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APRIL 2006

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GARDEN STYLE
GOLD MEDAL POOLS

A Pair of Jacks

by Rowena Kelley

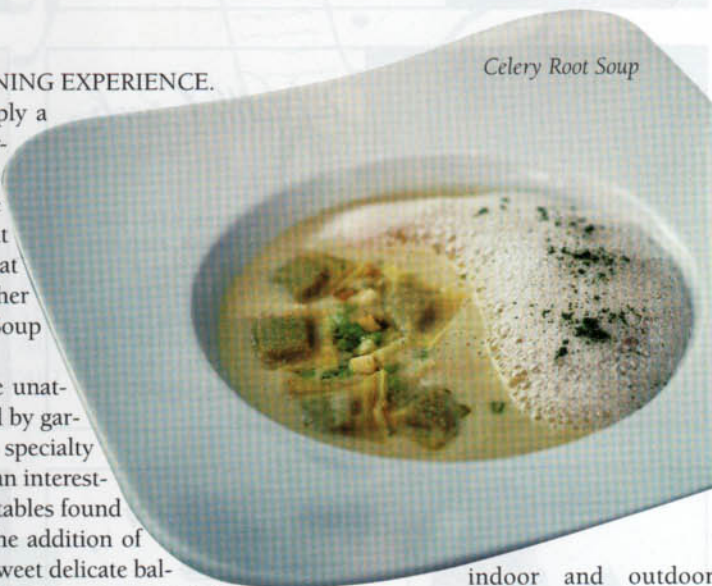
photography by Amy K. Fellows

SOUF IS HARDLY EVER THE HIGHLIGHT OF A FINE DINING EXPERIENCE. This is especially true in San Diego, where *soup du jour* is simply a conversation starter that ranges from lobster bisque—a hit-or-miss experience depending on the locale—to chicken tortilla soup—oftentimes better made at home or, better yet, across the border—and gazpacho—a liquid salad that, without the right consistency, is better left whole. But when you have a chef that treats every ingredient like a gift from God, soup can be altogether an adventure. Such is the case with Tony DiSalvo's Celery Root Soup at Jack's La Jolla.

Creamy and earthy, the Celery Root Soup brings to light the unattractive root vegetable (it resembles a turnip) that was developed by gardeners during the Renaissance and made famous in the French specialty celery remoulade. In DiSalvo's preparation, celery root provides an interesting, unexpected substitute for onion, mushroom and other vegetables found in soup. What makes the soup truly memorable, however, is the addition of black truffle agnolotti and butterscotch-infused froth that adds sweet delicate balance to the dish. With many unique offerings on the menu at Jack's, this soup can hold its own and is worth going back for again and again.

The same can be said of Jack's décor. Named after owner Bill Berkley's father, the restaurant has set a high bar for the next generation in San Diego dining. Interior designer David Robinson (whose handiwork is splashed all around town, from Roppongi to George's to Mr. A's) has created sophisticated spaces throughout the multilevel restaurant that wraps around a four-story atrium. The second-story, 200-seat fine dining room soars to a vaulted ceiling, yet remains soft with sinuous 20-foot drapes, leather booths, bamboo plantings and glass votives filled with pebbles and orchids. The view below is testament to Robinson's effort to blur the line between

Celery Root Soup



indoor and outdoor spaces—at the center of Jack's Grille in the courtyard, water runs through a glass table and spills onto a floating slab of fire. It's an attention grabber that draws standing-room-only crowds to the open-air casual dining room on weekends.

Out-of-this-world pizza, panini and sashimi are offered at the Grille, but to really experience the inventive pairing that has brought wide acclaim to the chef from Jeans-Georges, the Michelin-starred restaurant in New York, you must try the seven- or nine-course tasting menu in the fine dining room. Celery Root Soup is just a prelude to even more inventive pairings delivered during a three-hour gastronomic adventure.

The tasting menus are, of course, offered with wine pairings that add another dimension to the experience. Jack's offers a broad selection of French varietals from Bordeaux, Burgundy and Champagne, including a \$700 bottle of Krug Clos du Mesnil from Reims. And while New York restaurants integrated saké into their wine menus years ago, in San Diego Japanese wine is still nouveau outside of sushi bars. Jack's, however, offers several pages of saké choices that read like poetry, including Tentaka Kuni "Silent Stream" Junmai Daiginjo as well as Ginga Shizuku "Divine Droplets" Junmai Daiginjo.

Cubes of Bluefin Tuna





Jack's Grille, photo by Alan Decker



Fine dining room at Jack's



Muscovy Duck Breast

DiSalvo approaches his menus like an academian, often beginning his pairings on paper before collecting the ingredients and constructing the dish. It may seem a tedious, backward process to some, but its merit is proven in exciting dishes like Colorado Lamb Loin topped with cardamom crumbs and served with a shiso mint purée and a compote of sour cherries and endive. Akin to a perfectly grilled filet, the lamb was moist and meaty, and complemented the other ingredients on the plate—each one a sensation on its own. In DiSalvo's hands, even bluefin tuna becomes extraordinary when served in cubes atop celery root, layered with Meyer lemon, cucumber, toasted garlic and jalapeno, and then drizzled with yuzu sauce. A sushi purist, I was suspicious of the different flavors accompanying the tuna, but found myself wishing I had just a few more pieces before the next dish.

That longing soon vanished as the waitstaff brought out the Poached Maine Lobster. Unlike traditional lobster served with steamed vegetables and a dinner roll, this butter-poached lobster was served with fennel and leek risotto and an apple salad with slivers of kaffir lime and mint. Hints of lemongrass and galangal root, fennel and coriander seed infused every bite. The dish is so complex and hearty, it's surprising to find it on the list of first courses.

But that's exactly what makes Jack's a memorable experience—the surprise pairings and unusual ingredients served in one of the classiest interiors around. The intrigue even continues into the dessert course, where we were given a melting chocolate presentation—warm Valhrona chocolate ganache poured over jasmine crème brûlée. It's what sweet dreams are made of and puts the exclamation mark on all the hype surrounding San Diego's hot new venue.

At Jack's, it's as though DiSalvo and Berkley operate more as event planners than restaurateurs—ensuring guests are entertained, well fed and sent home happy. In a high-stakes industry where success comes to those who play their cards right, I'd say this pair has a winning hand. □

JACK'S LA JOLLA
7863 Girard Ave., La Jolla
858-456-8111

www.jacksaljolla.com

Jack's Grille open daily 11:30 a.m. to 2 a.m.
Dining Room open nightly 5:30 p.m. to 10 p.m.
Valet parking available