



[Restaurant Review |](#)

Food Porn

By [Naomi Wise](#) | Published Wednesday, April 18, 2007

[Jack's La Jolla - Ocean Room](#)

7863 Girard Avenue, San Diego, 858-456-8111

Jack's La Jolla has been on my "must do" list ever since it opened well over a year ago, but the daunting question was always "*which* Jack's?" The restaurant offers three distinct venues -- the casual carnivore's moderately priced Grille; the seafoody top-floor Ocean Room, complete with view and sushi bar (with a sushi chef formerly at Ota); and the most formal venue, the Dining Room. Only way I could do them all would be to spend a week at a cheap motel in La Jolla. There are no cheap motels in La Jolla.

But then the Lynvester and Samurai Jim ate in the Dining Room during Restaurant Week and came back all a-rave. Three days of wrestling with TurboTax had yielded a nice refund [sound effect: slot machine paying off], which deserved a celebratory splurge dinner, so the Dining Room was the destination. Jack's now has an actual Jack -- dessert chef Jack Fisher, fleeing from Addison. Jack may jump restaurants a little too swiftly (a jumping Jack indeed), but I love his avant-garde desserts, and his move spurred me to head to La Jolla with the Lynvester branch of the posse in tow.

We mounted the dozen-odd black steps to the entry of a handsome white building and were shown to a chic but cozy room done in blacks, whites, and greys, with a choice of semicircular booths and regular tables. On the same floor, in the back, is an atriumlike area leading to an open kitchen (inaudible from the Dining Room); farther forward and to one side is a casual bar-lounge serving upscale pub grub (the inevitable Kobe sliders, etc.), and a staircase to the higher realms. A piano player spins out jazzy vintage pop (Sinatra tunes, "Girl from Ipanema," etc.) that you hear in the dining room as a civilized accompaniment to conversation, not an invasion of it.

All the dishes on the menu, start to finish, have adventurous touches. The starter we loved best was a work of creative comfort food that, alas, is out of season and off-menu now: a creamy celery-root soup topped with a "butterscotch froth" (made with a touch of maple syrup, and balsamic vinegar to cut the sweetness). The soup concealed crunchy diced fresh celery and earthy house-made mini-ravioli with a filling of shaved

fresh black truffles and truffle juice, baked potato pulp, crème fraîche, and a little agar-agar (to bind it). This soup is just the kind of food San Diego needs more of, sensual and approachable but unexpected. Its replacement is a green garlic soup that I'd love to try.

An appetizer of poached Maine lobster brings two tender, shelled claws in a lobster stock enhanced by tangy Kaffir lime juice, and other Asian flavors, and fresh herbs, gentled by risotto rice but sparked by the acidity of sweet-tart sticks of Fuji apple. It's small but lovely.

Lynne loves the daily changing appetizer pastas here, and that evening's choice was a have-to-have-it of twisty spiral macaroni (packaged, but from Italy) in a sort of Vietnamese seafood bouillabaisse that turned out to feature an intriguing vegetarian stock (made by simmering garlic, chiles, and ginger with Asian and Western condiments and herbs in tomato-water, then straining out the solids to leave a tangy golden broth). The soup was swimming with sweet shrimp (*ama ebi* in sushi lingo), shrimp, mussel meats, and baby octopus. The broth was thicker and sweeter than classic fish-based bouillabaisse, with a crunch of sautéed leeks -- sexy both in taste and texture. Sometimes "food porn" is not in the words but in the mouth. Even the tiny octopi were tender, which means you can give in to the temptation of the baby octopus and fava salad (which we didn't try) with no fear of finding a plateful of rubber tarantulas.

Peekytoe crab salad sounded better than it tasted: "Fennel, sake, sea urchin broth," the menu said, plus a topping of tiny pieces of rosy sea urchin with vinaigrette. But I found the broth tart and too plentiful for the crab, and without warning, it proved spicy with Thai chilies. Much as I love hot pepper, which can do so much for the ubiquitous blue crab, it seemed excessive in the context of this delicate New England species.

