BY PETER LILIENTHAL

Sea Change

Restaurant Rater 94

806 S. 2nd St., Mpls., 612-225-6499, seachangempls.com

CRAIG BARES

[THE SCENE]

Shea, the local design firm cast with making over the former Cue, was trapped with the restaurant's cavernous shell. Nonetheless, Shea has transformed the interior into a pleasant dining grotto that's reflective of the new seafood theme. Highlights include a green color scheme punctuating the kitchen's commitment to sustainable aquaculture, reclaimed storm-felled redwood incorporated into furniture, coral frond–shaped lamps, and wavy dividers that convert the cavernous interior into small tidal pools of large, solid tables and comfortable banquettes. There's also an inviting raw bar and other high-top seating perfect for a light pre-theater meal. The pre-theater crowds are well dressed and watching the clock. Once they head off, the room is washed with a more convivial vibe.

[OUR TAKE]

With four successful restaurant concepts and a James Beard award in his creel, one wonders what bait it took to lure Tim McKee into taking over the bones of the whopper of a flop that was Cue. Nonetheless, the sustainable seafood concept he has fleshed out is a trophy catch. The menu, conceived and executed with French Laundry alum and chef de cuisine Erik Anderson, showcases what I believe to be the hallmarks of a compelling contemporary restaurant: lots of small-plate choices, moderate pricing, an emphasis on fresh and organic (there's a daily fresh board), and a range of both mainstream and whimsical fare. There are numerous dishes I will rush back for: spot prawns paired with avocado, chili, and orange arranged with their crunchy, deep-fried heads; melting clam croquettes served with a tangy piri-piri sauce; a trio of butter-tender large sautéed sea scallops arranged with sweet corn, chorizo, and jalapeño; and a smoky duck breast bedded on lentils and livened with cherries and burnt orange (one of several "not fish" options on the menu). Dishes I'd throw back include a rather strongly fishy striped sea bass served with oxtail and dashi broth, a middling bouillabaisse, and watery Bristol Bay king crab. Desserts created by pastry chef Niki Francioli include a great cherry soup and hazelnut semifreddo served with a high-tech Earl Grey tea foam. The service is as professional and competent as any around, but I imagine they're wincing at having to ask tables whether they'd like a "complimentary bottle of flat water."

Albacore tuna with watermelon, jalapeño, and mint.

[SUSTAINING SUSTAINABLE]

While the growing movement toward "slow," "sustainable," "green," and "organic" is to be applauded, my fear is that when it comes to seafood, it causes an undesirable dimension of diner anxiety. Is it OK this week to eat raw tuna? What kind of sea bass is it that's overharvested? What kind of fish am I to avoid if it hasn't been line-caught? Which "farm-raised" items are healthy and which aren't? Sea Change is trying to answer some of those questions in what it offers, but sustainable doesn't mean local fin fare here; the bulk of the menu is procured in distant oceans and air-freighted in. ▲

3 GREAT PLATES

1. **Albacore.** Slices of impeccable raw tuna are topped with mint, jalapeño, fleur de sel, and compressed watermelon. A bit pricey, but it's wonderful.
2. **Grilled Octopus.** This terrific starter will forever change any reservations you have about this oft-maligned mollusk. The meat is firm and accented by a great char. The accompanying salsa verde and Spanish peppers provide a perfect sweet-spicy counterpoint.
3. **Prosciutto-Crusted Sturgeon.** This delicious fish is rarely seen on menus. The fillet is expertly cooked to a medium doneness with a crust of crisp Italian bacon and sided with shell peas, beans, choke chips, rock shrimp, and a hint of truffle oil.

FINE PRINT

GETTING THERE, GETTING IN: Metered (until 10 PM) parking available on streets and numerous public lots, including a skyway-connected ramp. Reservations highly recommended, particularly pre-curtain at the Guthrie.

HOURS: Lunch Tu–Su 11:30 AM (11 AM on matinee dates)–2 PM; dinner M–Th 5–10 PM, F–Sa 5–11 PM, Su 5–9 PM.

NOISE LEVEL: Low to moderate

KIDS: No special menu; probably a poor fit.

CARDS: Amex, Diners, MC, Visa

ENTRÉE PRICES: $18–$26

EXTRAS: Plans are to offer a three-course, prix-fixe pre-theater meal. There's also a late-night menu.

ACCESSIBLE