

FOOD

Deep Dish

MUSSEL MAN

FOR RARE NIGHT OUT, FIVE FIFTY-FIVE GETS THE NOD

BY ADAM H. CALLAGHAN

LARRY MATTHEWS

CHEF/OWNER AT BACK BAY GRILL

DISH: FIVE FIFTY-FIVE'S BANGS ISLAND MUSSELS (WITH 555 CHERRY PEPPERS, GOLDEN GARLIC, CHIVES, AND CRUNCHY BREAD)

COST: \$15

Each week in Deep Dish we ask a Portland chef to share their favorite menu item from another local restaurant.

Back Bay Grill is an institution in Portland. Founded in 1988 in a neighborhood not known for its tourist-friendly atmosphere, the popular fine dining restaurant has changed hands twice in its existence. Larry Matthews bought the Grill in 2002, about five years after he became Executive Chef. Matthews smiles as he notes that he was 24 when he started — he's 42 now.

With kids and a busy schedule (he's often cooking the food at the Grill himself, as he is now) Matthews doesn't get out much. When he does, he goes to Five Fifty-Five for mussels. Or for steak. Or for anything, really, that his friends, Five Fifty-Five co-owners Steve and Michelle Corry, and their team whip up.

SO WHAT KIND OF MUSSELS ARE THESE? Bangs Island Mussels. They're local, they're great. We serve the same mussels at the Grill.

THEY SEEM LIKE THE GO TO MUSSELS IN THE AREA. Oh yeah, I mean look at them: they're a nice proportion of meat to shell, they're not super tiny. These ones are cooked perfectly as well. I love the background heat in this dish, it's enough that it's really satisfying but not so much that you're breathing fire.

WHAT ELSE IS GOING ON IN THIS DISH?

There's pickled cherry peppers, compound butter — I asked Steve this beforehand [laughs] — with some lemon and chives, and roasted garlic, so a lot of flavor.

The version we have right now is a little spicy, but generally it's like white wine, lemon, garlic, butter. Super simple. This one is really satisfying because it's got a lot of pickly flavor, the butter is rich, it's got the grilled bread and everything, it's fantastic. I love it. And it's the same protein we work with, but it's a different take on it. Generally I do mine a lot simpler. It's nice because guests go to restaurants for different reasons. That's what I like about food in general. We can each get handed a similar basket, figuratively, and do something totally different with it.

WHAT ARE SOME THINGS TO KEEP IN MIND WHEN PREPARING MUSSELS LIKE THIS?

Not to overcook the mussels is probably first and foremost. You overcook them, they tend to shrink right up. I'm sure you've seen that, mussels that come out with shells this big, and the meat is tiny, that's because they're overcooked. Also, sometimes I'll find they're open but not necessarily cooked all the way. So they look really great but you're trying to eat them, they're not quite right. These are perfect. Everything's set, it's not gooey at all, they slide out of the shell nicely.

Then a little bit of acid and a lot of richness from butter or whatever you want. Some people will use cream. And then of course something to sop up the delicious broth. It makes its own sauce. You put whatever you want in there, then they open up and it takes on a life of its own. We have a lot of requests for second batches of bread.

DO YOU THINK THESE WERE COOKED IN THIS SERVING SKILLET? I'm not sure.

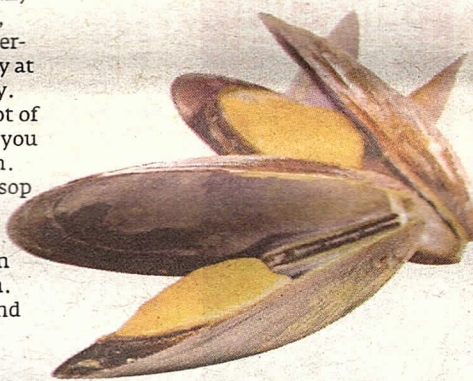
I would imagine they were probably cooked in another one then put in here, but that's just a guess because it's a lot of mussels for that little pan. It's a perfect pan, it concentrates the sauce down. If it were a big plate you'd be chasing the sauce around.

ANY OTHER HIGHLIGHTS ON THE MENU HERE?

The lobster mac and cheese is always a go to. But I think that's why I like this restaurant in particular: I don't have to think too much. I can come here and randomly pick something off the menu and I know it's going to be great.

For me it's as much about the restaurant as it is about this particular dish. I'll tell you, I don't get out a ton, so I don't experiment as much as I'd really like to, but this restaurant in general is one of my go to's. Quality place, customer comes first, your comfort is their important part. That's how I feel when I come here, and that's what we try to do at my restaurant, too. And it's like two blocks from my place. ©

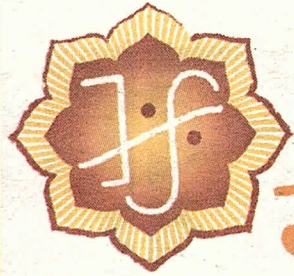
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