

Frankie's fame and flavor at Fishmonger's Market

Soulful seafood and great crudos in Middletown



Cherry Hamachi

In today's overheated food world, a platform counts. Whether it's opening a restaurant or publishing a book, "followers" and "friends" matter, sometimes at the expense of flavor. So, when Frankie "The Bull" Terzoli—of Bravo TV *Top Cheffame* and Food Network *Cutthroat Kitchen* glory—opened a new restaurant inside 57 Degrees in Middletown, I was dubious. **Fishmonger's Market & Seafood Bar**(1735 Hancock St.) belied my cynicism.

While it was Terzoli's stint on Season Two of *Top Chef* that brought him into the public eye, he has deep roots in both the restaurant and fishing worlds. A second-generation fisherman and licensed captain since he was 10 (and Global Sourcing Manager for Great American Seafoods), Terzoli began cooking as a teenager in his uncle's restaurant, Point Loma's Venetian. Both worlds, as well as his food TV fame, come together at Fishmonger's.

A dish of steamed clams underlines the point: Quality Manila clams are balanced—and highlighted—by a garlicky broth featuring Italian sausage and fennel. A glug of white wine in the broth does much the same for mussels marinara. Neither looks fancy. Neither suffers for it. It's the deep, comforting flavors that make both.

A bit more elegant were Fishmonger's crudos. They range from a grilled octopus to several salmon options and a couple of hamachis. Many featured some form of fruit and salicornia (AKA sea beans, sea asparagus or samphire). Perhaps the best of these was a cherry hamachi featuring candied cherry, salicornia, raspberry balsamic vinegar, watermelon radish and smoked salt. Instead of fruity flavors taking over the dish, the sea bean's brininess and the radish's bite made the dish both balanced and beautiful.

Another great appetizer was the baccalà-stuffed peppers, a play on a classic Spanish tapa of salt-cod in piquillo peppers. The kitchen whips the soaked and rehydrated baccalà and deep-fries the stuffed pepper, serving it with a remoulade dipping sauce.

There were hints of inconsistency. Fishmonger's play on a tuna melt was a riot of good flavors—the smoked tuna coming to the fore with a cascade of beautiful diced heirloom tomato on top and a fatty layer of melted brie cheese tying the flavors of the dish together. The problem, however, was architectural: It's not practically possible to consume this open-faced sandwich in such a way as to taste all the flavors at once. It was a similar issue with the grilled shrimp po'boy. The flavor was good, the engineering: not so much.

Terzoli makes no bones about the fact he's not the guy behind Fishmonger's stove on a day-to-day basis. That's a younger man's game. He's the one who guides what goes on the plate rather than the one who puts it there. When I mentioned I'd seen him put out some pretty good plates of food, Terzoli replied: "I beat those kids because I knew how to roll with the punches."

He adds that he didn't care about the tricks or the pretty plates.

"I care about the flavors and the food."

Deep, evocative flavors and heaping, honest plates. For the most part, that's just what's on offer at Fishmongers.