

# Leo's Oyster Bar earns 3 cool stars for refined seafood

By Michael Bauer | May 6, 2016 | Updated: May 6, 2016 9:58am



Photo: John Storey, Special To The Chronicle



The pan seared salmon at Leo's Oyster Bar in San Francisco.

Dorothy Draper's spirit lives in Leo's Oyster Bar. Black and white tile floor, large tropical print wallpaper with bright pink flowers, and over-exuberant details in the compact interior channel one of the most celebrated designers of the 20th century. In the 1930s and '40s she designed such properties as the Greenbrier in West Virginia, the Carlyle in New York and both the Fairmont and the Mark Hopkins lobbies in San Francisco.

Her anti-minimalist approach seems the antithesis of what's popular today. But when you look around Leo's narrow 45-seat dining room with its long pink onyx bar, with an oyster station at the end and a row of tables set before rolled pleated banquettes, what you notice first is that it's chockablock with young, well-dressed patrons. When you tap into the music, the cadence of cocktails being shaken, the pop of oysters being shucked and the buzz of the diners, it feels like a party.

Leo's is the fourth restaurant in the Big Night Restaurant Group, which consists of Marlowe, Park Tavern and Cavalier. Anna Weinberg has been able to create a distinctive feel to each restaurant, but the constant is the warm, efficient service and the bold, satisfying food prepared by chef-partner Jennifer Puccio.

At Leo's, oysters star, naturally. There are more than a half-dozen kinds (\$3-\$4.25) listed on a separate check-off menu, where diners can put together platters of caviar, crab, shrimp, lobster and other cold seafood items. With the shellfish displayed on a mound of ice, the presentation is always beautiful and thoroughly cold —not always the case at other places.

Despite its name, Leo's has a full-blown menu that emphasizes indulgent smaller bites. There are three hot oyster preparations (\$5 each) — one with deviled eggs, where the creamy filling gives way to a crisp fried oyster, and another in which the seafood is treated like carbonara with pancetta on top. In the third preparation, the oysters are baked and mounded with ahi tuna, seaweed and togarashi.

Champagne is also celebrated here, so caviar has its own section with three choices: osetra caviar piled on a truffled beet pancake (\$21) that adds an earthy sweet element; smoked salmon and its roe (\$14); and gold trout roe spooned on miso-broiled trout (\$15).

Other small plates include house-made tater tots (\$12), patties of fried potatoes topped with a scoop of brandade and tapenade. It's salt on salt on salt, but the rich creaminess of the potatoes and the meatiness of the fish keeps it all in check.

Just about everyone is serving something stacked on toast these days, and at Leo's options include an excellent rock shrimp (\$15) — some of the sweetest I've tasted, buoyed with bacon and lemon aioli; and salmon tartare given depth with marrow, capers and dill (\$15). There's also a category for crudos, including ahi tuna (\$18) that paves the plate and is topped with a tea leaf salad with peanuts and toasted garlic that seems to accentuate the suppleness of the fish.

The ahi is the perfect dish to accompany the well-crafted cocktails, whether the feminine Island Girl (rum, banana and spices, \$14), the spiritous Office Supplies (Scotch, amaro and vermouth, \$14), or a retro classic Grasshopper (gin, mint and cream, \$12) — the latter might make a better stand-in for dessert. The star of this show, however, is Mr. Nicholas' Liquid Lunch (\$16), named after Weinberg's husband and business partner, James Nicholas. It's a martini with either Ketel One vodka or Bummer & Lazarus gin, accompanied by a bowl filled with a half dozen or more different kinds of vegetable pickles.



Photo: John Storey, Special To The Chronicle

A server chats with a diner at Leo's Oyster Bar in S.F., which sports tropical wallpaper and playful touches.

Looking back to the history of San Francisco, chef Puccio features a Louie salad updated with Little Gems, radishes, tobiko and sieved egg. Diners can choose to have it with King crab (\$24), rock shrimp (\$18) or a combination of the two (\$22).



Photo: John Storey, Special To The Chronicle



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Rock shrimp toast (\$15) with Garden Party cocktail.

Larger plates include an excellent mussel preparation (\$19) with tomato, pancetta, olives and chiles that's cooked in papillote and unveiled table side, and a lobster roll (\$32), a little disappointing for a signature dish because it was a tad dry and the seafood didn't seem to stand out. But the accompanying fries, thrice cooked in rice bran oil, almost made up for it.

Pan-seared salmon (\$27) with asparagus and a smoked lemon sabayon and a scattering of fresh herbs on top was unquestionably fresh — but practically inedible because it was so salty. I left most of it on the plate and vowed to say something if asked, but no one did. On another visit the kitchen also overstepped the daily sodium allotment with braised short ribs (\$34). I had flashbacks to my childhood when I used to put table salt in the palm of my hand and lick it — that's to say, I love salt, so when a dish is too salty for me it will probably be so for 90 percent of diners.

If there's any criticism to be made of Puccio, one of the city's most talented chefs, is that she consistently takes salt up to the line, which works on the smaller bites where impact is needed to make an impression, but it can be too much when taken in quantity.

There's no doubt that Emily Luchetti is one of the best pastry chefs in the city, and here her offerings are scaled down to small-bite status: a petite sundae (\$7) with vanilla ice cream, caramelized pineapple, coconut and a scattering of pistachios; lemon mousse (\$7) that has a concentrated citrus flavor, modulated by brown butter streusel that helps to clear the pucker and set it up for the next bite; and an intense chocolate mousse (\$5) that goes well with the walnut cookies (\$2). It's a smart move to pare down the size.

Weinberg and her crew not only know how to throw a party but have gained a reputation for transforming awkward spaces into inviting ones. At Park Tavern, an upstairs room became one of the city's most pleasant private dining rooms. At the Cavalier, the restaurant originally looked like bowling alley lanes set end to end. Weinberg broke up the areas and turned the back room into a speakeasy called Marianne's, which has become a gathering place for the tech set.

At Leo's, which for six years was Wexler's, designer Ken Fulk turned a back room into the Hideaway, secreted behind a mirrored wall and accessed through a narrow hall past the tiny kitchen.

After that inauspicious trek, guests are greeted by a glitzy speakeasy lounge featuring another bar, metal tile ceiling, bright brass fixtures and small round cocktail tables. Diners can order the entire menu, save for the four main courses. Where the front can be reserved on OpenTable, this rear area is designed for walk-ins.

The collective talent shown in design, food and service has made Leo's a huge success. With the equally popular Wayfare Tavern just a few doors down, Sacramento Street now has an energy that brings the Financial District alive after dark.



Photo: John Storey, Special To The Chronicle

Mr. Nicholas' Liquid Lunch (\$16) at Leo's Oyster Bar — a martini with either Kettle One vodka or BUMMER & LAZARUS gin, accompanied by a bowl of vegetable pickles.

★ ★ ★

**Leo's Oyster Bar**

**Food:** ★ ★ ★

**Service:** ★ ★<sup>1/2</sup>

**Atmosphere:** ★ ★ ★

**Prices:** \$\$\$\$

**Noise:** Four Bells

568 Sacramento St. (between Montgomery and Sansome), San Francisco; (415) 872-9982 or [leossf.com](http://leossf.com). Lunch 11 a.m.-2:30 p.m. Monday-Friday (oyster bar menu served between lunch and dinner). Dinner 5:30-10 p.m. Monday-Wednesday and until 11 p.m. Thursday-Saturday (bar opens at 3 on weekdays). Full bar. 5% SF surcharge. Reservations and credit cards accepted. Difficult street parking.