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East End Eats

Gulf Coast Kitchen Goes Local

By Laura Donnelly

(04/29/2010) The first time I visited the Montauk Yacht Club was about 10 years ago. It was for one of those marvelously glossy magazines that pop up here in the summertime offering “fast reading for the slow thinking,” i.e., lots of color pictures of attractive youngsters in neon and pastel summer uniforms.



Morgan McGivern

Wicker armchairs and a water view enhance the dining experience at the Gulf Coast Kitchen.

The yacht club had been renovated and had added the obligatory spa, but still looked a little long in the tooth, frayed, and, dare I say, a bit unsanitary.

I returned last summer to check out the Gulf Coast Kitchen. My companion was a Long Island chef who has great respect for our local fishermen, farmers, and those who turn our grapes into something nice to drink. We ate snacks at the bar and wondered to ourselves why a place would serve shrimp and crab bits from the South when we are surrounded by boats bringing in the freshest

tuna, cod, stripers, fluke, and so on. We snuck away to the West Lake Clam and Chowder House for the meal we had hoped for.

Things have changed at the Montauk Yacht Club and Gulf Coast Kitchen and it is sooo much for the better. The place is massively huge. There is the Gulf Coast Kitchen by Robbin Haas, Hurricane Alley, the Barracuda Bar, and the Turtle Lounge. Each area has been spruced up beautifully.

The general theme is nautical blues and whites with great old photographs, postcards, maps, sails, driftwood, candles, hurricane lanterns, and comfortable wicker armchairs. Water views all around. Think Ralph Lauren channeling Carl Fisher.

Upon being seated you get some warm, freshly baked loaves of slightly sweet bread and butter. We began our meal with two kinds of chowder, tuna tartare, beet salad, and griddled calamari. Both chowders were very good. The white was nice and briny, with plenty of clams, and both chowders were topped with freshly steamed Little Necks.

The tuna tartare was excellent and beautifully presented. A little mound of coarsely chopped tuna seasoned with ginger and soy was accompanied by two beautiful tuiles speckled with black sesame seeds. There was a dainty portion of wakame seaweed salad and a bowl of additional soy sauce with a lima bean-size ball of wasabi perched on the edge of the bowl. It was cute as a button. The tuiles were slightly sweet, which was a nice contrast to the rich and salty tuna.

The beet salad was also great, partly because the beets were roasted, not boiled. They were served in a row of little wedges with a dollop of Coach Farm goat cheese and an arugula salad on the side of the long, rectangular plate. Their flavor was super-sweet and concentrated from the roasting.

Best of all, however, was the griddled calamari. Nicely seared but still tender, they were served in a superb citrusy broth with toasted garlic, capers, and oregano. We passed the plate around and sopped up the juices with bread.

For entrees we tried the roasted lemon-crust cod, seared diver scallops, sautéed Montauk fluke, and another appetizer, the Acorn Hill goat cheese gnocchi.

The cod was perfectly cooked, with a delicious crunchy coating. The accompanying English pea sauce was a combination of mashed and whole peas, tasting very fresh and sweet and springy green.

The seared diver scallops were also cooked just right, barely opaque in the middle with good caramelized exteriors. The pea shoot salad, a pretty tangle of tiny vines, was a nice delicate garnish. They were served warm rather than piping hot, but that was the only flaw of the dish.

The sautéed Montauk fluke was also handled with great care. A thin, lean piece of fish like fluke is usually done before you've even thought about flipping it over. It was served with a rich browned-butter sauce and toasted hazelnuts on top of barely wilted, super-lemony spinach leaves.

The goat cheese gnocchi were also very good. They were delicate and fluffy and the broth was light and full of basil flavor.

The service at Gulf Coast Kitchen was excellent on the night we went. The menu had just been changed that day and our waitress had just moved from California two weeks before. Nonetheless, she knew her way around the menu and had recommendations to offer.

There was a raucous party nearby for a local restaurateur, a First Communion celebration at another table, and a few families scattered around the room, so they were quite busy that night. It was handled smoothly and professionally.

The wine list is fairly short and reasonable, as is the dinner menu. There are plenty of bottles priced in the \$20s, and most are in the \$30 to \$40 range. The spring menu at Gulf Coast Kitchen is also fairly concentrated, eight appetizers, four salads, and eight entrees.

Prices are \$9 to \$22 for appetizers, \$8 to \$15 for salads, \$18 to \$44 for entrees, and \$6 to \$10 for desserts. The portions were not large, but we all agreed that they were fairly priced for what they were.

For desserts we ordered the warm apple tarte Tatin, Key lime pie, and a variety of sorbets, blueberry, green apple, and pineapple. The desserts are made in-house and were fairly good. The tarte Tatin had a nice puff pastry layer and the apples were nicely caramelized.

The Key lime pie had a good filling flecked with lime zest, but the crust was most assuredly not made in-house. The sorbets were lovely, especially the blueberry and pineapple.

After dinner we wandered around. One young man jumped out from behind the front desk to show us a beautiful room that still shows the splendor of its 1920s heyday. We congratulated the little girl on her First Communion celebration. "How could you tell?" she deadpanned in her frilly white and lacy finery. One of our dinner guests happily exclaimed that she would love to have her next big birthday bash here.

It looks like the Montauk Yacht Club has got it right this time. They've got a fancy spa where you can get "the Hampton" treatment and an organic Hungarian Paprika Peel. Turn the corner and you'll see a great old sepia-tone photograph of some smiling Tumas with their catch.

The Gulf Coast Kitchen has kept the Southern-themed name but now smartly focuses on the splendid fish caught right outside its beautiful windows.

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Gulf Coast Kitchen
Montauk Yacht Club
32 Star Island Road
Montauk
668-3100
Dinner daily except Tuesday