

# ICON

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Dining

ROBERT GORDON

## OCEAN

EASTON NEVER CEASES TO surprise. Certainly, reviewing another excellent Easton restaurant is no longer a surprise. At this point, this quaint riparian town's abundance of high-quality restaurants is no secret. The surprise is the name, Ocean, one of that scene's major players. It's situated smack dab in the middle of this inland terrain, a good 60 miles away from where the Atlantic laps our eastern shores. Yet despite the geographic disconnect, Ocean's moniker hits the mark metaphorically.

To start, diverse bounty pervades Ocean's menu. The tapas are superb, tastier in my opinion than any restaurant ICON featured in 2009. I lavish that praise sans hyperbole and with corroboration: *Lehigh Valley Magazine* has awarded Ocean "Best Restaurant in Easton" for the past two years, so I'm not alone in my assessment. Visually, guests submerged in Ocean's sleek, sexy interior find themselves mesmerized by the ambiance. The ceiling undulates stylish gray waves overhead. Blue light washed the ether. A translucent, watery room divider bounds the bar area from the main dining room. An intoxicating current of sophistication flows throughout. Ocean successfully packages high-tide Manhattan sophistication with low-tide prices. Many tapas suffice as mini-meals in themselves, however tapa prices top out at \$13. Entrées average about \$20 and desserts \$6—extremely low prices given the excellence and polish of the dishes and the digs.

Ocean is an extravaganza of tapas, a fête extraordinaire. No fewer than 20 beckon on the daily menu which has been skillfully crafted by Chef and CIA grad Nathaniel Leonard. The sweep of the list is impressive; Pierogis, Duck Confit, St. Louis Cut Pork Ribs, Lobster Mac & Cheese, Phyllo Wrapped Herbed Goat Cheese, Fish & Chips are a few ports of call on the menu's globe-trotting itinerary. I've sampled most of the tapas and encountered nary a sour note.

The Chef excels at expanding culinary stretch in his creations. A comfort dish like mac & cheese enjoys a yummy retake/rehab thanks to the addition of butter-poached lobster and mascarpone-enriched orzo. The traditional Polish staple pierogis update and upscale with truffle and Gruyère stuffing that's goosed with herb crème fraîche. The Chef riffs French with Duck Confit. This Charcuterie platter features a soulful repertoire of dressed meats along with grilled pain, pickled shallots, gutsy mustard, and mâche.

Butternut Squash Soup makes a tasty detour. Tiny pieces of squash, green onions, and slivers of Maitake mushrooms glut the light, liquidy stock which, contrary to the customary prep, is not sweetened. Craisins supply the sole sweet note. The Caramelized Onion Soup restores my faith. This French import has suffered so from its own popularity that I never order it, unless I'm reviewing. I've seen most preparations decline over the past three decades into a cheesy, overwrought, heavy-handed parody. Not so here. The stock is velvety smooth, and Gruyère cheese and rye croutons add grit in proper measure to an outstanding rendition.

Quality ingredients, expert handling, and creative pairings characterize the cuisine. St. Louis Pork Cut Ribs merits kudos not only for fall-off-the-bone tenderness but also for kickin' Guinness-based BBQ sauce. In another coup, the Chef successfully dismantles/remantles the British culinary standard, fish & chips. It's not unlikely that, until this version, I never characterized fish & chips as a "culinary standard" (which is rather like characterizing Barney Fife as a "police officer").

Space prohibits further run down—more accurately stoke up—of the tapas. Suffice it to say that Pommes Frites, Crispy Calamari, Yellow Fin Tuna Tartare—utterly superb, Panko-Fried Hen Egg Lyonnaise—ditto, Sweet Potato Risotto, and others boost appetite and adventure to giddy heights.

Did I mention attention to detail, to use a pop biz cliché? In this case, the cliché has legs. Literally. Chip, Ocean's ubiquitous, indefatigable frontman has assembled a loyal, well-trained, eagle-eyed staff which is ever cheerfully on patrol. As for detail, the pandebono is an exemplar of the kind of touch that isolates the upper echelon restaurant from the rest of the pack. Pandebono (which literally means "good bread"—an apt tag) is a tasty Colombian creation made with corn flour, cassava starch, eggs, and cheese. Served with butter and red chili and honey, pandebono is addicting.

Even with such a stellar tapa roster, Ocean hardly short-changes or de-emphasizes entrées. Nor does it overprice them. More than one-third of the entrée list falls below \$20. Selections split evenly between land and sea. There's also a vegetarian choice.

Grilled escolar pedestals atop snowy, house-made pillows of gnocchi commingled with wilted spinach, flanked by a huge beige dollop of celeriac purée. Mushrooms and scrumptious blackberry gastrique pool atop the escolar. At \$21, this destination dish is masterfully crafted. The recipe for Roasted Cod transforms a fish too often served off-the-mark into a coup-de-force. The accompaniment of pearl onion and chicken confit hash and cauliflower lend heady stability to this fish that, in the hands of the wrong chef, often suffers from extreme unctuousness. Awash in blood orange emulsion, fluffy coupons of Diver Scallops mound up in a beautifully presented dish and blend their dulcet tones with mustard greens and muscular truffle risotto.

Smoked Bone-in Pork Loin is a colorful composite of bitey Swiss chard, fruity apple purée, and butter-roasted salsify (a vegetable with an unusual oyster-like taste). The palette of colors alone in this medley impress. However the treat is the interplay of textures and tastes that coaxes more flavor from the pork than any other recipe within recent memory. Filet Mignon with a red wine demiglace and Pepper-Crusted 10-ounce Strip Steak in natural jus satisfy no-frills traditionalists. In contrast, Angus Short Ribs, served with the French staple, white beans along with pungent arugula ragout, lays a transcendent treatment on this comfort-food fave.

There are four desserts ranging from \$5 to \$7. Each is prepared meticulously on-site. Cheesecake Spring Rolls, sluiced in savory vanilla crème anglaise and fruity mixed berry coulis is the pièce de résistance—challenged ably and consistently by the Chef's Daily Chocolate dessert.

You'll need several visits to plumb Ocean's depths. A savvy restaurant crowd is tuned into that advice. In my profession, I'm afforded a good overview of the health of the restaurant sector. It's not good at the moment—hasn't been for some time. You'd never know that at Ocean. With a capacity of 80, Ocean is usually packed, energetic and hopping.

So what is the significance of the name? The answer won't inspire Dan Brown to pick up pen. "There's nothing all that profound in the name," Chip laughs. "The owner likes water. He associates good luck and good things with water. He owns the River Grille in town. That's a water reference too. So, this is Ocean. That's all there is to it."

That's not all there is to Easton's Ocean. For foodies, this place, while not a shore thing, is a sure thing. ■