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pressofAtlanticCity.com : Home At The Shore Dining

New Kids On The Block: Ocean City Seafood Company finds eager customers in resort

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By SCOTT CRONICK, At The Shore, 609-272-7017 | Posted: Thursday, May 21, 2009 3:15 am | 0 comments



Hot Seafood Caesar Salad is available at Ocean City Seafood Company.



Chef Paul Raymond is the first to admit that he likes to talk. A lot. He's not afraid to use big adjectives to describe his new restaurant, the Ocean City Seafood Company, and he's quick to say that his quaint, 35-seat eatery is "the best," especially when it comes to his crab cakes.

Bite into one and you quickly learn that Raymond can back up his braggadocio.

It seems Raymond has a lot to be boastful about these days. Since celebrating its grand opening in early May, the new restaurant has enjoyed the kind of success most restaurants would be happy to have in the middle of the summer, never mind pre-season.

But Raymond, with co-owner and Chief Operating Officer Kathi Sica, seem to have hit the pulse of what Ocean City residents and visitors are looking for: affordable, fresh seafood that's available year-round.

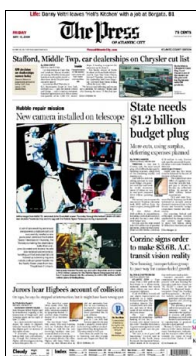
"I have to say we're overwhelmed by the response," says Sica, the quieter of the two partners. "We knew it would be a good fit here because when you pull into town, you see us; it's a great location. But we are doing near double what I thought it would be at this time of year. And it's not just weekends. It's every single night that we're doing a great deal of business. And we're very grateful about it."

Raymond is equally grateful, but he is far less shy talking about the restaurant's success: "I am the P.T. Barnum of seafood. I am the Howard Stern of seafood. No one is even in my area code. What is happening now is everything I said would come to fruition. It's all coming together right now."

Ocean City already knows Raymond. He had his own seafood shop in the Super Fresh market in town, where he consulted with well-known area Chef Willie Lewis to come up with great crab-cake and cream-of-crab-soup recipes. Those two dishes are part of the reason the Ocean City Seafood Company is an instant success. And when it comes to secret recipes, Raymond doesn't really have any. He'll talk about anything.

"It is all about fresh crab meat," Raymond says. "At least 99 percent of other Jersey shore restaurants are using pasteurized crab meat from a foreign country in their crab cakes. We are using a 50/50 mix of fresh jumbo lump and claw (that is from

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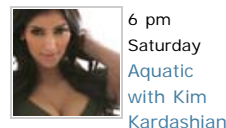
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crab meat is like eating the filet mignon of crab vs. the flank steak when it is pasteurized, because pasteurized crabmeat is saltier and drier. For the crab cakes, we use some cream, butter, veggies and some minimal spices. When you have the chance to eat fresh, sweet, juicy crab meat, why would you mask it with a heavy Baltimore spice? You only do that to mask inferior product."

Raymond and Sica aren't doing it all by themselves. They teamed with Executive Chef John Hoover, a Cape May native who has helmed the Tun Tavern kitchen in Atlantic City, among other area restaurants. His philosophy jives well with the owners'.

"It's all about using the freshest and best quality food as possible," Hoover says. "We are putting out food fast here, but it has to be high quality. I have always worked in gourmet restaurants, so this is new for me. But I am not sacrificing standards. The best part of it is they understand that and are letting me run with what I like to do. If I wasn't able to do that and use the best and freshest ingredients, I wouldn't be here."

Hoover isn't kidding. During the interview, a farmer with fresh tomatoes came to see if Hoover was interested. He bought them right off the truck. He also plans to bring in fresh seafood for specials on a daily basis, including some as far away as Honolulu, Hawaii.

"Right now, we have some wild-caught mahi mahi, and we'll have some fresh wild shrimp coming in today and some big-eye tuna for the weekend," Hoover says. "For me, it's all about freshness."

In addition to his specials, popular regular menu staples include: the hot seafood Caesar salad (\$11.99) with jumbo shrimp, scallops and lump crab meat, garlic, shallots, anchovies, wine and lemon tossed with romaine lettuce, parmesan cheese and croutons; fire-cracker crab balls (\$7.99) rolled and fried and served with a chipotle-mayo dip; local flounder (\$19.99) stuffed with Chef Paul's crab filling; and local jumbo scallops (\$13.99).

