

PRICE \$5.99

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TABLES FOR TWO MAISON PREMIERE



298 Bedford Ave., Brooklyn (347-335-0446)—Recently, a small hand-painted sign—“Bar/Oysters”—appeared above a weathered verdigris door in Williamsburg, discreetly marking the arrival of a French Quarter-inspired speakeasy. But does the nation’s capital of artisanal bitters really need another nostalgia-soaked outpost for herb muddling? In the case of the pitch-perfect Maison Premiere, which complements its absinthe-slanted cocktail menu with a very fresh raw bar, the answer is absolutely.

The co-owners Josh Boissy and Krystof Zizka (of the Brooklyn bistro Le Barricou) enlisted the designers John and Kevin McCormick (who helped turn back the clock at Freemans) to create an interior so convincingly bygone—from the horseshoe-shaped bar, with its green marble absinthe fountain, to the print of Napoleon near the rest room—that you may feel as if you’ve stumbled into the Belle Époque scene in Woody Allen’s “Midnight in Paris.” Not that you’re likely to find the director in the crowd, which swells during the dollar-per-oyster happy hour—and not just because the median age of Maison Premiere’s patrons hovers somewhere below thirty. Allen once quipped, “I will not eat oysters. I want my food dead.” The only cooked options here are succulent chilled lobster, crab legs, and a shrimp cocktail worth ordering just for the addictive kick of its sauce. (Technically, the sorbet-cold red-snapper ceviche isn’t raw, either.) With more than thirty-three varieties

of oysters on ice—Naked Cowboys from Long Island Sound, Beausoleils from New Brunswick, Moon Shoals from Massachusetts—the bivalve-averse should head elsewhere. There’s not so much as a bread stick to dunk in your quartet of condiments: mignonette, aioli, and horseradish, in addition to cocktail sauce.

One secret to Maison Premiere’s success (it already ranks among *Esquire’s* best bars of 2011) is its intimacy, which heightens the mood of Big Easy romance, as does the Delta-blues soundtrack. First dates might opt for a seat at the raw bar in the back, where expert shuckers offer something to focus on should conversation run dry. (A late-summer visit found the outdoor garden charming but rain-soaked.) The place is so popular that even three can feel like a crowd, especially after the arrival of the multi-tiered “La Grande” Plateau—that is, until the cocktails kick in. Eying a tabletop still-life of seafood with flute, coupe, and highball (drained of an egg-white-and-raspberry Clover Club, a champagne-and-Cognac Arnaud’s French 75, and an absinthe concoction known as Lafitte’s Swizzle), one usually reticent diner turned to the stranger on her left and announced, “This place is a little utopian.” (Open daily for dinner. Raw bar from \$1.35 for a littleneck clam to \$140 for “La Grande” Plateau.)

—Andrea K. Scott

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