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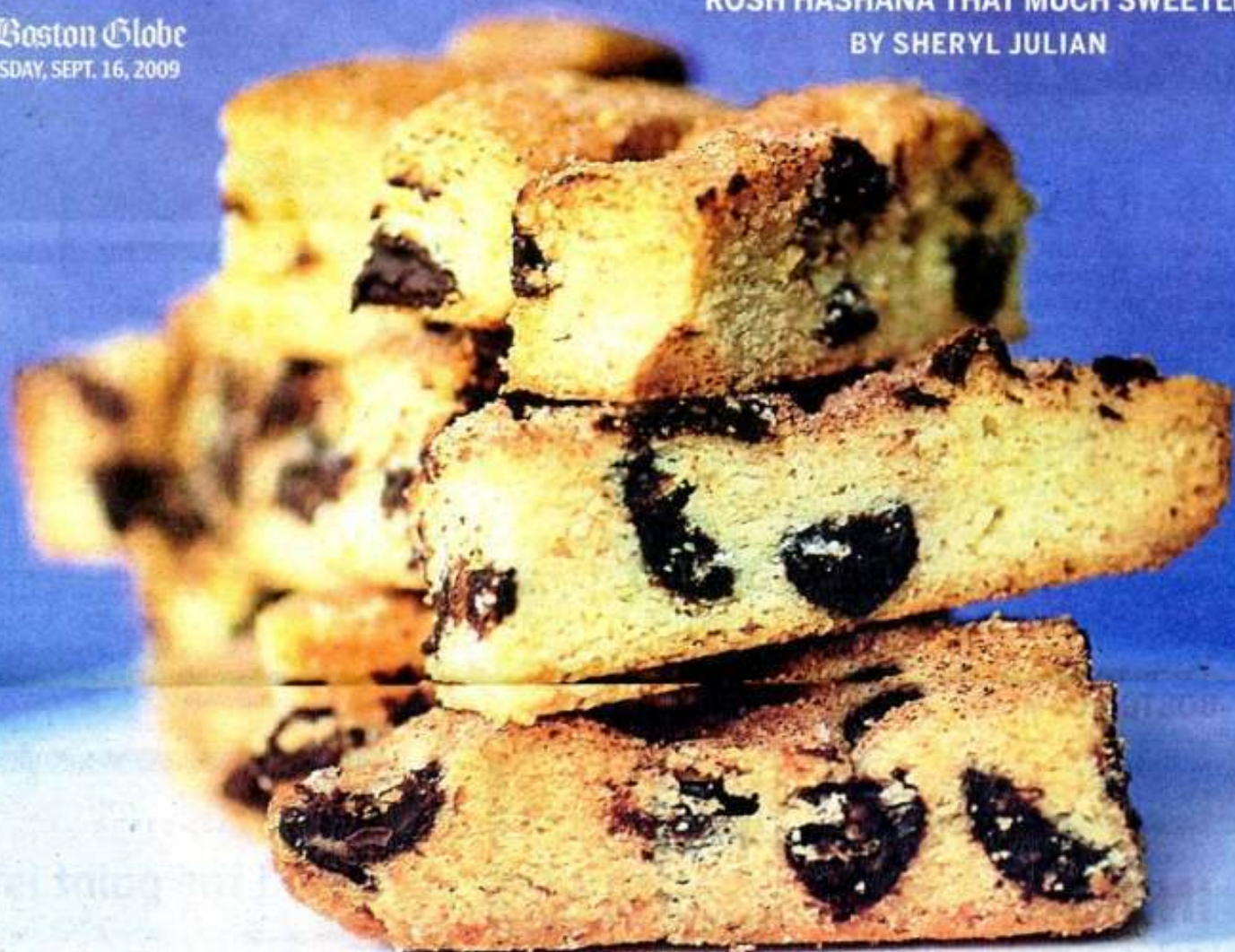
FOOD

The Boston Globe
WEDNESDAY, SEPT. 16, 2009

EVERYTHING OLD IS NEW AGAIN

TRADITIONAL FAVORITES,
SUCH AS MANDELBROT, MAKE
ROSH HASHANA THAT MUCH SWEETER

BY SHERYL JULIAN



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DINA BUDICK/GLOBE STAFF

Temple Bar's Black Angus burger, a juicy half-pounder, comes with fries that are crisp and dusted with rosemary.

Great expectations

Bold, innovative style is hit and miss at Temple Bar

By Devra First
GLOBE STAFF

Sadness: Temple Bar patrons learned earlier this year that chef Tom Berry was leaving for Nantucket's Great Harbor Yacht Club. Excitement: Chef Michael Scelfo would replace him. The restaurant gods giveth and taketh away.

