

DINING OUT

A fresh catch

King Crab Oyster Bar & Grill is only starting but they've managed to sail into success

BY ANDREW COPPOLINO
FOR NIGHTLIFE

Yes, the building was once Long John Silver's, but the similarities end there. Located at Victoria and River roads, King Crab Oyster Bar & Grill is a concept developed by owner and operator Brian Plouffe, the force behind the popular King Street Trio. With this pedigree, King Crab is many fathoms away from Long John's "arrrrrgh matey" fish sticks.

No lobster traps, fish nets, buoys, or anchors on the walls: an open dining room has sleek, contemporary décor and classic wood finishes. The open kitchen (I love it) invites you to take in the fiery action — and aromas — that emanate from behind the grill. King Crab is dynamic and energized when all the tables are filled and is dedicated to consistently fresh fish and seafood (scallops are conspicuous by their absence, but pork, beef, and chicken dishes are available).

I marvelled at that freshness and consistency on each visit. Calamari frito (\$8) is lightly breaded, crispy, and sweetly tender squid; hot and sour plum sauce accompany, but I preferred this perfect calamari unsauced. Clam chowder (\$12) as a lunch main is rich with clams, potatoes and vegetables.

OTHER MENUS

- **Lucy's Seafood Kitchen, Waterloo (885-9039)**
Multitudes of mussels, plethora of perch, oceans of oysters to name only a few fish that school up at this dynamic Niawlins-inspired seafood house.
- **Fusushi, Guelph (822-8838)**
Seafood in the raw: spacious, bright, open, Fusushi serves well-prepared sushi from a large menu.
- **Algarve, Kitchener (741-5030)**
Arroz de Marisco for two: beautifully cooked rice with lobster, shrimp, clams, mussels, and crab in a very Portuguese atmosphere.

Fried oysters intermingle with fried onion "strands," but this dish would be visually brightened with a livelier garnish. The clam flavour was spot-on, though.

A second lunch and two more appetizers: Blue crab and vegetable spring rolls were crisp and hot (\$11), while Blue crab and baby greens salad with lotus root chips and mango-cilantro coulis (\$9) was a "stacked" architectural dish with multiple flavours and textures as well as visual interest. Main course Spicy shrimp pomodoro (\$13) had just the right cilantro accent but needed salt. Ale battered cod (\$12) with potato gratin and chunks of roasted sweet potato was an inspired combination.

In the evening darkness, the relaxing décor and atmosphere is heightened by soft lighting. Complimentary rosemary focaccia with olive oil and balsamic is a welcome start to dinner. The house salad of crisp baby greens and dijon vinaigrette (\$5) is lively and well-prepared.

A sampler of fresh shucked oysters (\$13) is a good bet: two each of Martha's Vineyard, Malpeque, and Chesapeake Bay oysters. Each species had clear liquor (important in an oyster) and its own characteristics, either gently "sour," bracingly salty, or a milder combination of the two. I passed on the accompanying sauces: eat these bivalves freestyle and slurp down that liquor.

My companion's Coconut grouper (\$23) matched robust fish flavour with lightly crunchy julienned vegetables balanced by coconut sweetness, tart lemongrass, and cilantro spice. Green curry risotto was yet more flavourful and textured. To add one more flavour would have been overboard. The black grouper was almost hidden by the vegetables, and additional colour would have had this dish leaping off the plate in its presentation.



Baked sea bass (\$28) swam happily in a light basil cream sauce that did not overpower this meaty fish. Florentine mashed potatoes, punctuated with spinach, were good, but not great. However, roasted seasonal vegetables — what I expect from top cooking — were excellent. Forced to choose between these two fish, black grouper's slightly stronger flavour would be my choice.

Most desserts are made in-house, and this may be where King Crab is evolving. A diner's penultimate impression, desserts must dazzle the palate and the eye. Lemon cheesecake (\$7) is full-bodied but needs a thinner crust and more blue in the blueberry anglaise.

Pumpkin bread pudding (again, kudos for seasonal orientation) with maple syrup and whiskey (\$8) was slightly sweet for my taste. Mere trifles, however, against all of this culinary competence.

Dinner for two (two appetizers, two

mains, two glasses of wine, a shared dessert and coffee) can be about \$95 before taxes and tip. Some lunch selections are a bit expensive, although dinner prices seem better balanced. Top-notch seafood can be costly, but King Crab offers value and quality.

My King Crab visits were each characterized by professional, friendly service. The conclusion of dinner saw us rushed a bit by our waiter, yet as we donned our coats, we were met at the door, cheerily thanked, and asked to come again — and that is the ultimate and critically important last impression.

Remarkably, all of this after only seven weeks: what King Crab has accomplished thus far is considerable. There's more goodness to come, I'm sure.

KING CRAB OYSTER BAR AND GRILL
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Lunch: Monday to Friday 11:30 a.m. to 2:00 p.m.; Dinner: Monday, Tuesday 5 to 9:30 p.m.; Wednesday, Thursday 5 to 10 p.m.; Friday, Saturday 5 to 10:30 p.m.; Sunday 4:30 to 9 p.m. Wheelchair accessible.

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