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SAN DIEGO[®]

25 Happy Hours

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Saltbox

Sharing plates at Hotel Palomar's new restaurant is like a gastro-tour from the Big Easy to the California coast

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FROM THE DARK LEATHER CHAIRS TO the contempo modular tables and golden relief map of San Diego's bayfront, nary a thing has changed in the dining room. But the décor was never the problem at Suite & Tender. If anything, it was the defunct resto's most alluring attribute. Thankfully at Saltbox, the new eatery installed in the second floor of Downtown's Palomar Hotel, the food is as notable as the space.

An initial scan of the menu turned up straightforward, seasonally-driven fare at prices lower than anything I'd spied beneath the space's dim lighting in the past.

Ready to exercise some spirits, I selected from a list of cocktails devised by house mixologist Erin Williams. A recent

transplant from NYC, Williams honed her skills at the famed Pegu Club under spirit channeler Audrey Saunders. That pedigree glows as brightly as her neon-red Off the Beet'en Path, a saffron gin-based tippie delivering a citrusy zing that gives way to floral notes and a grapefruit-like finish. It may have looked like Kool-Aid, but was in no way sugary and exhibited exquisite balance. So, too, did my favorite of the bunch, Mental Ward. Composed of rye, lime juice, and pomegranate molasses, it delivered the familiar flavors of a whiskey sour without the alcohol burn.

With an open and freshly lubricated mind, I turned my attention to a collection of composed bar snacks like warm Castelvetrano olives, a dish called Crazy Pickles featuring an array of tart pickled



Bay scallop ceviche



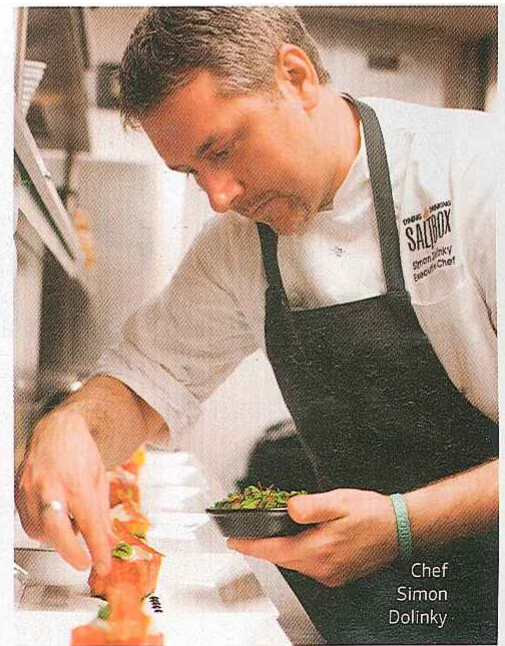
vegetables and quail eggs that'll make you forever forget dive-bar jugs full of fluorescent-pink ova, and miniature corn dogs stuffed with housemade shellfish sausage. All were enjoyable with the exception of some pickled bay shrimp that were more mealy than crazy.

The best of the small bites bunch were something I never expected in such a posh setting—tacos. In a gourmet take on this street food standout, chef Simon Dolinsky fills crispy housemade corn tortillas with heaps of either tangy shrimp ceviche and mango salsa or fall-apart tender ginger and soy stewed beef cheek with bright kimchi.

More low-and-slow lusciousness comes courtesy of Dolinsky's oxtail jam (move over, bone marrow). Cooked down with a sweet port wine gastrique, it's perfect for



Roasted sprout salad



Chef Simon Dolinsky

smearing onto molasses-bread toast-points. Short ribs beefing up a grilled manchego cheese sandwich were seasoned well, but undercooked. Thankfully, a zesty Creole sauce piquante and bread and butter pickles made this offering too tasty to be undone by a little chew.

Chef Dolinsky brings more than a decade of experience to Saltbox gained at other Kimpton Hotel properties in New Orleans, L.A., and Downtown's Hotel Solamar, where he served as a sous to Jsix's Christian Graves, a golden boy in the local slow food community. Dolinsky's Big Easy style comes through in all his slow-cooked meats, but he also embraces SoCal styles with citrus-cured shellfish offerings. Across the board, his dishes are approachable and built for a more casual, family-style experience than the fancy dining room implies.

On the lighter side of the menu, there are six salads, only two of which use lettuce as a base. Bitter grilled kale replaces boring romaine in a pecorino-spiked take on a Caesar served with a filet of white anchovy, while Brussels sprouts leaves match up with coriander dressing and cylinders of pear sprinkled with beet powder.

In a selection of seafood offerings, Baja bay scallops marinated in chile-laced tangerine juice are layered with heirloom tomato pico de gallo, cucumber, avocado purée, and an icy jalapeño granita. Sweet, sour, earthy, and salty, all of the flavor components enjoyed at once are delicious. The only shortcoming is the chilly temperature and crunch of the granita, which works against the rest of the ingredients. More

harmonious, the pot of plump mussels swimming in spicy *cioppino* broth is served with house-baked sourdough that's low on fermented twang, but spot-on with its contrasting inner chew and outer crunch.

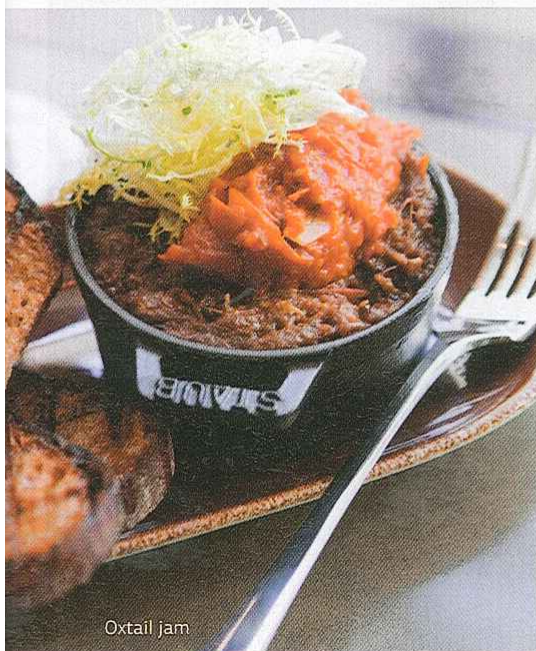
Desserts include a quartet of items like chocolate churros and butterscotch pudding. But if decadence is your game, go for the Peanut Butter Bomb, a half-dome of layered chocolate cake and peanut butter mousse encased in chocolate and served with pulverized pretzels and a smooth-as-butter maple-bacon ice cream.

The menu isn't what one would expect based on Saltbox's sleek design, but by holding on to the elements that work—looks and service—and bringing in solid, approachable flavors, this space has been given something far better than a facelift. Now it has heart... and hope.

// BRANDON HERNÁNDEZ



Shrimp ceviche tacos



Oxtail jam

