

Curtain Up

Dining with drama at Maison Blanche

John Bancroft

I like Maison Blanche on Longboat Key almost as much for the theater of the place as for the ambrosial haute cuisine it serves so beautifully six evenings a week. Think of it as a play.

Act I: Setting

All the machinery of this fine restaurant is offstage. The kitchen, for example, is the sanctum sanctorum in which chef (and owner) Jose Martinez, late of Paris and the South of France, works his wonders out of sight. In an age of open kitchens and bars situated close enough to the heat of the burners to flush diners' faces, Maison Blanche practices the magician's art of misdirection and surprise. The sleight of hand begins at the entrance, where diners must cross the low arch of a steel footbridge under canvas draperies before so much as setting a foot inside. The feeling of having left the everyday world behind is heightened in the soft curves of the dining room, with its subtle design motif of circles within circles. Pale sheer billows drape all the walls and windows. Table linens are white and the chairs sleek and comfortable black leather.

The contemporary soundtrack is both soothing and upbeat. The waiters' shoes make no sound on the soft finish of the wood floors. The lighting is discreetly indirect but ample for menu reading. Votive candles glow softly in small pearlescent globes on the tables, set off on our recent visit by a scattering of light-catching crystals on the tablecloths. The effect is serene, meditative and spa-like in its tranquility.

Act II: Menu

The evening's menu can be as simple or as complex as you like. Choose à la carte from two tempting pages of appetizers, soups and entrées or opt for prix fixe tasting menus of four, six or eight courses (\$55 to \$95 per person).

Concealment reigns on paper, too, beginning with the tradition of shielding Madame from the prices; in two-sex couples, at least, only Monsieur's menu bears dollar signs. Find it charming or insulting, but the practice has a long history in restaurants of the first rank.

If you dislike the fad of waiters introducing themselves and announcing that they'll "be taking care of you," you'll be delighted to discover the black-clad staff at Maison Blanche eliminates the chat in favor of action.

You'll know from the moment you're seated that you're in good hands.

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And if you too often find yourself worn out from reading even before your aperitif arrives, you'll be relieved to find that the description of each dish here provides just enough information to whet the appetite and allow you to make an intelligent choice. A given dish may well contain a list of ingredients as long as the chef's arm, but he'll not tax you with the catalogue. Instead, he'll do his job, which is to apply his alchemical skills to the ingredients he's so painstakingly chosen, and let you do yours, which is to savor the result and help spread his renown far and wide. Very French.

Act III: Performance

Sweetbreads are for me a guilty pleasure, one I indulge only rarely and then only in a restaurant where I have good reason to believe I can trust the chef completely. Most of us either love the dish or hate the very idea of it. I'll confess to fence straddling in the matter, but it is my ultimate test of a kitchen's prowess. Execute this one with all the considerable delicacy required and you've earned your stars.

That was the case at Maison Blanche, where the tasty but challenging calf's thymus gland was braised to a golden brown without and to a firm and tender white within. It was served on a bed of caramelized endives and asserted by a pretty swoosh of what the menu modestly describes as beet juice. Lovely—but that's my sweetbreads quota for the next decade or so

Now let's back up a bit and take in the broader view. As my wife Colette and I luxuriated in the room's quiet elegance, an amuse-bouche arrived: a soupçon of chilled puréed lentils topped with snips of tiny chives, a dot of olive oil and a crunchy micro crouton. A miniature delight, it did exactly what it was supposed to do, which is to excite the taste buds.

And so we were ready when Colette's divine baked tomato tart, the tomatoes naturally sweet on a thin pastry crisp and accented by fresh basil juice, was served opposite my big, pillowy mushroom raviolis in foie gras sauce with asparagus. We were in heaven. We sipped a Renwood Zinfandel Grandpère 2004 (\$59), wallowing in its rich briar, dark chocolate and tobacco flavors, while the appropriate interval passed before the main event.

Mine, of course, was the sweetbreads (\$27). Colette's was a deceptively simple organic prime rib eye (\$39), not grilled but roasted to a perfect medium rare and drizzled with black pepper sauce. The trick here began with the beef, to the selection of which the chef obviously had devoted considerable care, and finished with a subtly complex sauce hiding behind its homely black pepper label.

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It was served simply with savory roasted fingerling potatoes.

Nothing about it could be improved upon.

Because we were so pleased with the performance so far, we recklessly ordered dessert. Both my chocolate confection with yogurt sorbet and Colette's caramelized banana with a crisp cocoa lattice cookie were excellent, but before they arrived we were treated to another round of unbidden taste bud amusers: a thimbleful of coconut tapioca, a little caramel square robed in dark chocolate and, believe it if you dare, a small hand-cut marshmallow flavored with rose petals.

I've said it before and I'll repeat it now, with feeling: The goddess is in the details.

Maison Blanche

Four Winds Beach Resort

2605 Gulf of Mexico Drive, Longboat Key

941-383-8088

Non-smoking

Reservations suggested

Dinner: Monday-Thursday and Sunday, 5:30-9:30 p.m. Friday and Saturday, 10:30 p.m.

Major credit cards

Handicap accessible

Free and ample parking /private lot

Extensive list of wines and aperitifs