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Raw bar at the Oyster House

East Meets West

The new Oyster House puts a California spin on a Philly tradition **By Joy Manning**

In the early '90s, when Sam Mink spent his days off from high school shucking oysters at Sansom Street Oyster House, his father's restaurant, he contemplated alternative careers. By the time he finished college, he was ready to move to San Francisco, where he got a job teaching second grade. But over the years, a funny thing happened. He couldn't get the family business out of his mind. Eventually, after five years in the classroom, Mink left teaching to attend culinary school, then went on to work at San Fran's famous Zuni Café. "I always knew Philadelphia would come calling. I knew I would come back home," says Mink. Oysters were in his blood.

When he moved back to town in 2006, Sansom Street Oyster House wasn't Mink family-owned for the first time in decades. David Mink, Sam's dad, sold it in 2000. Afterward, the restaurant's reputation declined, and rumors swirled that the business wouldn't survive. Sam Mink bided his time and gathered experience, working at Amada and Distrito, hoping he'd get the chance to bring the property back under family ownership. While he waited, he clarified his vision for the Oyster House: "I knew I wanted to expand the restaurant, raise the ceiling, open the place up." Food-wise, he would adhere to the restaurant's venerated traditions—snapper soup, fried oysters with chicken salad—but update them with fresher, lighter California techniques.

Following a serendipitous sale that made Mink the owner, and then a year-long renovation, the new Oyster House is just as he envisioned it. The ceilings now soar, festooned with modern industrial light fixtures and exposed ducts. Whitewashed bricks, glossy subway tile and marble bars give the dining room a clean, expansive feel. The walls are decked with the family's collection of colorful ceramic oyster plates, a considered detail that lends a real personality palpably differ-



Fisherman's stew

ent from the contrived corporate identities of so many other eateries this size.

The heart of the menu, the oyster list, changes every day. It usually features five to seven varieties, with options from both coasts. Mink thought about confining the list to East Coast specimens, but his love of the Westerners, like the tiny, succulent, cucumber-scented Kumamoto, mandated that both regions be represented. Servers offer spot-on descriptions and guide newbies through the oyster-ordering process. During one visit, I fell head over heels in love with the Wellfleet from Cape Cod. My only disappointment at the raw bar was inconsistent shucking that left some oysters sullied with bits of shell and grit, especially during busy times.

The rest of the menu, devised by Mink and executive chef Greg Ling, sticks to the classics of the fish-house genre, but modernized recipes abound. Longtime loyalists will find their snapper soup has been made over. Gone are the flour and cornstarch, ingredients that gave the old version all the finesse of wallpaper paste. The new version is full of surprisingly beef-like turtle meat and aromatic carrots, celery and onion, with a light tomato-y top note and warm currents of allspice. The New England clam chowder has undergone a similar lightening-up; its texture is now more brothy than thick, allowing the fresh clam flavor to shine. Mink compares the fisherman's stew to French bouillabaisse, but it reminded me more of San Francisco's cioppino. The inspiration hardly matters, though, in a bowl of stew so delicious: head-on shrimp, mussels, scallops, calamari and bass in an oceanic broth boldly spiced with cayenne and fragrant with Pernod.

Some dishes are reaches for the genre, exhibiting



Summer berry shortbread

Oyster House

1516 Sansom Street,
215-567-7683,
oysterhousephilly.com

FOOD: B+
SERVICE: B+
VIBE: A

Average Entrée Price: \$22.50.
Food: Updated fish-house classics.
Wine: A small, value-driven list of food-friendly wines.
Get: The potent, sweet-sour Oyster House punch.

the ambition usually reserved for white-tablecloth places. Striped bass served with chanterelle mushrooms, corn, asparagus and tomato vinaigrette seemed unnecessarily fussy, and its flavors didn't harmonize as well as those in many pared-down options, like the lobster roll. A side of roasted beets with skordalia, a creamy potato-based sauce, was poorly executed, with undercooked beets and a lack of salt. The burger, an obligatory non-fish menu item, was also inadequately seasoned.

But who orders a burger at a fish house, anyway? If you let common sense be your guide, you'll be treated to well-executed dishes that have become classics for a reason.



Even with the minor missteps and disappointments, the unmistakable flavors of quality ingredients dominate the meal. And though Mink says some old-timers miss the starchy soups, most diners will welcome his subtle tweaks, his left-coast embellishments to these East Coast standards. It's a formula that should keep oyster addicts happy and the Mink family in business for another 60 years.

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Beer, Brats and Barmaids

Brauhaus Schmitz brings Bavaria back to town



Spaetzle, red cabbage and potatoes

Order a pint at one of Philly's gastropubs, and you're likely to experience a blast of flavors, including spices, fruits, even coffee. It's a far cry from Germany's *Reinheitsgebot*, the beer purity law drafted in 1516 stipulating that beer could contain only water, barley and hops. The long-repealed law is posted prominently near the bar at Brauhaus Schmitz, the new beer hall on South Street. Co-owner Doug Hager is trying to keep the tradition of simplicity alive.

Hager, born in Germany, tapped into his passion for the beers of his home country working at Ludwig's Garten. After Ludwig's closed, he immediately saw opportunity in the void. "I had to scour the city to find a place with more than two German drafts," says Hager. The long, high-ceilinged, oak-clad room (complete with buxom, dirndl-wearing barmaids) looks like something out of the Munich tourism catalog. With a 20-item draft beer list that

changes constantly, Brauhaus Schmitz is a classroom for aficionados.

You might expect the food to be an afterthought at such a beer-centric joint, but thanks to chef Jeremy Nolen, who has worked in Central Pennsylvania's authentic German clubs, it holds up to the drink. The cuisine is stick-to-your ribs, homey and rustic, but immensely satisfying, in spite of the sometimes-dry schnitzel and the pasty potato dumplings. Start with the airy house-baked pretzel, or a plate of roll mops—tart pickled herring served with onion, sour cream and rye bread. Most of the wursts are from German butcher Reikers, and they're all good, but the house-made bratwurst, a mouth-watering mix of pork shoulder and spices, rises above the rest. The Schweinshaxe, a rotisserie-cooked pork shank speckled with pieces of crackling, and the surprisingly light spaetzle are just two of the highlights on the still-growing menu of classics.

The food and beer here are as good as at any gastropub, but the taste of German culture puts Brauhaus Schmitz in its own category of bar. The South Street location repels hipsters while drawing in tourists and the beer-clueless, which leads to a convivial, democratic vibe. Though service can be painfully slow, the informed staffers can easily match a big-brand beer drinker with the right German style of brew, many still made from only water, barley and hops. —J.M.

BRAUHAUS SCHMITZ

718 South Street, 267-909-8814, brauhauschmitz.com

FOOD: B+ SERVICE: B- VIBE: B+

Average Entrée Price: \$17. **Food:** German. **Get:** A Twitter account, and follow @BrauhausSchmitz for updates on just-tapped kegs.