

NORTHSIDE

The Hungry Palate

By Susan Dyer Reynolds

There's more than meets the tourist at Bistro Boudin

I hate it when San Franciscans poo poo Fisherman's Wharf. "I never go there," a friend recently bragged, but I don't think that's anything to be proud of; in fact, I have wonderful childhood memories of the Wharf and I still visit, and not only when I have out of town guests. The views are arguably the best in town (check out the 4th of July fireworks from one of the restaurants this year), and you won't find Dungeness crab any fresher. Last year, *Northside San Francisco* ran a cover story called, "A local's guide to Fisherman's Wharf," and I was surprised at the letters we received, many from natives. "I have lived here my entire life, now nearly 80 years," one gentleman wrote, "and I have never had a crab from the crab pots as you recommended in your article." He finally did, and wrote again to say it was the best crab he'd ever eaten. I swear by my routine — pick out a crab at the crab pots, grab a fresh baguette and a buttery chardonnay (or during warmer months, a crisp Sancerre), and enjoy a quintessential San Francisco treat.

Besides the fact that the Wharf brings much-needed tourist dollars into The City, there is also an in-

credible amount of history, from the Italian fishing fleets during the Gold Rush to housing San Francisco's oldest continuing business, Boudin Bakery.

The Boudin family, master bakers in their hometown of Champigny-sur-Yonne in the Bourgogne region of France, settled in San Francisco in 1849, bringing with them a recipe for classic French bread — sweet, soft and airy with a golden, crunchy crust. In order to bake bread in those days, bakers had to "catch" wild yeast from the air and cultivate it, and as the Boudin family discovered, each kind of yeast imparts a unique flavor depending on geography. Much to the family's surprise, the "mother dough" created in their new home had a tangy flavor, which is now synonymous with San Francisco sourdough bread. During the Great Earthquake and Fire of 1906, the family almost lost its most precious asset, but Louise Boudin managed to save it in a bucket. The company still uses that mother dough today, which resides under lock and key in a safe at the bakery. That's just one of the things you discover when you take a tour of the museum at Boudin, just one of the additions in a spectacular

renovation that took place two years ago this month. I recommend the museum tour for anyone who loves San Francisco — it's chock full of city history, photos and trivia. For example, did you know that Italian fishermen created cioppino by adding Dungeness crab to a Tuscan bouillabaisse of fish, mussels and prawns called *cacciucco*?

Boudin also decided to throw its name into the toque and open an upscale restaurant in the beautiful space (they also have another of their famous cafes downstairs). The trick was keeping the tourists happy while enticing the locals as well. The first incarnation was not terribly successful — lovely room, great views and mediocre food — but the recent hire of an ambitious, talented chef is helping to bring the food up to par.

After three years apprenticing with master chefs in Paris, James Chan moved to Bangkok, where he worked as executive sous chef at the five-diamond Dusit Thani Hotel. He eventually landed at the five-diamond, five-star Bacara Resort and Spa in Santa Barbara before his appointment as executive chef at Bistro Boudin.

Upon meeting Chan, it is apparent that he is ambitious — with a charming British accent, the low-key chef describes recent additions to the menu like halibut cheeks with crab butter, but he also professes to know the value of Wharf classics like crab Louie. That doesn't mean, however, that he will make them like some of the tourist haunts nearby. For one thing, he's a stickler for fresh, seasonal, local ingredients. When I use that phrase in reviews, I feel like a broken record because most San Francisco restaurants are committed to a mostly locavore philosophy by now, but when we're talking about a restaurant on Fisherman's Wharf, it bears repeating. The good news is that more and more Wharf restaurants are heading this direction: The Franciscan Crab Restaurant serves made-to-order burrata, and the fish at Scoma's comes right off their dock and into the kitchen.

I loved Chan's take on the crab Louie (\$23.75) — crisp butter lettuce becomes a vessel for a large mound of fresh-picked snowy white Dungeness crab meat, claws and knuckles intact. In place of the usual hard-boiled eggs, Chan offers fluffy deviled eggs with just a hint of horseradish. To complete the simple presentation, he adds a slice of tomato and two thick stalks of asparagus (unlike most vegetables, where the smaller and thinner are more tender, thick



(above) fried chicken with fixin's
(bottom) interior ambiance
photo's: Elizabeth Armstrong

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asparagus stalks have more volume to the proportion of the outer skin while thin stalks tend to be woody). The tomato ("from a little old lady who is very proud of her tomatoes") was the best I've had this season — ripe, sweet and juicy. The homemade Louie dressing, served on the side, is as classic as it gets.

Dungeness crab mac-n-cheese (\$22.95) is decadent to say the least. A lot of upscale restaurants are doing mac-n-cheese these days, but Chan's is the first I've had that truly brought back memories of eating Kraft mac-n-cheese at my friend Anita's house as a kid, and I mean that in a good way. Chan combines aged Vermont cheddar, cream and crab with pasta shells that cradle every bit. The flavor of the crab is lost, but it adds nice texture, and the sweetness cuts the tanginess of the cheese.

