

## **Maison Blanche creates romantic and memorable meals**

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Maison Blanche transports diners to a setting that stands slightly outside place and time. Maison Blanche

Upon arrival at the Longboat Key restaurant, diners first cross a metal footbridge with a white canvas forming a tunnel. Then, following a curving entrance, they arrive at the restaurant proper, a circular room that literalizes Maison Blanche's name: white linens drape all the walls; the ceiling is white; in a center of the room stands a large spray of white orchids; white tablecloths and napkins complete the theme. Black club chairs add the only note of contrast.

It is elegantly austere, almost hermetic, and it focuses attention on the food and drink, which shares a similar sophistication.

In the background, music plays, not the classic French chanson that you might expect, but contemporary cuts of the type that might appear on a Buddha Bar compilation.

Unlike many restaurants nowadays, Maison Blanche doesn't use the menu as a marketing tool. Items are listed in a straightforward manner, free of faddish trends. And the cooking has a classical simplicity, impeccably executed.

The evening began with an amuse-bouche of arugula that had been mixed with olive oil and blended into a frothy cream, light and refreshing. Appetizers include selections such as Asparagus Soup (\$14), with a creamy base and the tips arranged on top, or a more sumptuous Arborio Risotto (\$19) with lobster and a bisque.

A standout is the Tomato Tart (\$14). The dish arrives at the table with the tomatoes arranged on a delicately flaky crust, a large shaving of parmesan on top. The tomatoes have been cooked just enough to distill their flavor while retaining their shape. Basil juice lends a subtle spiciness to the whole.

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A special for the day was a Terrine de Cochon du Lait (\$14), a preview of the suckling pig that appears among the main courses. It was succulent and tasty, the sweet pork offset by a vinaigrette laced with hardboiled egg.

As a main course, Suckling Pig (\$24) receives simple treatment, being roasted and served with sautéed spinach and basil. This restraint governs the offerings at Maison Blanche. Halibut (\$30) is roasted, as is Red Snapper (\$32), although this receives more exotic treatment, being wrapped in a magnolia leaf.

Beef Cheek (\$28) was braised so that it fell apart, the long, slow cooking intensifying its flavor, which was accented by the red wine of the braising liquid. The result was a deeply satisfying dish.

A special that evening was what the waiter termed a Poultry Pie (\$31), which suggested perhaps a refined version of chicken pot pie. Not quite! The pie part came out as a vol-au-vent, light as air, and buttery and flaky, while the poultry turned out to consist mostly of liver, a strong contrast to the delicate crust and rather unexpected.

Desserts complete the meal with the same quality. A substitute for the evening was a Pear Clafoutis (\$11). Clafoutis, a custard, is usually a rustic affair. I've had it with unpitted cherries, but this version refined it, with a smooth, velvety custard, raspberry ice cream as an accompaniment, and an almond cookie perched jauntily on the side. A Moelleux au Chocolat (\$12) resembled a lava cake and had a deep, rich flavor of high-quality chocolate.

Service at Maison Blanche is professional and unobtrusive. There is a very good wine list focusing mainly on French and American wines, but it is pricey, with almost no choices under \$40.

The Maison Blanche Dining Room



designed by award winning architect, Franck Hammoutene