
BACK OF THE HOUSE

NO MEAL IS AN ISLAND

Provincial and proud.

BY MARY MORGAN



SHELTER ISLAND—Nestled between the two forks, Shelter Island is a place unto itself. Geographically and psychologically. And the food offerings are no different. The small population of islanders can only support so many restaurants, which makes redundancy unnecessary and unviable. There are old, stuffy inns that cater to tourists, and revamped oceanside locations that cater to beautiful people. There are family restaurants that make no attempt to follow trends and there are trendier spots that are raising the bar. Most notably, the insular culture still supports a dying breed—the one-man restaurant—where a single person, sometimes assisted by a relative or friend, takes your order, cooks your food, and serves it. Any serious culinary explorateur should try the always-hot and cinemaphile-friendly Italian fare served at Nettie’s (24 North Midway Road), as well as the slow, soul food—with collard greens, scampi seafood, and memorable fried chicken—dished up by Commander Cody at his

Fish Shoppe (corner of Smith Street and Midway Road). Both men serve it up yearround, providing a place for their neighbors to dine even when the rest of the world has left. Here are a handful of other distinctive—sometimes quirky—restaurants frequented by locals.

BOB’S FISHMARKET AND RESTAURANT

If there is any theme to Bob’s Fishmarket and Restaurant, it is family. Whether you drop in to buy a few pounds of scallops for home or stick around with the kids for a night of French fries and fish-O’s (addictive, rubbery onion-ring-shaped calamari), you immediately feel like family.

The waitresses hover and chat like doting mothers, particularly at tables with finicky children; the kitchen and fish market staff are rapt in conversation and laughter and actually are family. Founded as a fish market three decades ago by bayman Bob Reiter and his wife,

Kolina, Bob's later expanded to serve fish and chips and eventually grew to a full-service restaurant—although Bob said it's the fishmarket, rather than the restaurant that still makes a profit, as shoppers look to cook for themselves. Today, Bob and Kolina are still behind the counter weighing and cleaning fish and their son, Earl, often works the kitchen.

With the Reiters' longstanding connections to local fishers, the fish tastes like it's right out of the water. The steamers were juicy and creamy. The flounder was moist and flakey. The soft shell crab was

quite lovely, tasting like crab and not fry batter. Even Bob's bluefish—broiled with blue cheese on top, a decadent dish which takes seafood into uncharted territory—preserved the strong flavor of the fish alongside the strong cheese. The lobster claw and Portuguese fishing

Avid about the freshest local seafood, Iattoni chooses species that seem daring to us, but are traditional fare across the Atlantic. Why? "Because it's fresh. Because it's here."

ball décor and ubiquitous baked potatoes, slaw, fries and disposable tableware—and lack of fresh veggies—will remind some of the Maine Turnpike, but this is all Route 114. (Route 114, just north of George's IGA, 749-0830.)

VINE STREET CAFÉ

Fresh, uncompromising, consistent. No wonder our Shelter Island guests informed us that all tables at this auberge with Asian and Continental overtones have been filled since Vine Street first opened.

The simple décor of clothed wooden tables, white burlap walls, exposed beams, and a concise menu preface a skillful sensibility in the selection of components and flavors. The Plat du Jour blackboard presents an entertaining variety of daily specials: bouillabasse, crispy confit of duck, rainbow trout, whole roasted sea bass.

Chef proprietors Lisa and Terry Harwood have created a country gem. Terry studied with the renowned Charlie Trotter, and remains a disciple, using natural, organic and heirloom ingredients that evoke flavorful masterpieces. His preference for rich saucing stocks, rather than butter or cream, was evident.

Our appetizers were an astonishingly sweet beet salad, tour de force crispy calamari, and succulent frog's legs (a nod to Terry's Tennessean boyhood?) with a perfect remoulade, followed by a lusty steak frite à la Bordelaise and local Shinnecock sea scallops, traditionally Provençal. The Friday special, whole roasted sea bass, Bronzino flown in from the Mediterranean, arrived a stunning tip to tail on the plate, attended by flavor surprises of rosemary, spicy sautéed broccoli rabe, and braised fennel.

From a 60-plus wine list, heavily French, we chose a delightful Italian Prosecco and an appley Austrian Gruner Veltliner. (There were seven local wines.) A Slow Food purist might daydream, but for culinary excellence, Vine Street merits its high marks. (41 South Ferry Road, 749-3210.)

RAMS HEAD

The most romantic place on Shelter Island is the elegant dining porch of the Ram's Head Inn, overlooking Coecles Harbor. It's a little bit like Mt. Vernon, with green lawns rolling to the water, and amber sunsets. A happy family celebration with romping children and chirping birds completed the picture.

Self-described "stewards" James and Linda Eklund have owned the 1920s era seaside inn since 1979. Two accomplished chefs Chris Meenan and Joe Smith mix traditional with daring.

A theme of the restaurant seems to be Slow Food, emphasizing



Above: The action in the kitchen at Planet Bliss. **Previous:** Family and freshness define Bob's Fishmarket and Restaurant, where Bob Reiter takes orders and his son Earl cooks.

local, seasonal ingredients. A second theme was adventure, as in the sensational pan seared Hudson Valley foie gras or tarragon waffle with strawberries and rhubarb.

Duck lovers must not miss the "duck tasting" appetizer comprised of a dark duck prosciutto, foie gras terrine, smoked duck breast and sweet potato duck tart. But our favorite was perhaps the aromatic wild mushroom strudel in a pastry crust. Heaven for wild game lovers would be the elegant "Forest Floor" an entrée of rabbit and

grilled quail. Or perhaps the wild sockeye salmon blanketed in a rich scallop crust. A beautiful apple tart and scoop of vanilla ice cream was only surpassed by an inventive honey orange cheese cake with fresh fruit that sealed our perfect painting of a summer vacation. (108 Ram Island Drive, 749-0811.)

