

October 30, 2011

## Red Lobster: Feast on This

I'm a bit of a seafood snob.

I usually like to prepare it myself, finding that few people can achieve the proper flavour and texture that elevates the cuisine from ordinary to orgasmic. Instead, I've come across too many seafood blunders, including overcooking, overseasoning or – gasp – overthinking the dish. Tsk tsk.

And so I tend to order *fruits de mer* strictly from Michelin-starred restaurants, where paying \$42.50 for an entrée is a surefire way to ascertain the food will arrive perfectly poached, pan-seared or Provençal.

I warned you. (Don't worry, I can hardly stand myself.)

But for all my airs and expectations, I have a little secret... when it comes to enjoying seafood that is tasty, affordable and available without jetting off to London, I really, really love **Red Lobster**.

My first real date was at Red Lobster; my boyfriend at the time (it's totally a high school romance when your "boyfriend" takes you on a first date after he's your boyfriend) surprised me with a fine lobster dinner for my 17th birthday. At the time, I thought it was the most delicious meal I'd ever had in my entire life. And over the years, I popped in and out of Red Lobster, always for the mixed bag of seafood, and usually when there was an endless shrimp promo :)

But somewhere along the way, I lost touch with the brand and it had been many years since I indulged in their varied menu of surf and turf. So when contacted by Red Lobster to check out one of their new, redesigned restaurants, I figured it was time to decide once and for all if my palette – which had changed drastically since I was 17 – could indeed find room for a Red Lobster recommendation.

(For those wondering, the redesigned restaurants are inspired by Bar Harbor, Maine. "Red Lobster's new design creates a warm, inviting seaside atmosphere. Nearly 700 restaurants across North America will be remodeled by 2014. Our redesign builds on the many improvements made inside the restaurant over the last several years — from the debut of an award-winning Today's Fresh Fish Menu to bringing guests more delicious items prepared on our signature Wood-Fire Grill." [Click here](#) for more info.)

My husband and I arrived at the Mississauga, Ontario Red Lobster and were instantly aware that the restaurant had indeed received a facelift since the last time I had been there. Although this particular location had not been decked out with the stone facing, the changes to the interior and exterior of the restaurant nevertheless alluded to Bar Harbor's finest.





Want to know how to ensure exemplary customer service? Put your manager's name on the outside of your restaurant. Then, you know, work your a\*\* off to be hospitable, warm and friendly (more about the Incredible Mr. Saunders later).

Once in the foyer, I was a little taken aback; there was a lineup of about 25 guests at 7:15pm, all casually hanging out in the lobby and bar (Red Lobster does not take reservations). I was instantly on guard; I normally do not like to wait – especially when I can count 25 diners who'd be noshing on crab legs before me – but in the spirit of rekindling my relationship with the seafood giant, we took a seat at the bar and prepared to sit it out.



Thinking that a delicious appetizer would make the time go by quicker, hubby and I decided to share a seaside starter: Pan-Seared Crab Cakes. The crab cakes had a delicate texture and lump crab meat was plainly visible throughout, lending a sweetness that was countered by a spicy, tangy remoulade sauce. I must pay homage to just the right crunch thanks to finely chopped celery and onion. And while I'm not certain I would order them again – having been duly spoiled by too many luscious crab cakes on my jaunts to San Francisco – when it comes down to it, I did enjoy every bite (as noted by the evidence, below).





Want to try them at home? Red Lobster shares [recipes and tips](#) via their website, which is truly an extraordinarily nice touch. You can find the recipe for Maryland Crab Cakes [here](#). At 7:45pm, we overheard that the wait for a table was approximately 45 minutes. No one seemed to be leaving; instead they firmly planted their feet in line. Enjoying my crab cakes, I befriended Janet, another dining-hopeful who was casually sipping on beer while keeping an eye on her pager. "Do you come here often?" I asked.

"Oh yes," she replied. "The food is always fresh and delicious, and I don't mind the wait because the turnaround time once you get to the table is very quick," she reasoned. "I've been coming to this location for about 5 years, and I'm always satisfied."

"So what are you doing tonight?" I pressed. "Is it a special occasion?"