The entrées were even better than the starters -- no letdown, no coasting. Muscovy duck breast was the canvas for a dish so brilliant it struck several of us as funny. The breast slices were "rosy" as ordered, tender and rich, rubbed with star anise and accompanied by parsnips and a sweet kumquat confit in which each dainty slice of fruit was individually visible. But the Zen-foodie joke lay in an irresistible pile of toasted ground cocoa nibs: flour, butter, and sugar, baked and then seasoned with toasted ground cloves and run through a Cuisinart-equivalent. It's as though the chef had pared down the classic Mex-haute combo of mole poblano with turkey -- this was cocoa and game bird reduced to essentials, a logical but original combination that tasted stunning.

Crispy Jidori chicken was another killer. As Kobe is to beef and Berkshire hogs are to pork, the black-legged Asian Jidori is to chickens -- a breed raised for flavor, not fast growth or big breasts. And the cooks did it proud -- not an overcooked morsel on either the upper or lower quarter of the half-chicken. The skin was as crisp as the menu advertised, and the tender meat tasted the way chicken used to taste, when it was a Sunday treat rather than a cheap commodity. (I'd bet Jidoris don't live the miserable life of "factory chickens" either.) Matching it strength for strength were well-conceived accompaniments of butternut squash ravioli (encased in delicate house-made pasta skins), black trumpet mushrooms, gently cooked greens, and rich brown butter tanged with Meyer lemon juice.

When we saw line-caught Maine cod on the menu, we all sat up. In New England, where cod has been a staple since colonial times, the species is now nearly extinct through overfishing. "Line caught" means, first, that it wasn't captured in one of the miles-long gillnets that have nearly wiped out the species -- and also, that it's likely to have reached port fresh, the day it was caught. "This is the best cod I've ever eaten," said Mary Ann. For me -- second best, only to the time I saw a dayboat delivering cod to the waterfront dock of a seaside restaurant in Gloucester and decided to lunch there. (Tasted like sugar.) Delivered within 48 hours of its arrival on land, this was slow-cooked and tender, topped Portuguese-style with sweet peppers and

slices of spicy chorizo, with a tropical-looking "leaf" of parsley purée painted along one side of the plate. Clams are supposedly part of the array, and in my doggie-bagged take-home, I even found one.

With two fowls and a fish, we needed a quadruped to round out the ranks. Roasted beef tenderloin was my companions' choice, mainly for its accompaniment of pickled short rib. (Lynne goes for short ribs whenever she sees them, and I certainly have no objections.) The tenderloin, splashed with its own *jus*, was a fine, tender piece of meat if that's what floats your boat. It is not, however, the most flavorful cut of the steer. The boneless pickled short-rib meat underlaid a heap of carrot confit, topped by crisp, almost baconlike shreds of shallot. (Never realized shallots had so much *umami* -- the Japanese term for happy-meat flavor.) All very fine, but less interesting than our other dishes. (On a do-over, I'd choose Colorado lamb loin with cardamom crumbs, since I love cardamom better than beef.)

For desserts, we split our choices between a new Jack Fisher invention and, urged by the waiter, the restaurant's "signature dessert," carried over from the previous pastry regime. This dish is called "melting Valrhona," a combination of intensely sweet molten chocolate and intensely tart passionfruit purée over coconut cookies, all under a hard chocolate crust. The contrasts of sweet and sour, hard and soft, shock the mouth. I still don't know if I like the combination. I found the sweet chocolate cloying, the passionfruit almost painfully acidic. Perhaps they should rename the dish "melting sadomasochism."

All in all, I was glad Jack Fisher has replaced that dessert's inventor. Jack contributed a citrus gratin, with fresh fruit flavors ranging from sour grapefruit to tangy tangerine to something soft and sweet that I couldn't quite identify, which reminded me of mangosteen, the most prized and exotic citrus of Thailand. All were robed in an almond cream sauce, and on the side, three little balls of exquisite blood-orange sorbet. I joked that maybe Jack had heard I was coming and deliberately declined to make one of his supernal panna cottas, just to force me to try something else.

Service? Way better than average. The waiter was considerate, helpful but not hovering, and fully familiar with the menu. We loved the chance to have a conversation without fighting the all-too-frequent deliberate "party noise" common in splashy new restaurants. We were not in the least tempted to shoot the piano player in the lounge next door.

