

# Lighting the Way

## A seasoned Cypress takes on the world

BY JEFF ALLEN

### Cypress Lowcountry Grille

American/Eclectic — Upscale

Entrées \$20 and up

Downtown

167 East Bay St.

727-0111

Dinner

People can't help but fall in love with Cypress. This became abundantly clear when it first opened years ago, a fancy throwback to the mid-20th century, serving lobster Thermidor, tableside Caesar salads, and big, brawny slabs of steak. I still lust after the cowboy rib steak that once graced the table, so delicious and full of marbled fat that my wife raced me home for lunch the next day to steal the remains of the gargantuan portion from the refrigerator. As the restaurant matured, so did the menu. Gone are most of the items straight from a 1960s dinner club, replaced with decidedly new American fare that combines classic French preparations with an Asian accent under the watchful eye of Chef Craig Diehl. The "wall of wine" remains, as does the awesome décor, and a new cookbook highlighting the restaurant's food lets you take it all home, but eating it all in-house is so much better.

For a place that's been around awhile, Cypress still feels as trendy and fresh as the day the stark white tablecloths welcomed the first diner. The old jacket requirements for the downstairs seating are gone, which means that you can now enjoy the fanciest of seats among the coolest light show in town. Like a slow-mo disco, the scones and lamps reverberate through a programmed array of colors — first pink, then blue, all pastel and glinting through the wine and in the reflections of the polished tableware, waves of refraction spilling out upon the table.

When they first opened and you sat there in a stuffy jacket, all dressed up like a yachtsman, nosing on shrimp cocktails and martinis, the Vegas shtick seemed somewhat over the top. Now the fion chameleon glows with a renewed purpose — it provides the perfect metaphor for the creative impulses of Craig Diehl, whose efforts make Cypress the best it's ever been. He twists world flavors like a contortionist in a steel trap — sushi over fresh oysters, scallops, bacon, and hominy in concert, fried goat-brie crusted in an almond crunch — they all pour forth with incredible balance and a touch that makes the diverse flavors seem perfectly at home, rubbing elbows across diverse geographies. The old-



AT CYPRESS, CHEF CRAIG DIEHL SERVES KUMOMOTO OYSTERS TOPPED WITH A SLAB OF FRESH SASHIMI TUNA AND GARNISHED WITH CILANTRO, LIME, AND JUST A TOUCH OF WASABI

school favorites are still on the menu, but a seasonal bill of fare interposes the classics, making the entire menu flexible and exciting.

Diehl's juxtapositions are profound. The "sashimi tuna and Kumamoto oysters" (\$15) represent the perfect start to a beautiful meal. A thick, rectangular bed of ice lands in front of you, a line of oysters extending along the cold sparkling carpet. They are tiny, serrated cups of brine, each trembling beneath a perfect slab of blood red tuna. You suck them down in one bite, a sweet concoction teeming with the herbiness of cilantro and the spike of lime before the wicked bite of wasabi.

The "Caesar Salad" (\$9) still summons the old tableside carts, wheeling their way from place to place, dispensing the sweet garlicky stench of delicious romaine leaves, and it is good, but the seasonal entries, which evidently change monthly, steal the show. The "Oak-Roasted Chicken" (\$22) is some of the best I've ever tasted in a restaurant (even if I rarely order chicken).

It is smoky, juicy, which a wonderful flavor indicative of a quality bird. A single voluptuous breast sits surrounded by glazed vegetables. Carrots, leeks, and artichokes are bathed in a sheen of fine olive oil.

The "Rice Paper Wrapped Halibut" (\$30) is also a stout plate, a flattened cylinder of fish perched atop piles of ramps, shiitakes, garlic confit, asparagus, and tarragon — the flavors melding into a tremendous harmony that perfectly represents the beauty of Cypress. It bends logic, defies expectation, changes in ways that would seem detracting until you sit down, try them, and realize that the diversity within the menu and surroundings provides a rich palate massaged into perfect balance by a very competent staff. This extends from the swanky bar overlooking the giant glass wine cellar to the final dessert at the table. One of those desserts happens to feature rhubarb and strawberries at the moment, another strange combination that proved a fitting end to a surprisingly perfect meal. ■