

# Sitting on the edge of greatness

Pacific's Edge leans toward casual but Chef Mark Ayers nails the flavors

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Pacific's Edge Chef Mark Ayers launched a more accessible menu in May,... (SPECIAL TO THE HERALD)

Unfussy, approachable, value-priced — all buzz words in the restaurant realm as a discerning dining public tries to make ends meet. But when Pacific's Edge at Highlands Inn, arguably one of the top fine-dining restaurants on the Central Coast, announced in May that it would become a "new neighborhood favorite dining spot" and serve more accessible cuisine, local foodies stopped in mid-chew to emit an audible gasp.

Nestled high on a perch in the Carmel Highlands and boasting breathtaking views of the ocean below, Pacific's Edge — once named one of the nation's "Top 20 restaurants" by Wine Spectator magazine, and the former home to the international epicurean wonder Masters of Food & Wine — was always a destination restaurant, coveted for anniversaries and special occasions.

Over the last few years, however, a growing trend toward more casual, uncomplicated dining took hold, and fine-dining restaurants everywhere wanted to attract guests on a more frequent basis.

As part of the overall plan to cut costs, the Hyatt-owned hotel closed the adjacent, less-expensive California Market for dinner (it's now breakfast and lunch only), forcing menu modifications at Pacific's Edge (formerly California-French contemporary cuisine) to better cater to a cost-conscious, bistro-loving public.

"I admit I was a little apprehensive," said Executive Chef Mark Ayers, who led the way in creating a seasonally focused, comfort food menu with a "sophisticated approach."

"So far it's been well-received."

A modified, four-item tasting menu is priced at \$65 (\$105 with wine pairings), and standard menu items feature a few Pacific's Edge standards (seared "day boat" scallops; sweet corn soup; braised short ribs), some California Market-style offerings (roasted pork chop; Point Reyes blue cheese salad) and some inventive fare from the creative mind of Ayers, who graduated top of his class in 1992 from the Culinary Institute of America.

## SHE SAID

The jaw-dropping panorama from the dining room at Pacific's Edge is something no one should miss. We arrive early for a drink and sit with our backs to the bar to take it all in at sunset. I'm thinking this is what it's like to stow away in a crow's nest. (From the bar menu, we enjoy a half dozen raw oysters (\$15) and three perfect deviled egg halves served with toast points atop frilly frisee — \$7.)

What feels different now is the relaxed vibe. Make no mistake, though, you'll pay for that destination experience. Understand you're not simply paying \$42 for short ribs; you're paying for a brief vacation that feels a little like a spiritual awakening. You'll also have expert service, and we're in the very best of hands with Amy and David, who know the menu intimately and don't miss a detail. We entertain the tasting menu (full table participation required), but opt for eclectic selections from the regular menu.

The delicate leaves of warm baby brussels sprouts are tossed with red grapes, bacon and thin squares of dry ricotta in an apple-bacon vinaigrette. It's possible to get the perfect bite of sweet, salt and smoke, with the added crunch of toasted sunflower seeds (\$12). Red abalone (sustainably farmed in Monterey Bay) steaks are amazing tidbits that turn this neophyte into a believer in one tender bite. Ayers applies a simple, gentle dusting of Wondra flour before searing. Resting in a small abalone shell is a tiny flan infused with the barest hint of garlic, and a squiggle of Meyer lemon coulis that runs down the center of the plate (\$20).

As the lid is lifted from a bowl of white corn soup, a steamy fragrance takes me back to my family's backyard barbecues. This satiny puree is naturally sweet and tastes just off the cob (although it's not quite hot enough). A curlicue of green chive oil floats on top (\$8).

Illy coffee in a French press comes with a small pitcher of steamed milk — such a nice touch. And by all means, indulge in something from the dreamy repertoire of pastry chef George Fritzsche, one of only 15 American members of the elite Le Cercle des Chefs.

This is still a splurge spot for me, and it's hard to recall a more memorable experience. Maybe next time it'll just be champagne, the view and those deviled eggs in the bar.

## HE SAID

Pacific's Edge has always pushed its food and service to heights that match its vista, instead of hoping a breaching whale or soaring hawk will hypnotize guests into overlooking obvious flaws.

It's no different now. The food is more accessible, sure, but it's not dumbed down, and if someone's taking shortcuts it's certainly not apparent. Ayers' flavors are spot on, and the technique and precision show in the plates.

Consider the olive oil poached salmon (\$32) atop a leek "fondue" (the onion's second cousin sautéed and slowly concentrated in cream until tender and silky), along with fingerling potatoes, and a tomato relish of heirloom cherry tomato halves and briny capers. There's a lot going on here, but all the flavors play nice — the fatty salmon lifted by bright flavors, including a reduced vinegar gastrique dotting the plate.

The salmon, farmed in open-ocean pens off Tasmania, is not sustainable, but research shows it comes close. I do know it's delicious, the squared fillet poached in an oil bath at just under the boiling point. Amazingly, it's not greasy or flabby, the flesh peeling off in moist, pink layers (almost ruby in the center).

The old Pacific's Edge had me sweating in a sport coat and sweating the check after two tasting menus. Now diners are free to order smaller and gentler. My choice would be the scallops, two medium beauties perfectly seared, just opaque in the center, and served atop a creamy corn "pudding" with some grilled Big Sur chanterelles to lend earthiness. The sweetness is muted by an acidic, microgreen salad nestled on top. Perfect, and nicely priced at \$16.

There were a few missteps, albeit minor. The olive and onion tart (\$15) comes off as mundane (and served off-puttingly cold), while the accompanying arugula salad is underseasoned. We balk at a menu special described as "Monterey Bay bluefin." Though there's an effort toward sustainability with this local, line-caught tuna, it's still a no-no on the Seafood Watch list. Also, during service a thumping bass from a downstairs wedding reception tries to shatter my zen.

But getting back to center is easy. Another sip. Another bite. Another look at that view. Ahhhhh.

Mike Hale and Melissa Snyder approach their reviews from a couple's perspective. All visits are made anonymously. Comment at [tablefortwo@sbcglobal.net](mailto:tablefortwo@sbcglobal.net).GO!