As luck would have it, I ate at Jack's on an evening when I was strangely un-hungry. This made for substantial doggy-bagging. Over the next five nights I gently reheated and re-tasted the lobster appetizer, pasta bouillabaisse, and all the entrées. Nearly every dish knocked my socks off -- far more intensely than at the restaurant, now that I was free from the distractions of friends, waiters, music, and that continuous array of dishes. Savoring the flavors solo, one at a time in small quantities, rather than in a flashy parade, I realized what depths of flavor and culinary intelligence each held.

Few of us can afford to buy our own Picasso original, antique Tibetan *thanka*, or Song Dynasty scroll painting. (I'd bet that for those who do, these sublime objects devolve through familiarity into mere decor.) But at least for special occasions, many of us can manage a dinner where, bite by bite, we can experience bliss, even if the art vanishes down our gullets. So if you value cooking for its creativity as well as its sensuality, consider going to Jack's Dining Room and deliberately ordering too much, to take home leftovers and taste them again with your full concentration engaged. Amazing stuff.

ABOUT THE CHEF

Tony DiSalvo grew up with great food in Highland Falls, New York, a suburb within commuting distance

from Manhattan. "Food and cooking have always been important in my family. We're Sicilian, first generation, from a small town near Palermo. Sicilian food is very different from mainland Italian, with a lot of African influences. And luckily, I got to travel a lot when I was younger -- Spain, Italy, France -- I hit the big ones. My father...was very interested in exploring, from the Sicilian village food he grew up with to Cantonese and Shanghai food, in depth. He would do a Peking duck the real way, with a fan in front of the sink, or jellyfish. He would research everything, and we would go to Chinatown and get all the ingredients, go to a fish market that would sell Japanese fish species. We would cook together -- things like mu shu pork, making the pancakes from scratch. So I grew up as a real foodie, and as my interest in it grew more serious, I saw it was something that I could do. At age 13, I worked 'under the counter' during the summer in the kitchen of a hotel in my hometown -- chopping vegetables, opening oysters, making deviled eggs for eight hours straight. So I could see the reality of restaurant cooking. I was lucky, I didn't go into cooking school with a false sense of what it was really like.

"I was considering going to the Culinary Institute of America when I was still in high school, and luckily, I had a contact through a friend of my father to Jean-Georges Vongerichten [noted French chef in New York, a pioneer of fusion] when he still had only two restaurants, Jean-Georges and Jo Jo's. I started working at Jo Jo's even before I went to the Culinary Institute, and afterward I did my externship there. When I graduated in '95, I worked at a small French bistro that has one Michelin star now, La Goulue, and then I went to Gramercy Tavern and worked under Tom Colicchio [another noted New York chef] for almost three years, when he still had just the one restaurant. I've been fortunate to hit some pretty strong places. Then I worked at Jean-Georges for about seven years -- the last two of them as chef de cuisine. [Editor's note: the chef de cuisine is the number-two chef under the executive chef, charged with making sure the kitchen produces the executive chef's dishes properly. This includes cooking, tasting, and supervising sous-chefs.] I left to come to San Diego because Jack's made me a great offer, including a partnership, with the opportunity to do something totally new with my food -- and I liked the prospect of raising my family out here. There's a lot of things I didn't get to do in New York that I could do here -- including building a restaurant from scratch.

"It's important to me for what we're trying to represent that we use really good, fresh ingredients. We try to buy as much as possible locally. I don't go to Chino Farms in the winter, when their stuff is sort of bland, I go when it's interesting -- in spring, summer, fall. Right now, it's vibrant and exciting, and I go there every day on my way to work. When you go every day, you get much more of a sense of what's best there, rather than just ordering over the Internet or by phone. We also use Cunningham Farms and La Milpa, but some of the produce companies here are also doing a really good job, getting produce grown closer to L.A. And we use Brandt beef, a natural product from this area. We use a specialty mushroom purveyor who gets fresh chanterelles and porcini and morels from Europe, Michigan, Washington State. I don't like to mention all the ingredient sources on the menu. People just have to trust us to find the best products, because that's such a major part of what we do.

"I think the most important thing in cooking is for each component to taste like what it is, and to build levels of flavor based on the essences of those flavors. If the dish is based upon the essence of each ingredient, I think you'll end up with something with more purity. If everything is masked with everything else, it's hard for each ingredient to express its own voice. That's where the cleanliness of the food comes in, and the separation of ingredients on the plate. If we put something on a plate, we want it to have a reason. At the core, we're just trying to take ingredients that go well with each other and make them interesting."