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MAGAZINE



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Wisecracking Crabs

YOU BET YOU'D HAVE BEEN embarrassed. The situation recalled a movie gag in which an inexperienced diner catapults an escargot from one of those demonically complicated snail-hoisting devices. (It happens in real life; in the 1970s, this writer dodged an airborne snail at a fancy restaurant near Washington, D.C.)

A month or so ago, on an overcast and nearly nasty day, the gloom seemed to lift when thoughts of a sultry bowl of gumbo inspired a lunch-hour dash from downtown to Market Creek Center (Euclid Avenue near Market Street). Herbed, spiced, coddled and just about bewitched, this soup and other Creole specialties share top billing at Magnolia's, the Southern eatery operated by longtime restaurateur Bessie Johnson and her family. Rich in crabmeat, spicy sausage and chicken, the gumbo arrived garnished with curvaceous crab legs, and do-

ing it justice took more concentration than a plate of spaghetti. The messy work required clutching a soup-lubricated leg in one hand, using the other to break the tough shell with a metal cracker and finessing the sweet meat with a cocktail fork.

It pays to be up on your crab-cracking technique. The first leg, which dripped gumbo juices across the hand that clutched it, balefully resisted the cracker. Finally, a more determined twist of the wrist broke off a large portion—which sailed high up in the air at a 45-degree angle, caromed off a window, bounced against the edge of the table and landed far off on the floor. Patrons around the room followed the aerobatics intently before turning their gazes to the red-faced diner, who busied himself buttering a corn muffin. The gumbo was superb to the bottom of the bowl, but the other crab legs were relegated, uncracked, to a side plate.

MAMMA MIA, THAT'S a speecy-spicy meatball—and it may be rolled from shrimp, duck, boar or even rabbit. Monday nights now are "Meatball Mondays" at Jsix, the redoubtable East Village restaurant in Hotel Solamar (the special includes one glass of house wine and costs \$12, placing it squarely in the "steal" category). Chef Christian Graves, ever the innovator, can be absolutely

SIDE DISH



E Is for Extraordinary Excellence

CHOCOLATE MAY NOT BE HER MUSE, but Karen Krasne certainly understands the magic that can be wrought with this unique gift from nature. To celebrate 20 years of bringing San Diegans just about to joyful tears with the amazing pastries at her two Extraordinary Desserts locations, the maître pâtissière created a quintet of chocolate bars that express her preference for "E" words: extravagant, expensive and, yes, extraordinary. Several are inspired by the cakes that have made Krasne famous, such as Gianduia (a "darkened" milk chocolate bar with caramelized hazelnuts) and the bittersweet Au Chocolat. The brilliant 20 Years Anniversary Bar fills bittersweet chocolate with salted caramel and will remain in your memory at least as long as it lingers on your hips.