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DINING BRIEFS



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ENJOY THE TRIP Maison Premiere's seafood takes you to Long Island Sound, Narragansett Bay, Cape Cod and beyond.

MAISON PREMIERE

298 Bedford Avenue (Grand Street), Williamsburg, Brooklyn; (347) 335-0446, maisonpremiere.com.

Like Balthazar, Maison Premiere is a fake that sometimes improves on the original. Keith McNally's SoHo restaurant feels like a lost brasserie that was uncovered during routine construction work on Spring Street.

At Maison Premiere, the set-dressing is taken to another plane. You don't believe the place has been sitting on Bedford Avenue for ages. Instead you feel as if you've slipped through a wormhole to the French Quarter in the late 1800s. Telephones and lightbulbs are still an implausible

rumor. Absinthe is not just legal but safer than drinking water.

The pains the designers took with the interior can stagger the imagination. Is the toilet really flushed by pulling a chain on a wood tank on the wall? (Seems that way.) Was all the liquor behind the bar decanted into antique bottles? (No, but the head barman, Maxwell Britten, apparently buys from a distributor who specializes in brands with old-fashioned labels.)

So strong is the room's pre-industrial pull that when you feel the urge to reach for your phone, you check yourself. Nobody wants to be the party crasher from the wrong century.

Stagecraft dominates the experience until the moment a plate of oysters shows up, and you eat one. That's when you understand that the fakers who run this place are for real.

Maison Premiere was dreamed up by Josh Boissy, who operates a bistro across the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway called Le Barricou. He is serious about shellfish. When you take a seat at Maison Premiere, you are handed a long list of spirits, cocktails (absinthe figures prominently in

these) and wines; a pencil, and a seafood menu.

You can check off sweet steamed king crab legs (\$34), smaller Jonah crab claws (\$20) or both. You can — you should — place an X next to the shrimp cocktail, so you can be reminded how good that dish is when the shrimp are tender and briny and the sauce is spicy and sharp. The lobster (\$18 for a half, \$34 for a whole) tastes like it was simmered in a pot of Maine seawater.

And then you can begin exploring the oysters (\$1.95 to \$3.15), a long trip that will take you up the Long Island Sound, past Narragansett Bay, around Cape Cod and all the way up to the Maritime Provinces: around 20 oysters, some of them rarely seen this far from home. When you've finished that itinerary, you can hop across the continent and get to work on the dozen or so West Coasters.

As for the local oysters that hit the spot when one is in New Orleans but can seem flabby and bland the farther they get from the Gulf of Mexico, they are not served here. As I said, Maison Premiere sometimes improves on the original.