

Follow the Food

Fine French at Maison Blanch

Kristine Nickel

Several years ago, Maison Blanche opened to great debate. People loved the food, hated the service. Some thought it was too expensive; some claimed it was the bargain of the century. Some decried the fixed price menu; others sang its praises.

Like most momentary controversies, talk about the restaurant faded away, except among those who keep their eye on great food and rarely follow the fads. Of course, the nature of a restaurant critic is to follow the fads. That's why I appreciated a loyal reader sending this not-so-gentle nudge: "Why don't you write about Maison Blanche? For us, it's the best restaurant in town."

Mea culpa. Our trip back to Maison Blanche was heavenly. In fact, the predominance of white in the interior—white walls, ceiling, napery and so forth—does give the impression of resting in a pristine—well, celestial—backdrop. The design slant towards the contemporary saves the diner from anticipating servers with wings and halos, but you get the picture.

The dining room is über comfortable. Tables are placed far enough apart to throw caution to the wind and engage in intimate conversation or uproarious gaiety. No one is sitting in your down draft—such a relief in these days of squeezing pennies out of every square inch of floor space. Maison Blanche affords every opportunity to settle in for an evening of fine food and service. The menu is deceptively simple. The descriptions do slim justice to the richness of taste, preparation and presentation. Take a simple mesclun salad. The menu reads "field greens," but the salad is a sensation of several types of greens, including refreshing mint. All the greens taste just-picked sweet and are cleaned and dried so that the vinaigrette makes a mere air kiss of a statement. Some shaved, aged Parmesan adds a welcome salty richness to the dish.

Calamari—all parts of the squid—is a science project pinned to a poster board. The body and tentacles might put off those used to plates piled high with fried rings of the body. But the whole squid provides a tenderness and taste of the sea not often discovered. And the red pepper sauce hints at a squirt of squid ink with its earthy authenticity. There are earthy strikes again in the lushness of the foie gras sauce, served with a ravioli of wild mushrooms. Here the plate is saved from a forest of brown with brilliant green spears of steamed asparagus forming a coat of armor across the little ravioli pillows. The entrées are equally delightful. A lobster ravioli special was unbelievably light in texture, with a topping of lobster foam that enhanced the impression of buoyancy. On the opposite side of the scale, short ribs, braised until they fell off the bone, glistened with a rich, mahogany sheen and tasted complex yet sturdy.

Swordfish takes an Oriental turn, the thick loin crusted with peppercorn and sesame seeds and served with a soy sauce the consistency of caramel sauce. Moist and satisfying, it's simultaneously fiery and sweet. Red snapper, rarely one of my favorite fish, is treated to a lively sauce of citrus that balances the pan-frying and slyly boosts the herbaceous flavor of thyme in the accompanying potatoes.

The leisurely pace of the service precludes any refusal of dessert. Of course, true to any fine French dining establishment, Maison Blanche offers an amuse-bouche, in this case an aperitif-sized glass of chilled arugula soup. And following the entrée, a tray of truffles appears in preparation for the dark roasted coffee.

Chocolate cake is a warm dome of lusciousness, served with an icy ball of sorbet and dribbles of orange sauce across the plate. Pineapple is roasted, the juice melding with the flavors of the accompanying vanilla bean. Of course, it's served with coconut ice cream to create a tropical fantasy.

The wine list offers French reds and whites as well as a solid inventory of New World and California contributions. They're reasonably priced. The rest of the menu is up there, as they say, with entrées inching toward that \$40 mark (the organic prime rib) and others more moderately marked in the mid to high \$20s.

The wait staff is efficient yet measured in their manner, with charming French accents; all in all, the dining experience belongs near the top of the list of the region's finest.

Maison Blanche

Four Winds Beach Resort

2605 Gulf of Mexico Drive, Longboat Key

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

Easy parking