THE DORY BAR AND RESTAURANT

What's open on a Wednesday night when you're hankering for a burger and fries? The Dory, of course, an Island classic. Open seven days, this quintessential American pub has a friendly staff, fun décor and unbeatable views. Its red and white tented porch overlooks a serene wetland and bird sanctuary off Dering Harbor. Nautical paraphernalia and large black and white photographs dot the walls, such as the plane flying low over the New York skyline, the Manhattan and Brooklyn bridges in the distance. Upbeat 40s music and short retro news broadcasts completed the picture.

Living up to its mid-1920s provenance, The Dory offers a great selection of beers, with eight on tap, including the delicious Blue Point lager and pale ale, and a mighty good selection of wines by the glass, half carafe, full carafe and bottle, including local.

The Dory burger was a hand formed premier beef patty cooked to perfection, served with piles of crisp French fries, cole slaw and attended by an excellent pickle. The local steamers were perfect, no heavy handling, and tasted like the sea, even if a touch sandy. Local food snobs might scoff, but for friendly food and burgers, the Dory delivers. (Bridge Street, 749-8871.)

ON SHORE

The sea change at Dering Harbor Inn's On Shore means a cozier, more inventive and more adventurous offering. Chef Marcel Iattoni, beloved as the charming Gallic chef of the Olde Country Inn, partners here with Joanne Piccozzi. The lodge-like space, rearranged into dining areas and a comfortable leather sofa study, features tables added to the patio. Enjoy a symphonic sunset over Dering Harbor under majestic oaks.

Chef Iattoni has revamped his menu and added surprises. You'll be happy to find your favorites, as we did: Iattoni's blissful, classic French duck confit artfully paired with blueberries, sweet potato, and fresh snap peas.

Avid about the freshest local seafood, Iattoni chooses species that seem daring to us, but are traditional fare across the Atlantic. So the

prix fixe offered such local catch as blackfish, squid, and skate. Why? "Because it's fresh. Because it's here," Iattoni responded. A renewable resource as well as delicious, these fish are underutilized here and show some culinary courage.

Our entrée choices happily included seafood pasta and mussels poulette, prepared à la Provençale with wine, lemon and chopped parsley. (These shellfish were the tasty, blue species that isn't native, but has taken up residence in our rocky bays.) "Poulette" or "young hen" refers to the use of eggs yolks in the sauce. Delectable broiled blackfish, a local species also known as black sea bass, abundant from Florida to Maine year round, was napped in a piquant caper sauce.

Smartly poached in a wine caper sauce, the skate's white firm meat and delicate texture was not smothered, but embellished, by the zesty sauce. Odd-looking and kite-shaped, a skate, or ray, is prized for its mild flavor and sweet flesh not unlike a scallop. Myriad ray swim our coastal waters; not as popular here as it is in Britain and France, most of the catch ends up exported.

The squid was simply superb, and our favorite, not the typical deep fried version, but delicate, breaded and broiled. Fished locally, it freezes beautifully, holding its texture and delicate flavor, On Shore's careful preparation would gain fans for this and other unsung denizens of the deep. (13 Winthrop Road, 749-2300.)

PLANET BLISS

You don't need to enter Planet Bliss to feel the energy. It oozes from the slightly psychedelic blue-green-yellow sign out front and the pulsing orange walls, purple and red cushions, and eclectic retro accents inside. Planet Bliss would be right at home in a college town or even on a corner in Williamsburg, Brooklyn. And, in fact, the late-night bar flies at Bliss aren't much older and are no less ready for action.

The bar itself replaced a small food commissary stocking dried beans, soymilk, and other items not common on Shelter Island. (Bars are so much more fun than health food stores.) But Bliss, with tattooed and pierced wait staff, some welcome veggie entrées, and the occasional cat brushing by your shins, held onto its alternative, health food spin. The name Bliss goes way back on the Island and still graces the local variety store. Chef and owner Sebastian Bliss, has worked in restaurants for nearly two decades, picking up Southern-Caribbean influences at kitchens in Key West. His original job behind the grill was during high school when Bliss's location was Cogan's Country Kitchen. Today, his wife, Julie, with roots in design and palpable style, has reinvented the space with its "welcoming chic" personality, while Sebastian infused the air with "world bistro cuisine."

Right now, this world seems to be dominated partly by Southern-style Tex-Mex and East Asia, with Bazie's blue claw crab cakes with lime coriander remoulade and vegetable dumplings with cashew chili sauce. A seafood gumbo spars with pork enchiladas with mole sauce, which in turn plays off of a stir-fried Sichuan shrimp and veggies. Black bean and okra cakes sit next to free-range Southern fried chicken with "Oh, that's good" mac and cheese. The cheese plate from Cavanaugh's Gourmet in Sag Harbor features three of the best America has to offer, including one from our own Mecox Dairy. One dining companion in the wine biz described the wine list as "short, well-chosen and well-priced." Another craving ethnic food on the East End bit into her spicy food and was in heaven. (23 North Ferry Rd. (Rte. 114), 749-0053.) □

RECIPE

SMOKED BLUEFISH PATÉ

by Stephanie Villani, Blue Moon Fisheries, Mattituck

1 lb. smoked bluefish	1 tbsp. capers
1 package cream cheese (8 oz.)	1 tsp. horseradish
1 tbsp. lemon juice	

Remove skin and any bones from fish. Shred the fish into flakes. Combine all ingredients; mix thoroughly and chill. Paté may be served on crackers or bread as an appetizer. (Consider adding 2 tbsp. fresh chopped cilantro or parsley to other ingredients.)