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Salt Wood: A must-visit stop on the Monterey Peninsula

By Michael Bauer | November 28, 2017 | Updated: November 28, 2017 10:16am



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Salt Wood

In his Between Meals column, Chronicle restaurant critic Michael Bauer writes about the restaurants he visits each week as he searches for the next Top 100 Restaurants. His main dining reviews, written after three or more visits, appear in the Sunday Food + Wine section.

The restaurant scene on the Monterey Peninsula can be a little sleepy. There are lots of good choices, but few could compete in a one-on-one matchup of what you'd find in San Francisco. Many are, charmingly, frozen in time.

Yet on a recent trip to Carmel, I was impressed with a new restaurant called Salt Wood Kitchen and Oysterette that opened at the end of September in the Sanctuary resort in Marina, a town about 10 miles north of Monterey.

The restaurant has made an impressive entry into the dining scene in terms of both the food and the interior. This is a destination worth the 25-minute drive from Carmel.

The chef is David Baron, whom I first became acquainted with when he modernized the menu

at Casanova, which has been one of the most popular restaurants in Carmel since it opened 40 years ago. At Salt Wood, Baron has created an approachable menu that concentrates on seafood but has excellent fried chicken and other offerings that will appeal to a broad range of diners.

The stylish restaurant has an almost East Coast look, with white walls, recycled-wood floors and impressive box-beam ceiling. The restaurant also incorporates an open kitchen, an oyster bar, a two-sided cocktail bar and a grouping of furniture in front of an impressive floor-to-ceiling steel-fronted fireplace that turns the area into a comfortable lounge.

Careful attention is paid to details — from the green, knobby water glasses to the gunmetal-gray utensils to the individual lights over the table.

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There's also a room and terrace that can be rented out for corporate events and weddings. It's bound to be a popular destination.

What will really lure me back, however, is Baron's food. The menu features five kinds of oysters (\$3 raw or \$4 dressed) that can be wood-grilled and served with kimchi butter; béarnaise and tarragon pesto; and spicy sausage and bread crumbs. The three accompaniments for

the chilled oysters include the “bloody Mary” with freshly grated horseradish; apple gelee with finger lime; and melon cucumber.

We enjoyed the first-of-the season crab remoulade (\$16) with big chunks of seafood in a light sauce accompanied by pink peppercorn potato chips. Whole crab was also on the menu, but I went for the Monterey squid (\$13) stuffed with chorizo, kale and preserved lemons in Romesco sauce, and wild California halibut with corn, sweet peppers and tomatoes — a dish that seemed to be pushing the boundaries of summer a little too much.

The menu offers many non-seafood options such as almond-wood roasted carrots (\$8) and ember-roasted squash. Baron also prepares excellent fried chicken (\$26) served on a round slice of wood with a cheddar biscuit and a cast iron pot filled with braising greens. The board also contains stainless steel containers for house-made hot sauce and pickled peppers.

Other main courses include a cheeseburger (\$18); pork chop (\$31); and braised lamb shank (\$31).

Cocktails are well made; the wine list offers some reasonably priced selections.

Salt Wood is a restaurant I’ll be sure to return to on my next trip to the Monterey Peninsula.

*3295 Dunes Road, Marina; (831) 883-5535 or www.saltwoodkitchenandoysterette.com
Lounge opens at 3 p.m. nightly; dinner 5-10 p.m. nightly. Reservations accepted.*



Photo: Michael Bauer, The Chronicle



Crab remoulade with pink peppercorn potato chips at Salt Wood Kitchen.

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