

SANDRA BROWN ON TOP *by* Skip Hollandsworth
WHY JODY CONRADT QUIT COACHING *by* Evan Smith
HOUSTON DIVORCE LAWYER TELLS ALL! *by* Mimi Swartz

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The Filter: Dining

OUR FAVORITE RESTAURANTS, BISTROS, CAFES, AND JOINTS



PAT'S PICK Reef *Houston*

WHERE ARE WE, MIAMI? The Bahamas? The shimmering blues and aquatic greens say "seaside." So do the shell light fixtures and the wavy-textured back wall, which reminds me of a David Hockney swimming pool. All that's needed are a few coconut palms to complete the Caribbean vibe. What's driving this motif? Chef Bryan Caswell's menu, which is as fresh and energizing as an ocean breeze. ¶ You remember Caswell. A multirestaurant veteran, the 34-year-old was last seen at Bank, the formal venue in Houston's Hotel Icon. He made a splash there in 2004, but after three years, he and business partner Bill Floyd decided that if they were ever going to jump ship, they had better make their move. Lucky for Houston diners, they bobbed to the surface in Midtown in May. ¶ It's been a while since I've eaten at a restaurant where so many dishes were so good, right off the bat. The kitchen's operating theory seems to be to take classic preparations, throw them up in the air (figuratively speaking, of course), and let them come down in novel ways. Take, for instance, the mussels. The shellfish (left) arrive steamed in a broth incorporating shallots and Shiner Bock. So far, so predictable. But Caswell zaps the liquid with a bit of roasted ancho chile

and cubanelle pepper, and the result is a full-bodied Latin delight. Or consider the snapper carpaccio, a captivating creation. Granted, it doesn't look so great; in fact, the thin grapefruit agrodolce—a sweet-sour jus covering the delicate fish—has all the visual appeal of dishwater. But, oh my, those bright, edgy flavors. Brilliant.

So often these days, starters outclass main courses. Not so at Reef. Scallops, for instance, sit tall and silky on rustic, grainy polenta swirled with truffle oil. If you stir in the accompanying ragout of mushrooms, the effect is even more delish. Slow-baked salmon matches perfectly with subtle lemon risotto (although the fish came out way too rare and had to be sent back for more oven time).

But the thing that I can't get enough of is Caswell's fish with greens. Admittedly, the first time I saw that item on the menu, I thought, "Oh, what a shame, the poor guy has lost his mind." But, boy, was I wrong. The two versions I tried, the crispy-skin snapper (sided by sweet-and-sour chard with a rich brown-butter broth) and the roasted grouper (on braised collard greens with a robust pot likker), were just amazing; the greens had nary a touch of bitterness, and the pristine fish were brimming with flavor. About the only thing at Reef that disappointed me involved meat, the very odd combination of pork carnitas and raita, a Mexican-Indian fusion dish that just didn't work.

Reef's dessert list is simply labeled "Sugar," and while the four choices are all fine, none really grab you by the lapels. The most fun is the petite brandied vanilla Milkshake No Minors. In fact, that gives me an idea. The next time I eat here, I'm ordering one milk shake for me and straws for everybody at the table. Given how light and healthful Caswell's menu is, I don't want to ruin the effect by piling on the calories. And besides, if I skimp on dessert, I can justify coming back for dinner the next night. Bar. 2600 Travis at McGowen (713-526-8282). Open Mon–Thur 11–10, Fri 11–11, Sat 5–11. Closed Sun. Reservations recommended. \$\$–\$\$\$ (W)

For a recipe, go to texasmonthly.com.

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