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Grabbing life by the lobster tail

The festive Lobster Bar Sea Grille joins the party on Las Olas.

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Lobster Bar Sea Grille in Ft.Lauderdale. Carline Jean, Sun Sentinel (Carline Jean, Sun Sentinel / October 27, 2013)

By **John Tanasychuk**, Staff writer
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If you find yourself at Las Olas Boulevard and Fifth Avenue one evening and hear a buzz coming from the building on the corner, pay careful attention.

It's the sound of about 200 gleeful restaurant patrons, relishing their night at the 2-month-old Lobster Bar Sea Grille. Downtown Fort Lauderdale now has a jaw-dropping, showoffy, destination restaurant. It's also very expensive.

Atlanta-based Buckhead Life Restaurant Group, which owns Chops Lobster Bar and City Fish Market in **Boca Raton**, spent \$3.5 million remaking the former Jackson's Steakhouse, which sat empty after closing four years ago. The new restaurant is an elegant ode to classic seafood restaurants. Every surface of the restaurant seems to be covered in white subway tile. If it's not tiled, it's mirrored. There's a white coffered ceiling. White Carrara marble covers the bar top and surrounds the oyster and appetizer kitchen in the center of the dining room. Fresh fish is displayed on a bed of ice. A huge stainless-steel bowl holds tomatoes or gourds, depending on the season. Wait staff in white shirts, black trousers and black vests glide

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through the dining room. It's easy to tell that many of them have never served in a restaurant with such high aspirations.

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On a busy Friday night earlier this month, the restaurant was one big, glorious party. It was a four-star scene in a four-star setting.

And then, there's the food.

It's good. Sometimes very good. But it occasionally feels secondary to the socializing.

Char-grilled Mediterranean octopus (\$17), for instance, is very good; simply served with pickled red onions and Santorini capers. Steak tartare Parisienne (\$16) is also very good, nimbly seasoned with a texture between ground and chopped. But ahi tuna tartare (\$16) with pickled pulled

wild mushrooms and thin waffle chips tasted fishy. At the bar one night, Sea Grille escargots au Pernod (\$14 for six/\$24 for 12) were so salty that we returned them. Too bad, because they looked gorgeous on their white plate, each hollow topped with a round of puff pastry. A chopped salad (\$12) was just right, dressed in creamy lemon-basil lime.

Given the restaurant's name, it's no surprise that the staff likes to talk up lobster. Be sure to share an order of flash-fried lobster tail (\$59 per pound), served with drawn butter and honey-mustard aioli. The outside of each piece is so thinly crisp that it's hard tell if there's any batter on the lobster. Just be sure to eat this dish the moment it arrives. It cools quickly.

One section of the menu is named Whole Fish Experience. It features as many as eight different species cooked whole, of course, with olive oil, lemon, oregano and Santorini capers accompanied by quinoa and kale. At \$32 per pound, the menu recommends three quarters to one pound per person. Three of us shared a 2 1/4-pound dorade (\$72). The fish was outrageously fresh and buttery tasting, but there was so little fillet that it truly was just one serving. Our mistake. We should have ordered something larger.

But we were also sharing Dry Aged Porterhouse Experience for Two (\$64), a 26-ounce beauty. Unfortunately, both the loin and the strip portion were unacceptably chewy. A manager walked by just as we were chewing and choosing between returning this sad excuse for custom-aged prime beef or soldiering on. Said manager saw our quandary, but rather than whisking it away, he seemed to be challenging us to ask him to take it away. We kept it.

On another night, however, we had a deliciously tender New York strip (\$29, 8-ounce/\$39, 12-ounce/\$54, 12-ounce). It had the nice chew of a strip and that wonderful rich beefy flavor. We couldn't help but try white truffle butter, one of four so-called steak enhancements (\$4). Triple-crème-blue-cheese butter, cracked-pepper-crust-ed-au-poilvre sauce and classic bearnaise round out the offerings. Shareable side dishes (\$8) were impeccable, from tater-tot coins and cauliflower gratin to Brussels sprouts leaves dotted with lardons and sauteed wild mushrooms with baby artichokes and sweet Grana Padana cheese.

There are other seafood offerings on the menu, where we found fresh fettuccine (\$29) with one pound of lobster morsels, chanterelle mushrooms and a rich lobster sauce. It was incredible.

LBSG, as some people are now calling this place, has a very busy bar scene, and I can see the 30-seat patio filling up as the weather gets cooler. The thoughtful wine list includes choices at every price point. They also pour a very nice cocktail.

I was delighted to see pavlova on the dessert menu (\$10 each). The crispy meringue is served with passion-fruit mousse, mango pudding and sorbet. Rum Baba here is a rum-soaked brioche round with apricot coulis and creme diplomat. An old-fashioned chocolate-praline sundae had banana split aspirations made with hazelnut and chocolate ice cream, banana, blondies and marshmallow.

Come to LBSG on a busy night. Everything tastes better. The party is captivating.

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