"Oh no. We're just going to see a movie – that new Brad Pitt movie? – and we're catching dinner before the show."

I must admit this surprised me; perhaps it's because I've always associated the restaurant – and lobster in general – with special occasions. It seemed strange to me that the cuisine would be deemed appropriate for pre-movie munchies.

So I took a look around, and realized that for the most part, diners were 1) dressed casually, 2) with their families and 3) all happy and relaxed. And it was instantly apparent that the restaurant had become part of the community.

Nicely done, Red Lobster.

The time is 7:55pm. There are 36 people waiting for a table.



Success! Our names were called and we were guided to our booth. Within moments of seeing the menu, I knew I wanted the Fire-Grilled Lobster, Shrimp and Scallops - "A split Maritime lobster tail and skewered Jumbo shrimp and sea scallops with a savoury garlic finish, served over rice. \$28.50"



Since we were also allowed to choose two sides, I opted for mashed potatoes and a Caesar salad – two things I rarely (if ever) have, and therefore as good a choice as any. (Funny fact – my husband ordered the exact same meal, substituting a Caesar for garden salad. We never do that.)

In case you're not keeping count, let me add it up for you: lobster tail, shrimps, scallops, rice, mashed potatoes and salad... for \$28.50. All of a sudden, the 36 people in line makes sense.

Did I mention that their famous, hot, delicious, cheesy-garlic biscuits were dropped by our table within moments? It was all I could do not to fill up on bread. Mmmm... sorry, Atkins-enthusiasts. When our salads arrived next, I picked at mine in an attempt to save room for the seafood bounty that was surely on its way. For the most part, the salad was very good – dressed properly, with the right amount of creamy-to-crunch ratio. I actually had to push it to the side to keep from eating it.



And finally... the feast. Overflowing with lobster, shrimp and scallops, my mouth watered as I took in the splendid fare. A delicious, smoky essence wafting up from the seafood – it was all I could do not to attack the plate.



The smoky essence I'm referring to, of course, is courtesy of the oak wood fire grill. To achieve the perfect balance of flavors, Red Lobster uses oak logs in its newly retrofitted wood-fire assisted grills. "Fresh fish and shellfish are delicious in their purest forms, and wood-fire grilling really enhances those natural flavors without overpowering them," said Red Lobster Senior Executive Chef LaDuke. "The result is a simplistic, lighter dish that emphasizes the natural appeal of delicious, heart-healthy seafood." ([Click here](#) for more on the Art of Wood-Fire Grilling.)

I speared a scallop and was relieved to find out that it was cooked perfectly, sweet, juicy and enticingly flavourful. The lobster and shrimp mirrored the faint smoky flavour and were also just the right texture for this seafood snob. In fact, the entire meal was just so wonderfully complementary that I could honestly not remember the last time I "mmm'd" so much.

**I HAD TO KNOWV: how did they do such an amazing job with cooking the seafood to perfection?**

Turns out the Certified Grill Master, Chris Walsh, had recently won a Canada-wide grilling competition, earning him accolades and respect galore. In fact, each restaurant across North America has four to five Certified Grill Masters – the only crew members who are allowed to cook on the open fire. So I guess you could say they take their technique seriously, which is music to my ears.

We followed up with two "small" desserts -



I know, terribly indulgent, but delicious nonetheless. After the meal I honestly felt like a cat who had been stroked for hours – completely satiated and drowsy with euphoria. Do I really need to conclude with a note on how it was truly an amazing experience? It was beyond, friends. However, I will conclude with a note on the General Manager, Richard Saunders -

Richard is likely one of the hardest working, most likable human beings I've ever met. During our entire meal, I witnessed him buzzing around – circulating the dining room, talking to diners, conferring with staff, setting up tables, etc etc. In fact, he epitomizes what it means to love what you do, and he constantly creates an "experience" for those around him. During both of our brief conversations, he was called away to accept kind words of gratitude from other diners who had a similarly thrilling dining experience. If you live in the Greater Toronto Area, I welcome you to make the trip to the Mississauga Red Lobster and dine among friends.



And, if it's been some time since you visited your local Red Lobster, rekindle your relationship soon. I'm really hoping that you'll be won over, too.

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