Scelfo earned a following at restaurants such as Tea Tray in the Sky and North Street Grille, a dab hand in the kitchen and a clever crafter of menus. He uses bold flavors in interesting, often mouth-watering combinations. He made dinner worth having at

the less-than-food-focused Good Life. He's a talented guy.

Temple Bar's menu sounds like classic Scelfo: pork belly braised in cider with malt vinegar aioli, pear salad, and cider syrup; pan-seared redfish with artichoke ragout, bacon, cardoons, and tomato vinaigrette; chicken with savory corn pudding, zucchini, and honey-thyme butter. Bold flavors, interesting combinations.

But at Temple Bar, this doesn't always mean perfect results.

Some dishes live up to their potential. The redfish, for example, is lovely — the fish smoky and moist, served atop a generous pile of artichoke hearts studded with bites of thick bacon. There's a little side salad of red and gold cherry tomatoes and microgreens, perfumed with tarragon. It's well realized and delicious.

The pork belly appetizer is outrageous, a fatty and crisp slab that is nearly overwhelming in its richness, rescued by the presence

of pear slivers and vinegar and cider acid. It's very good, though a bit more sweetness would be welcome.

Calamari is coated in an addictively light batter; mussels become something exciting when accented with pieces of house-made merguez sausage. Even better are the merguez sliders on the bar menu, worth a trip to Temple Bar in their own right: three toasted brioche buns sandwiching slices of pickle and slabs of the fantastic lamb sausage, its

spices standing up nicely to the lanolin flavor of the meat. Temple Bar's burger, a juicy Black Angus half-pounder, also holds its own in the pantheon of local patties; the fries, crisp and dusted with rosemary, are contenders, too.

But too often a dish that is almost great has fatal flaws. The chicken is a bit dry, but so full of flavor and with such crisp skin it almost doesn't matter. The accompanying corn pudding is baked in a little dish, with a nicely puffed-up, browned top. It tastes overwhelmingly of dill, though, and we encounter about

three kernels of corn in our serving.

Seared scallops are perfect, sweet with silky middles. Servers ask how we would like them and the redfish cooked: Is medium-rare all right? Beyond the realm of steak, it's time for restaurants to dispense with this query and just serve food that's cooked properly — as the scallops are after we say we'll leave it in the hands of the chef.

If we have to be asked, though, ask us how we'd like our grains. The farro accompanying the dish, prepared in the style of risotto, is vastly undercooked. Yes, farro ought to be chewy, but edibly so. Risotto with peas and chanterelles, on the other hand, is overcooked and mushy. Earthy and green, the flavors sing, but with no bite to the rice, it's hard to enjoy them.

A brined and grilled pork chop comes with caramelized shallot and cheese panade — a stuffing-like bread casserole — and a fig and black truffle vinaigrette. Despite all those wonderful-sounding flavors, the impression one is left with is "salt lick": brining gone awry.

For dessert, pecan pie is a medley of sugar and nuts, good enough though served with a forgettable coconut ice cream. Ice cream sandwiches suffer from the same problem; they're served with a shot of fruity, sweet liquid for sipping, but it seems random rather than inventive. Chocolate fondue for two is the clear winner for dessert — fruit, biscotti, cake, and a vat of chocolate to dip them in. It's hard to go wrong. Cocktails are strong here, and there's a decent selection of beer. An uninspiring, fairly commercial by-the-glass wine list could use some sprucing up.

Whether dishes are spot-on or a bit off, they take a long time to arrive. ("Not to be too American, but where is our food?" one diner whines.) Temple Bar is a good place to relax, dark and comfortable, with giant mirrors framed in wood, exposed brick walls, and a crowd of Cantabrigians of all ages and types. One doesn't want to rush off. Still, the lag between ordering food and receiving it can begin to wear.

If all the dishes were as solid as Temple Bar's strongest offerings, one wouldn't mind the leisurely pace. Scelfo has high expectations to live up to. When he's at his best, his food is worth the wait.

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TEMPLE BAR

★★

1688 Massachusetts Ave., Cambridge. 617-547-5055.

www.templebarcambridge.com.

All major credit cards accepted. Wheelchair accessible.

Prices Appetizers \$8-\$16. Entrees \$9-\$32. Dessert \$6-\$15.

Hours Dinner Sun-Wed 5-10:30 p.m. (late-night menu until midnight), Thu-Sat 5-11 p.m. (late-night menu until 12:30 a.m.).

Brunch Sat 10:30 a.m.-3 p.m., Sun 10:30 a.m.-4 p.m.

Bar Mon-Fri 5 p.m.-1 a.m., Sat-Sun 11-1 a.m.

Noise level Music can be loud.

May we suggest

Merguez sliders, pork belly, redfish, hamburger.



PHOTOS BY DINA RUDICK/GLOBE STAFF

Bold flavors abound in the braised pork belly (above) and the redfish with artichoke ragout, bacon, and tomato vinaigrette.

