

## RESTAURANT REVIEW: Atlantic Beach's oceanfront Azurea is worth the splurge

Dining at the restaurant inside redone resort is special occasion indeed.

### J.F. MIX

Forget everything you know about oceanfront dining in our area. Azurea has set the new standard.

Not that we have a plethora of such options anyway, but the restaurant in the new Atlantic Beach resort, One Ocean, would be a player no matter which beach it overlooked.

Azurea is a posh, yet relaxing dining experience. Come early to have cocktails or wine on the patio before dinner. The oversize patio furniture is the perfect place to forget your day and prepare for the evening's fare.

The restaurant is located in the former Sea Turtle, but go ahead and wash away any memory of that old hotel. The building has been totally redone. Upon arrival, the valet takes your car, and you enter the resort's spacious lobby. Azurea is in the former Plantains space but looks nothing like it.

This restaurant is awash in deep blue hues. The dining room features a wall of black leather padding and wood floors. Along the long wall are spacious high-backed booths perfect for a private dinner for two. The dining room offers seating for larger groups. The lack of tablecloths is at first offsetting, but the furniture looks too good to cover up.

The wine list is appropriately varied. We were pleased to see that even our by-the-glass order entitled us to a fresh bottle, chilled in an ice bucket and opened at our table.

Throughout dinner, service was prompt without unnecessary hovering. Dishes came out in a steady but unrushed pace.

Our evening started with a tangy *amuse bouche* that combined hearts of palm with yellow and red peppers and citrus. The Cast Iron Seared Jumbo Blue Crab Cake (\$16) appetizer is a standout. Not only was it one of the freshest I've tasted, but the accompanying cider-braised collard greens were also an unexpected treat. The greens took on a totally unexpected smoky flavor. I almost wished that they could have been served as an entree side dish.

Our other appetizer, Lacquered Bouchot Mussels (\$15) suffered by comparison. The crab cake is such a flavor explosion that the mussels broth seemed much too tame. But the bowl was full of plump, sweet mussels and would make a worthy choice otherwise.

Another starter of interest is the Hudson Valley Foie Gras "Two Ways." One is red sea salt-crusted foie gras, and the other is a tellicherry dusted duck confit strudel (\$16).

Bread service is not an afterthought. The basket includes several choices as well as four toppings. The hummus was especially good. It had a pleasant texture and wasn't a garlicky paste.

Chef Ted Peters offers a nice collection of entree options relying heavily from the ocean, such as Crisp Skinned Sea Bass (\$32), Coriander Crusted Long Line Ahi Tuna (\$27) and Pan Roasted Diver Scallops (\$28).

Meat dishes include an ample 20-ounce Bone-In Grass-Fed "Cowboy Cut" Bison Rib Steak (\$42), Slow Braised Boneless Snake River Farms Wagyu Short Rib (\$42) and Tellicherry Crusted Organic Beef Tenderloin (\$36).

We opted for the "Local Catch, 3 Ways" (\$29). The featured fish was mahi-mahi, and it came grilled with stone fruit salpicone, bronzed with lime butter emulsion and beignet-battered with smoked Vidalia onion remoulade.

The serving was ample with each portion offering about four bites. The beignet presentation was the most interesting. The batter was doughy but light. However, when cut, it slipped off the fish. The grilled piece was a bit overdone.

Our other entree was the Lava Lake Ranch Young Lamb Loin served with Arugula Mint Pesto (\$38). While the meat was perfectly cooked, it lacked any lamb flavor. It tasted as if I was eating a good steak. Not what I expected. The mint was lost in the pesto. The accompanying broccolini and warm plum tomato were no garnishes. They served as much appreciated sides.

Pastry Chef Nancy Slatsky's dessert menu answers the tough question: What to choose? Opt for the One Ocean Dessert Sampler. A platter for two is \$12 and one for four is \$18. We enjoyed the Banana Cheesecake, Essence of Chocolate, the Key Lime Pie and Modena Sweet-Aged Balsamic Berries. The favorite was the Banana Cheesecake. The dessert is topped with sauteed Murapo bananas with Ataulfo mangos and Cruzan Coconut rum.

Azurea had a couple of small stumbles, and at these prices it is a special occasion place for most. But I'm looking for an excuse to again indulge in a splurge at Azurea.