On our second visit, my dining companion Bill, who is allergic to cow's milk, was thrilled to try the baked artisan goat cheese appetizer (\$9.95), and it didn't disappoint with crusty toasted sourdough baguette for dipping, and garlic roasted tomatoes to top it off. The French onion soup (\$8.95) was also good, with gratinéed Emmental cheese hiding sourdough croutons soaking in a perfectly seasoned beef broth. For another satisfying starter, Chan oven bakes small, sweet mussels and manila clams (\$12.25) in an iron pot

with parsley, garlic, smoky Hobbs' bacon, and sourdough crumbs (all of the bread is freshly baked from the bakery below, so if you're not a sourdough fan, you're out of luck). We would have loved to have tried the duck rillettes with fried green olives, but they were "out" on all three visits. (A bit of snooping uncovered a plan to remove them from the upcoming summer menu.)

The selection of sandwiches includes a deliciously moist crab cake that was 99 percent crab on toasted sourdough with lettuce, tomato, avocado, and lemongrass mayonnaise (\$16.95). Another winner, the hot, smoked salmon club on sliced sourdough with bacon, lettuce, tomato, avocado, and basil mayo (\$14.95) is big enough to share, and one of the best deals on the menu. Surprisingly, the eponymous burger (\$14.50) was a disappointment, but only because we ordered it medium-rare and it arrived medium-well.

Entrées stay mostly traditional and include a shellfish laden cioppino (\$27.50) with a nice, spicy saffron-tomato broth. The Anchor Steam-battered fish and chips (\$19.75) are made with fresh cod (when available) — they were tasty, but I wish they had been served in two large pieces rather than a bunch of smaller pieces that quickly went soggy after being doused with malt vinegar. A 10-ounce filet mignon was pricey (\$35.50), but excellent,

with a caramelized crust, and tender, pink interior; the steak was topped with crunchy onion strings that were so good, I'd like to see them on the menu of sides.

Speaking of sides (\$5.95), most were good, especially the oven-roasted field mushrooms with thyme and brown chicken au jus. I also liked the fact that they offered a "petite" version of their famous clam chowder in a bread bowl, which, if you haven't tried it, is an ingenious invention.

Bistro Boudin also offers nightly specials including double cut Berkshire pork chops on Tuesdays (\$21.95), and duck shepherd's pie on Wednesdays (\$17.95). We sampled Saturday's braised beef short ribs (\$25.75), which forked off the bone into tender shreds; Friday's steamed Dungeness crab (A.Q.), heady with the scent of fried garlic and Parmesan; and Sunday's buttermilk skillet-fried Fulton Valley chicken (\$17.95) served with fluffy hush puppies and rich brown gravy. You don't find skillet-fried chicken very often outside of the south because it's actually very difficult to do right, but Chan's is the best I've had since a visit to Memphis a number of years ago. The skin of skillet-fried chicken is what sets it apart — the coating turns almost gooey in the pan, giving it a softer, less brittle texture, which I happen to prefer over deep-fried.

Views from Boudin look out to

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Alcatraz and are particularly stunning at sunset, and the ambiance is classy, highlighted by a Persian rug, a stone fireplace, and dark, wooden beams. (As you head toward the stairway to exit, be sure to stop at the glass wall to check out the working bakery below.) A full bar and friendly service is a bonus; the wine list is mostly California varietals, but I would love to see a nice Sancerre or a few Italian pinot grigios, as they would work exceptionally well with

the abundance of crab on the menu.

While the Wharf still has its fair share of tourist traps using sub par ingredients and charging exorbitant prices, it is encouraging to see restaurants like Bistro Boudin and a few of its neighbors like the Franciscan, A. Sabella's, and Scoma's, consistently caring about the quality of the food they serve, hiring chefs who know what they're doing, and wanting to create something that they are proud to share with locals and tourists alike. The one thing Bistro Boudin has in common with other Wharf restaurants is fairly high prices – most entrées are in the \$20 range – but with views like that, the rent can't be cheap.

Not-to-Miss-Dish: I love Chan's Louie, but Sundays are strictly about the mouthwatering skillet-fried chicken.

What to Know: There is a parking lot right in front, and the restaurant validates up to three hours.

Bistro Boudin: 160 Jefferson St. (at Taylor), 415-928-1849, www.boudin-bakery.com. Dining room hours: Sun-Thu, 11:30 a.m.-10:00 p.m.; Fri-Sat, 11:30 a.m.-10:30 p.m.

All Hungry Palate reviews are conducted anonymously with a minimum of three visits; Northside Publications, Inc. picks up the tab.