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Entertainment

## DEEP DISH: A revamped Rocky's Aqua gets Todd's attention

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By Todd Lyon, Deep Dish writer

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What a delightful surprise. There we were, my friend Cara and I, gallivanting across the Connecticut shoreline on a hot and sweet Sunday afternoon, looking for adventure and food. We were wearing extremely cute dresses, one of which wasn't even second-hand (not mine), and were hoping to find a place with fresh seafood and awesome martinis, preferably with a saltwater view.

After repeatedly striking out — it isn't easy to find lunch on a Sunday in these parts — a friendly shopkeep told us about Rocky's Aqua. I was intrigued. Was this the same Aqua, at Cedar Island Marina in Clinton, once operated by chef Rob Johnson? Same place, new owner, said the nice man, who was clearly dazzled by the beauty of our dresses.

We hopped in the rod and soon found ourselves on a big, breezy deck with an outdoor bar, the water at our feet, watching boaters bicycling to their vessels on wide wooden docks. Heaven!

Turns out, much has changed since I last visited Aqua, a number of years ago. At the time, Aqua was a staple for neighbors and visiting seafarers, a unpretentious place with solid New England fare in an atmosphere that relied on the view for its atmosphere (I can remember wishing they'd pitch the beat-up captain's chairs, for instance).

Enter Rocky Ross. In late 2008, when Rob Johnson left after 13 years to head up Park Central restaurant in Hamden, Rocky and longtime Aqua employee Ernie Criscuolo took over. The two immediately began to make improvements.

"I have no restaurant background, except for working as a busboy and dishwasher in high school and college," says Rocky. However, he's lived a literal stone's throw from Aqua for years, and befriended Rob, first as a customer, then as a kind of consultant. "I always thought Aqua had the ingredients for success, but it was like a chair with three legs. Good food, a great loyal staff, a beautiful location — it just needed dressing up."

The marina's owner, Jeff Shapiro, offered the lease to Rocky and Ernie, and the partners opened for the 2009 season (April-December) as Ernie & Rocky's Aqua. The place was transformed with all new furniture, featuring dark cherry surfaces and golden walls, plus cushy banquettes in the living room and, most important, an upgraded patio with an outdoor bar that's just recently been varnished and polished to a high shine by the experts at the marina. The 36-seat patio is the place to be in all sorts of weather, thanks to heavy-duty clear curtains that can be rolled down in heavy rain or wind.

This year has brought even more changes to the restaurant: After last season, Rocky bought Ernie's share of the investment and the place was renamed Rocky's Aqua. The kitchen and the staff remain the same, however. At the helm is Executive Chef David Thomasson, who began as a dishwasher at Aqua and trained under Rob. "He's a perfectionist; he does a phenomenal job," says Rocky of the chef. "David has taken this place to the next level."

The menu is a pleasure, offering classic New England sea treats — steamers, clams on the half shell, Clams Casino, lobster rolls, broiled seafood combos and all the fried favorites (oysters, scallops, shrimp, sole). But there are some surprises, too, including a crab, avocado and bacon sandwich; jambalaya; a fried oyster salad with house-made dressing; scallops arreganata; and a daily fish steak (sword, tuna, salmon) blackened with an orange, garlic and cilantro sauce. "It's our signature treatment," says Rocky, and is the most popular dish on the menu.

Outstanding desserts are also on the bill of fare at Rocky's. On that blissful Sunday, Cara and I sampled a blueberry pudding cake that practically knocked us out of our chairs. Not too sweet, it had a texture that reminded us of polenta and was served with house-made vanilla ice cream. Everything at Rocky's is made in-house, and it shows. On another night, I sampled a trio of fruit sorbets while my date quietly swooned over a flourless chocolate cake (again, with the home-made ice cream).

I was also delighted to learn that Rocky's has a second chef in the kitchen, and he's one of my favorites: Michael Mastrianni, whose career I've been following since he cooked at Jeffrey's in Milford back in the '90s. Because I am incredibly spoiled, Chef Mike prepared a special tasting dinner for my date and me; I highly recommend ordering either of the talented chef's specials when they're on the menu.

Rocky's Aqua is open for lunch and dinner seven days a week clear up until Columbus Day, when hours are reduced through the first of January. This is especially good news for those of us who don't have "normal" schedules and might want to do something as outrageous as having lunch on a Sunday or dinner on a Monday night.

When the summer wind whispers your name and you've just got to be sitting by the water, Rocky's will be there for you. Cute dress not required.

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## THE ESSENTIALS

- Place: Rocky's Aqua, 34 Riverside Drive, Clinton.

- Phone: 860-664-3788.

- Website: [www.aquaonthewater.com](http://www.aquaonthewater.com).

- Hours: Lunch, 11:30 a.m. to 4 p.m., seven days; dinner, 4-10 p.m., seven days. Reduced hours beginning Columbus Day through January 1st; closed January-April 13, 2011.

- Reservations: Accepted; recommended on weekends.

- Food: Well-prepared New England favorites are joined by more creative dishes in a newly upgraded restaurant with a 120-seat dining room and a delightful outdoor patio and bar in the heart of a marina. Appetizers start at \$9.95 for escargot or a duck confit spring roll and top out at \$11.95 for a smoked fish plate or beef carpaccio; entrees range from \$17.95 for pasta dishes to \$25.95 for a baked lobster and shrimp. Please save room for desserts, which are all made in house (the blueberry pudding cake shouldn't be missed).

- Drink: A full bar is joined by a tidy, drinkable and affordable wine list, with all the bases covered via glass and the bottle.

- Wheelchair access: Through the main entrance.

- Credit cards: MasterCard, Visa, Discover, Amex.

- Parking: In the marina parking lot surrounding the restaurant.

- Private Parties: The space is available for all sorts of private parties, including small weddings; see the party menu on the restaurant's website.

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