ate it fresh-caught in Honolulu.)

Pan-seared diver scallops were beautiful thick hunks, and tender, but so oversalted they tasted as if they'd been marinated in brine. They came with a lychee relish and sweet-tomato compote, but the garnishes didn't matter much once the line-cook stubbed his toe on the salt shaker.

We also tried the evening's special, a poached-grilled free-range chicken breast. Our waiter — radiating enthusiasm, knowledge, and intelligent good looks — had sampled it just before dinner service began. Cooked by the chef herself, it was exquisitely tender, he said. Hours later, we were not as lucky. Cooked-dry breast aborts the flight of even the free-est bird.

Sally's desserts (aside from those served at the “chef's table” dinners, which chef Linkenheil prepares personally) are designed by the chef and executed by the hotel's pastry kitchen. The surprise hit for us was a banana-caramel lumpia (the Filipino version of a spring roll — a crisp-fried dough wrapper that's more typically stuffed with savory ingredients like ground pork, shrimp, and bean sprouts). The delicate, frangible wrapper bought off the lush weight of the fruit and the richness of the sauce, restoring the balance of sweet and savory flavors. I was less pleased with a coconut panna cotta. I love coconut and adore panna cotta — ideally an ethereal, gelatin-stiffened

cream confection, softly atremble like a maiden's breast — but too much gelatin rendered this version as firmly bouncy as a silicone implant.

Sally's still has plenty of potential for V-Day: Seafood is light on the tummy, not liable to cause premature snoozing on that special night. The chef plans a special menu for that evening but hadn't finalized it when I spoke with her. (Hey, how about a raw oyster appetizer for a V-Day aphrodisiac?) All that's really needed to restore the romance to the atmosphere is a change of soundtrack, from whatever "share the pain" Goth group they were playing to, say, the Coltrane for Lovers CD or equivalent. Sally's shouldn't even try to be a bridge-and-tunnel young scenesters' hangout, never gonna happen — so act your age, lovely lady, and you'll attract your lovers!

ABOUT THE CHEF

Thanks to a semester as an exchange student in Ohio, Sarah Linkenheil speaks American English with a faint German accent. "Germans aren't the greatest cooks, but my mom would bake, and I really enjoyed that. And I started making breakfast for my parents, and I really liked that, too. My mom was the big inspiration. And then in high school, I was always the one to make food for my friends, with ideas about what to make, what to bring. And I decided to start my apprenticeship to learn to do it professionally." At 18, in 1998, she began apprenticing with the Swissôtel Düsseldorf.

There are still relatively few women chefs in the world, least of all at hotels and other top destinations. I asked Sarah if she'd encountered any professional barriers because of her gender during her education or career. "Not really. I always felt like I always outdid everybody," she laughed. "I was fortunate, because I had a little more basic education than the people that usually started to cook professionally in Germany. I was already 18H, and these kids that had just started to cook were 16, so I was more mature, already taking things a little more seriously. I was very competitive — but I did know a lot more than the guys did that I worked with. It gave me, early on, the idea that 'I can handle this, oh, yeah.' You do have to fight your way through, you have to do the smack-talking, you just got to keep up with everybody else, and I was usually worse than everybody else. You know how rough restaurants usually are."

Sarah continued learning as she gained experience at major European resorts in Switzerland, and later in Vail, Colorado, where she met her husband (who is a line-chef at Arterra). “We were quite done with the cold and snow, so we looked into where else we could go. I was with Hyatt already and kept an eye onto all the job openings, and Sally’s turned up one day, and I applied and got the job.

“The switch to Asian-fusion happened at Sally’s in November–December 2006. I learned about Asian flavors here. I’ve never traveled to Asia, but for a long time I’ve been fascinated by the types of food and spices and techniques used there. Coming from Germany and Switzerland, I have to say that the flavors are a little bland — the farther north of the equator you are, the blander the flavors. It’d be better to go there [to Asia] and learn from people who really know the cuisines and cook them every day, but I’m very fortunate here that my bosses [the hotel executive chefs] are extensively traveled, and they know all kinds of different cuisines. That definitely is my way of learning, and I learn every day. The chef in overall charge of the hotel food is from Hawaii, so he knows all these Asian cuisines. Maybe they need to send me to Hawaii to taste the food there!

“I do like the way it’s changed in this city. From what I hear, eating in San Diego has changed a lot in the last ten years. I hope to be opening even more people’s horizons to different foods, different flavors, and I hope they will go for it and won’t be afraid to taste new tastes. I think we [Sally’s] are doing a good thing by not trying to fit too tightly into any bracket — we hope that people will try everything and not be afraid of something they haven’t tasted before.”

Note: Next week I’m taking a desperately needed breather and will not deliver a review. Doesn’t mean I’ve died with my bib on, I’m just inhaling deeply, cleaning house, planting Chinese greens, and doing the overdue laundry while I start work on a project that may take a little extra time. See you the week after.

Sally’s on the Water

HHH (Very Good)

Manchester Grand Hyatt, One Market Place (at West Market Street),
downtown, 619-358-6740, sallyssandiego.com.

HOURS: Lunch, Monday–Friday, 11:30 a.m.–3:00 p.m., Saturday, noon–3:00 p.m.; Sunday brunch 10:00 a.m.–3:00 p.m. Dinner, Sunday–Thursday, 5:30–10:00 p.m., Friday–Saturday until 11:00 p.m.

PRICES: Starters, \$8–\$16; entrées, \$28–\$38; sushi and sashimi, \$4–\$26; desserts, \$9. Lunch entrées, \$14–\$18. Sunday brunch buffet, \$39. Prix-fixe dinner at the “chef’s table” in the kitchen by prearrangement, price to be negotiated.

CUISINE AND BEVERAGES: Asian-fusion, emphasizing seafood, plus sushi-sashimi menu. Mainly Californian, rather steep wine list (little under \$40), plenty by the glass (at high markups), plus serious sake list on sushi menu. Full bar.

PICK HITS: Appetizer sampler for two; crab cakes; shrimp tempura; ahi and salmon Napoleon; black cod with miso-orange sauce; banana lumpia.

NEED TO KNOW: Free validated parking in hotel self-parking garage. Long walk to restaurant, but no barriers to mobility devices. Two vegan appetizers, one vegan entrée. Scenic patio seating in good weather. Views all around. Dining-room tables well spaced, but room can get loud when sound system is turned on high. Reservations strongly recommended.