

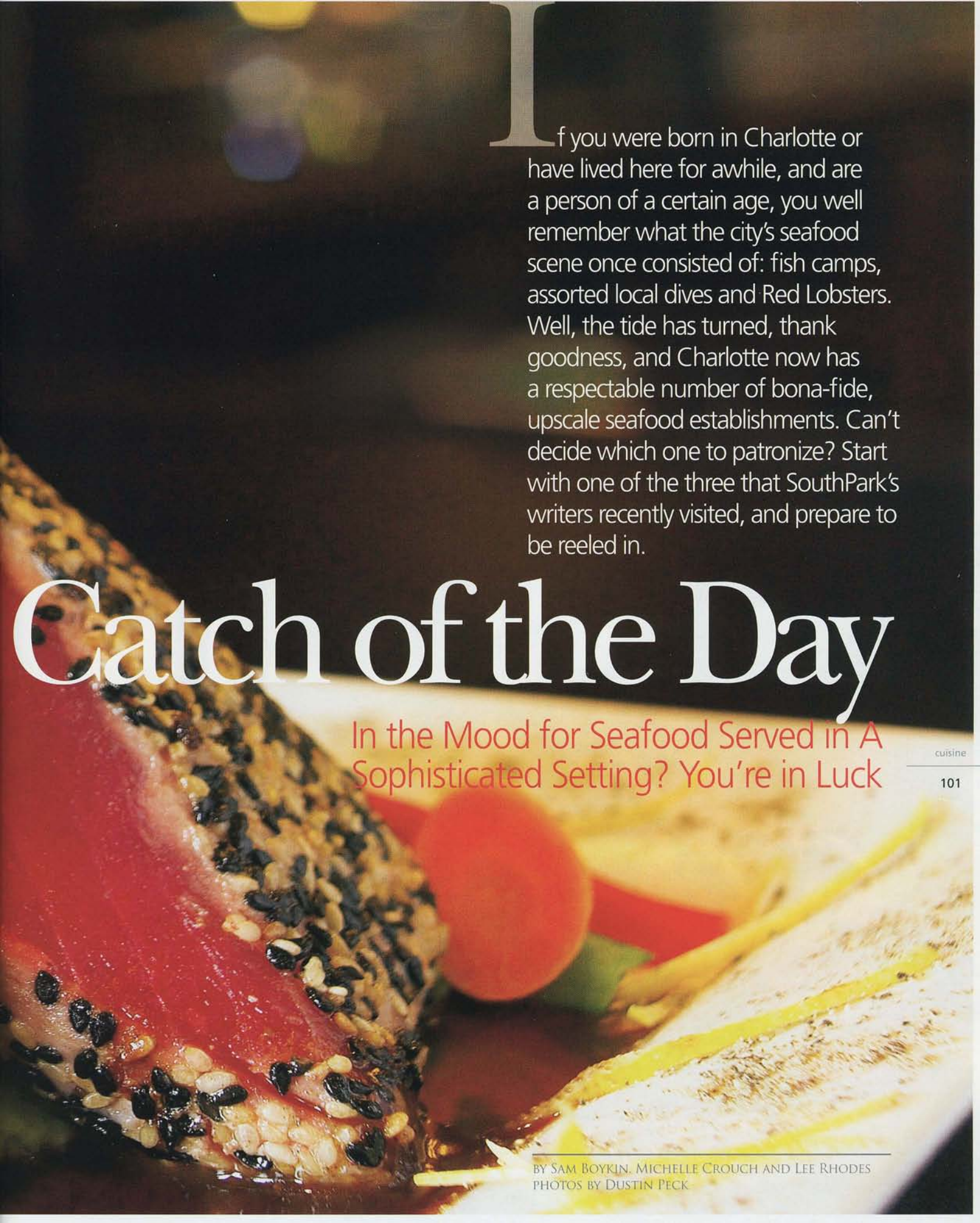
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SOUTHPARK

M A G A Z I N E

Grand Shellfish Platter.





If you were born in Charlotte or have lived here for awhile, and are a person of a certain age, you will remember what the city's seafood scene once consisted of: fish camps, assorted local dives and Red Lobsters. Well, the tide has turned, thank goodness, and Charlotte now has a respectable number of bona-fide, upscale seafood establishments. Can't decide which one to patronize? Start with one of the three that SouthPark's writers recently visited, and prepare to be reeled in.

Catch of the Day

In the Mood for Seafood Served in A Sophisticated Setting? You're in Luck

cuisine

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BY SAM BOYKIN, MICHELLE CROUCH AND LEE RHODES
PHOTOS BY DUSTIN PECK

Down-to-Earth Elegance

The Oceanaire Seafood Room in Piedmont Town Center bills itself as the “seafood restaurant for people who love steakhouses.” And while there are no wacky street signs on the walls or peanut shells on the floor, it does share a few similarities: huge portions and, despite the swanky address, an atmosphere that is unpretentious and what my girlfriend describes as “comfortably elegant.” But that’s where the similarities end.

As we entered the 8,500-square-foot restaurant, we were greeted by swinging big-band music and a somewhat harried group of young hosts and hostesses. Oceanaire is known for its 1930s oceanliner inspired décor, which makes for an interesting mix of upscale affluence and trendy cool. The ivory-colored walls are offset by red leather booths and dark hardwood floors and trim. As the hostesses scuttled about, our attention was drawn to the restaurant’s crescent-shaped raw bar situated in the far corner and radiating a blue neon light.

In contrast to the polite yet somewhat flustered hostesses, members of the wait staff — dressed in white, button-down shirts, ties, black slacks and white aprons — were unfailingly smooth, professional, informative and attentive. Our waitress, in almost overwhelming detail, ran through the highlights of the night’s specials, making a few informed-sounding recommendations.

We got the meal started with a creation called the “petite shellfish platter,” a foot-tall mountain of crushed ice embedded with shrimp, oysters, mussels, lobster tails and crab legs. This towering, gut-busting orgy of seafood, mind you, is the petite. A “grande” size is also available. Next up we sampled strips of pickled herring, which was served with sour pickles and olives. The herring’s spicy and vinegary taste went perfectly with the dark rye bread.

The a la carte sides at Oceanaire were no less gargantuan than the entrees. As our order of hash browns arrived, we were shocked to see a loaf of potatoes about the size of a dinner plate and fashioned into the shape of a cake. This thick, dense, moist-in-the-middle and crispy-on-the-edges concoction was seasoned with salt, pepper, bacon and onions, and was dangerously rich and yummy. No less delicious or decadent were the lump-meat crab cakes, sweet, buttery chunks of flaky crabmeat slathered in butter.

Fearing I was about to slip into a food coma, I excused myself to go the bathroom, which one of the ever-helpful waiters informed me was “just below the grouper,” referring to the large, striped, stout-bodied fish mounted on a wall near the back. In the bathroom, I was surprised to see that the urinals were filled with ice. Our waitress explained that this curious design touch is in keeping with the cruise line-inspired theme. It turns out that during the pre-flush days of the 1930s, cruise ships filled the urinals with ice in order to have running water.

By the time our main entrees, stuffed flounder and sable fish with miso sauce, arrived, my dining companion and I were so thoroughly gorged we could barely lift our forks. However, when we nuked the fish in the microwave the next day, they were still delicious. If you like fresh seafood — and lots of it — then Oceanaire is certainly worth a try.

— Sam Boykin 