



3.5 / 5 Gavels

The most beloved appetizer for sharing has to be fried calamari. Whether the restaurant is Italian, Asian, or American, calamari will be a top seller. Good thing that Banks Seafood Kitchen and Raw Bar, the re-branded Harry's Seafood Grill on the Wilmington Riverfront, offers a flawless Fried Calamari. The scrumptious squid arrives at your table hot, crispy and coated in just enough breading. Slices of fried pickled jalapeño are mixed throughout for a little kick. To create the perfect bite, combine a tentacle or ring (there is an even distribution of both!) with a jalapeño and scoop of the red curry crema accompaniment. Kudos to Chef/Owner David Leo Banks, who was co-owner of Harry's establishments for almost 30 years, for creating the best calamari in the Wilmington area.

Banks' menu, as large as a full broadsheet of newspaper and printed daily, has dozens of first course options. From the raw bar's shrimp cocktail to clam chowder to snapper ceviche, there is something for everyone. The group I dined with recommends (after the Fried Calamari, of course) the Sriracha Crab Timbale with avocado and wakame. The wakame seaweed forms a crisp bed for the pleasantly spicy and plump crabmeat.

During our evening of tasting around the menu, we also ordered the Smoked Salmon Crisps. The components were excellent – creamy smoked salmon and citrus crème fraîche dotted with capers atop crunchy wonton crisps. The only downside was that the assemblages required some deconstruction to enjoy.

Although calamari “rings in” this review, oysters on the half shell must begin your meal.

When we dined at Banks, ten varieties, both east coast and west coast, were on the shucking block. The selection is ever-changing, but I hope these three of the six we tried, listed in our order of preference, are available on your visit.

- Watch Hill (Rhode Island) – plump and briny
- Stellar Bay (British Columbia) – creamy with a sweet melon finish
- Damariscotta (Maine) – also briny but not as plump as Watch Hill

Now, I must pause for the bread. You only have one chance to make a first impression. Banks, with its nice crusty artisan bread, makes a good one indeed.

The main courses we sampled were lackluster after savoring the above smaller plates. The Lobster Cioppino contained shrimp and Maine lobster whose textures were sub par. The Oven Roasted Corvina was flaky but over-salted. The Rare Seared Big Eye Tuna with soba noodles had a pleasant flavor but nothing about the dish made it “pop”.

A few final thoughts: The Blueberry Buckle and house-made Strawberry Basil Sorbet ended our meal on a sweet high note. Cocktails each of us enjoyed are the Honey Mezcal Martini (pleasantly smoky), Signature Old Fashioned (bitter classic) and Make-a-Mule (refreshing in a cute copper mug). Our recommended wines from the extensive list are the Chateau de Paraza Minervois Rosé (tasting notes of citrus and strawberries) and the La Rioja Alta Viña Alberdi Reserva Tempranillo (nose of red berries, smooth and full bodied).

In sum, I recommend you enjoy a variety of raw bar items and appetizers to maximize taste sensations rather than a main course. Also, do not overlook the truffle parmesan fries, the best of the frites, for sharing. They are crispy, thin and better than popcorn. The prices for the raw bar, appetizer and beverages are on point for a seafood restaurant, but the entrée items are a bit on the high side. The open, bright space allows for easy conversation on a weeknight, and our attentive and helpful server made for a relaxed dining experience.

Please look for the gavel rating system in future *Judicial Palate* restaurant reviews. 

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