"Every dish on the menu went through me," says Hoover, noting there are also plenty of items for meat lovers and vegetarians, including ribs, chicken, burgers, salads and wings. "We took the crab-cake recipe and improved it. We took the cream-of-crab soup and made it better. I am proud of every dish on that menu."

One of the reasons the Ocean City Seafood Company has struck a chord with residents and visitors is price. All entrees and sandwiches come with potato and cole slaw and fresh Bennie's Bread from Ocean City, including a roll made specially for the crab-cake sandwich. The crab-cake platter, for example, is just \$17.99, with most entrees around \$15 and all sandwiches under \$9.

Those prices, good location and better food could mean big things for the new eatery.

"We want to be a year-round venue, because no one else is offering fresh seafood year-round," Sica says. "We don't want to be just be there for the tourists. We want to be part of the community."

"I enjoy this," Raymond adds. "I have the passion and I love the smiles on the faces. I love the instant gratification when they eat and tell you how unbelievable it is. We had a rocket start, and I think it's going to get even more nuts. When we first opened, John and I brought in a deck of cards thinking that we would need to pass some time on weeknights. We haven't played a single hand yet."

Ocean City Seafood Company

WHERE: 846 Central Ave., at the corner of 9th Street, Ocean City

WHEN: Open 11 a.m. to 9 p.m. Mondays to Saturdays, noon to 8 p.m. Sundays, year-round.

HOW MUCH: Appetizers range from \$6.99 to \$7.99; soups \$3.99 to \$6.99; salads \$3.25 to \$11.99; sandwiches, burgers and wraps \$6.99 to \$8.99; seafood entrees \$13.99 to \$19.99; beef, pork and poultry \$9.99 to \$21.99; dessert \$3.99.

SERVICES: No liquor license. No BYOB. Major credit cards accepted. Disabled access through front door. Eat in. Takeout. Free delivery for orders more than \$25. Catering. Kids' menu. No smoking.

MORE INFO: Call 609-814-1203 or go to www.oceancityseafood.com.

BETWEEN YOU AND ME: Don't leave without trying Executive Chef John Hoover's signature key-lime pie for dessert. There's a reason that the pie, which has an almost cheesecake-like consistency with a graham-cracker crust, is the only dessert on the menu: After trying it, you won't want anything else.

Growing the company

Co-owners Kathi Sica and Paul Raymond have big plans for the Ocean City Seafood Company, including opening other restaurants, franchising and selling its seafood, particularly its crab cakes, on a national level. The company, which has a trademarked logo featuring a crab with a chef's hat on, already sells its crab cakes in A&P and Whole Foods markets. "It is our intent to definitely open a second one, if not hundreds of them," Sica says. "We'll look for another location, whether it's on this island or near Cherry Hill or Northeast Philly or even North Jersey, where I am from." The crab cakes are also available on the Web site www.oceancityseafood.com.

Seafood delivery

North, South and Central America). And we are using it in our soups, our salads, our crab cakes. ... We even stuff our flounder with it. And fresh crab meat is much more expensive than the pasteurized stuff, but that's what we want to offer. Eating fresh

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Raymond says that customers are really responding to the restaurant's free deliveries for orders more than \$25. "No one delivers fresh seafood," Raymond says. "It's a big deal. And by July, beachgoers will be able to go to our Web site, place an order and we can deliver up to the corner of the cross street where they are at. They place an order, we call back when we are five minutes away, and then we will meet them. They'll be able to have fresh seafood right on the beach or wherever they are."

Kids' meals

When it comes to taking the kids out to eat well and inexpensively, it will be hard to beat the Ocean City Seafood Company. All five of its children's items are under \$5, including fish and chips. There's a hot dog and fries for \$2.99 and a cheeseburger with fries for \$3.99. "One thing that always drove me nuts is when you go out with the kids and you pay \$7.99 for chicken fingers and they barely touch one and you're yelling at them to eat it," Raymond says. "Here, you can come in and get a grilled cheese and french fries for \$1.99. It puts parents at ease and takes the stress out of the meal. And it's a really affordable option."

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