

Judges' Table

A tough critic hits the town's newest spots and can't get enough.

It's quiet when I walk into **Sea Change** on a Saturday evening. Every table and every seat is full, but people are taking in each word on their menus, whispering about food, admiring plates. Camera flashes go off. The vibe is one of concentrated study. This is serious food, and you are meant to take it seriously.

Is Sea Change more intimate than Cue, its farm-focused predecessor? The room is sleeker in dark blacks and greens than it was in blue, and the décor on the tables is hipper, but there's not much you can do about the soaring space with mammoth portraits of theater greats staring down. It reeks of Terry Gilliam's *Brazil* or the Nike 1984 ads, but the experience is not half as jarring as it used to be.

Sustainable seafood (whatever that means), executed in a contemporary style with thought-out Asian and

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Mediterranean exclamation points, is a major-league addition to the local dining scene. I started with Indian Creek oysters with roasted jalapeño vinaigrette. The selection of oysters is modest—there are very few East Coast varieties and no Gulf—but the quality is high and the offerings smart. Achingly fresh and sweet scallop crudo came with cucumber, lime, and chili; thinly sliced fresh albacore was offset by rectangles of pressed watermelon; lightly pickled Spanish mackerel crowned with fried shallots was insanely good; and maybe the best bite of the night was the raw silky spot prawns. They were skewered and

soused with soy and sesame, and laid across shards of ripe avocado and tuna. Five dishes, perfectly executed.

The kitchen sent over an oversized treat as I was waiting for my entrée: peanut butter, banana, bacon, and foie gras turned into a mound of dense edible snow. It was a brilliant construction, and the dish was one of the richest and most sinful things I have eaten in a while. A small version of this would make a killer amuse or first course in a degustation menu. I finished with a crispy striped bass with braised oxtail that succeeded in ways it doesn't in most eateries where the beef braising liquid is reduced too much and fights the fish. The roasted eggplant worked miracles, pulling the miso and potato elements into focus as well. Wow.

Want something a little more rock 'n' roll? Slide down to the old Babalú space and check out **Bar La Grassa**. Barring some inexplicable meltdown, this Isaac Becker-Josh Thoma creation will be the smash hit that 112 Eatery was—and still is. Gone is the labyrinth of rooms; in its place is a stylish, warmly lit, simple dining room bracketed by a tight, comfy bar and a dine-at-the-kitchen counter that allows patrons the opportunity to interact with the chefs and see the food leaving the kitchen.

Chef Eric Sather's talents with salumi and charcuterie are impressive, and the *mortadella*, *porchetta*, head cheese, and marbled *polpettone* of chicken and foie were stellar. They were so good, in fact, that I was shocked to see a handful of Fra' Mani products on the antipasti menu. Sather is good and should do everything in-house. Pastas were superb and available in two sizes for every budget and appetite. I scarfed down the decadent and buttery *bucatini bolognese* dressed with a curl of *ricotta salata*, inhaled



the fresh pappardelle with perfectly braised veal and tomatoes, and couldn't stop noshing on the grilled veal and pork sausages, which were beautifully balanced and not fatty.

All the food is simple and unadorned in the great rustic Italian style. Becker's famous escarole with anchovy shows up as *bagna cauda*—bathed caramelized cauliflower with spinach. This dish alone is worth the trip, as are many of the bruschetta, but one dish stands above the others. Becker's swaddled soft egg and sautéed lobster truffle-lemon-butter mélange spooned over toast is as killer a signature dish as I have seen cooked in town over the last two years.

The economic climate is daunting, but these successes prove the genie can be coaxed out of the bottle. ▲



Not Enough Zimmern?

AZ dishes on restaurants, chefs, and all things food on his blog *Chow & Again* at mspmag.com/chowandagain.