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**HEADLINE:** DAVID NELSON ON RESTAURANTS: BLUE CRAB HAS IT ALL -- VIRTUES, FAULTS AND GOOD VIEW

**BYLINE:** By DAVID NELSON

**BODY:**

Oh, well. It's summer, the time for reruns, and not just on the tube.

The season always brings us a few new restaurants, including some that are difficult to distinguish from places that have opened in summers past.

Something about The Blue Crab Restaurant strikes a familiar chord. Even though this waterside eatery is less than two months old, it might have occupied its berth next to San Diego Bay for a decade or two.

This is the quintessential San Diego waterfront restaurant, a place with a wonderful view and an easygoing, relaxed mood that evidently holds sway in the kitchen as well as in the dining room. Little about it is original; all the virtues and faults that are associated with such eateries can be found here, from the pleasant, airy decor to the servers who have only a vague idea of what proper service entails. Also present and accounted for are the various little pretensions that pop like soap bubbles when given the most casual examination; for example, the servers offer chilled forks with the salads, but the kitchen garnishes the greens with sticky commercial dressings. What could be more typical of this type of restaurant?

The Blue Crab menu fits the general mold, although it does contain a few surprises, namely a full page of meat dishes offered to those who view seafood with suspicion. Generally speaking, however, it concentrates on fish and shellfish, much of it broiled over mesquite and some of it -- probably too much, judging from experience -- gussied up in ways that frankly seem beyond the kitchen's reach.

The nicest time to arrive at the Blue Crab may be when the sun still hangs high enough above the horizon to light the bay and the ranks of boats that stretch out along the restaurant's windward side. It is pleasant then to let the menu sit unopened for a while, and instead savor the scene, the calm and one's companions; if the cooking at its waterside restaurants sometimes seems to be San Diego's curse, the mood of well-being these places often achieve certainly is one of the city's blessings.

When the menu is opened, the wise diner will read it with a careful eye. The appetizer list is straightforward enough, featuring the usual seafood cocktails as well as a smoked fish plate, steamed clams and mushrooms stuffed with crab. The entree list runs to some length, though, and be careful to ask which of the fish offerings are actually fresh; on neither of two occasions was the information volunteered that a fair number of items were frozen. Most notable among the frozen offerings were the Maryland blue crabs that give this restaurant its name. These were not tried, since when fresh they are so memorable, but when frozen so lackluster.

One may be tempted to order the clam chowder, a soup that San Diego clutches dearly to its bosom. The basis for this affection is unclear, however, since most local eateries seem incapable of preparing a decent chowder, and to this long

list of sorry chowders let us add the Blue Crab's, which emphasized potatoes rather too enthusiastically while minimizing the role played by clams. However, when it came to adding thickener, the kitchen showed boundless enthusiasm, thus endowing the soup with a glutinous texture that was quite displeasing.

Among the seafood that may be had broiled over mesquite are Pacific snapper, rainbow trout, mahi mahi, shark, salmon, halibut, sea bass and swordfish. Shrimp, scallops and lobster tail, alone or in various combinations, also get the mesquite treatment, and skewered and teriyaki-style dishes are not out of the question.

The broiled salmon turned out to be both quite a fish and the Blue Crab's sole incontrovertible triumph. The server guaranteed its freshness, and fresh indeed it tasted. The salmon requires little description, other than to say it was beautifully cooked, lightly charred in a manner that ensured the fish a moist, flaky interior and a flavor that lasted from the first bite to the last. So it would seem that simple, broiled fish are the best bets here.

The quality of the more complicated dishes is less predictable. The shrimp Sicily, although not especially Italian, came off well enough, and with its garnish of sauteed tomatoes and peppers tasted quite like shrimp Creole. A combination shrimp and crab Louie was magnificent in size and presentation; at least two quarts of greens completely obscured the immense platter from view, and simultaneously supported an impressive bounty of seafood. But the shrimp were the small, defrostible kind, and the crab was shredded snow crab, also previously frozen.

The fettuccine Alfredo sounded interesting primarily because the menu noted it was made with the Blue Crab's "secret recipe" sauce, and also because it was garnished with clams steamed in beer. Whatever the kitchen's secret recipe may be, it should be *kept* a secret, because this gooey pile of noodles was dressed with something that congealed as it cooled. The clams neither added to nor detracted from the pasta's basic lack of interest.

Equally unlovable was a poached salmon served with what the menu called "a memorable dill sauce." For starters, the kitchen proved that while it can broil fish, it can't poach them; this one was quite dried out from the process, which is exactly opposite from the result poaching is supposed to achieve. The dill sauce just wasn't dill sauce -- the fish was spread with a remarkably stiff white sauce that incorporated no dill itself, but had dried dill sprinkled over it, presumably straight from a box, jar or can. And this when the markets are bursting with fresh dill.

## THE BLUE CRAB

**4922 N. Harbor Drive, San Diego**

224-3000

Dinner served 4-10 p.m. Sunday through Thursday, until 11 p.m. weekends.

Credit cards accepted.

Dinner for two, with a moderate bottle of wine, tax and tip, \$35 to \$50.

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