

Mystic, Conn., luring foodies with a booming restaurant scene



By Gary Santaniello

GLOBE CORRESPONDENT SEPTEMBER 01, 2017

MYSTIC, Conn. — The perennial draws here have always been Mystic Seaport and Mystic Aquarium, complemented by the stretch of West Main Street downtown that draws regular foot traffic to a collection of tightly bunched shops, boutiques, and eateries, almost all locally owned.

In the last few years, though, the old whaling port has become a destination for foodies and a blessing for locals who crave variety and creativity in what they eat.

“Mystic is blowing up with restaurants,” said Michelle Pease, who has been a server at [Anthony](#) J’s, a cozy Italian bistro, for most of its 27 years.

“It’s more sophisticated than it was in the ’70’s,” added Linda Chambers, the manager at [Sea Bags](#), which sells totes and other items made from recycled sails on West Main Street. “Back then it was steamers, fish and chips, and a good steak. There are definitely more choices now.”

The newest addition is a novel concept in the area. [Grass & Bone](#), which opened on Aug. 30, is a butcher specializing in custom cuts from local farms and a restaurant with seating for 52 inside and out.

Grass & Bone is the latest venture from Dan Meiser, who opened The Oyster Club (oysterclubct.com) in 2011 and The Engine Room (engineroomct.com) in 2014.

The Oyster Club bills itself as a “farm & sea to table” restaurant, drawing on the bounty of shellfish and seafood available in local waters and Long Island Sound, as well as a burgeoning artisanal community of bakers, brewers, distillers, cheesemakers, and organic farmers. Its entire menu is locally sourced, and every night executive chef James Wayman turns out specials, often influenced by his North Carolina upbringing, such as buttermilk-fried bluefish. On another night Wayman produced a roasted corn and tomato soup, with all ingredients harvested from Stone Acres Farm in Stonington, another Meiser/Wayman endeavor.

Another fresh concept is [M/Bar](#), an upscale wine café that opened in 2016 in a renovated vintage service station. Serving small plates along with wines from owners Michael and Merrily Connery's Saltwater Farm Vineyard in Stonington, M/Bar's 92-seat dining area is by fronted by three bay doors, which open in pleasant weather. Outside, tables surround a fire pit, one of many dog-friendly patios in Mystic. (Most of the shops are dog-friendly, too.)

Occupying another interesting space is the Engine Room, which took over the building once occupied by J.W. Lathrop Engine Co., a maker of fine marine engines. The décor honors its industrial past, with brick walls, polished cement floors, original signage on the walls, and an antique drill press behind the bar. Burgers, by far most popular items, are made from beef and pork raised at Beriah Lewis Farm in North Stonington. A full bourbon bar and 16 taps featuring a rotating selection of craft beer accommodates discriminating drinkers.

It's not just full-service restaurants energizing the scene. Adam Young, formerly the executive pastry chef at the Ocean House in Watch Hill, R.I., opened [Sift](#) last year, a French-inspired bakery with an outdoor patio. One of three finalists on the Food Network's 2017 Spring Baking Championship, Young offers the full range of baked goods, including croissants that begin as 81 layers of dough and butter before they're cut, rolled, and baked. "Achievable luxury" is how he characterizes his offerings.

Across Water Street and just around the corner from [Bank Square Books](#), one of southern New England's best independent bookstores, [Rise](#) arose in 2016 from the imagination of Mystic native Melody Pere, who had wanted to open a homey breakfast and lunch spot. Their pancakes are made with flour from Farm to Hearth Bakery in nearby Salem.

Next to Sift Bake Shop, Pizzetta brought thin, crisp pizza crust to the village, as well as an open-air patio in back with river views and live music Thursday through Sunday. There's a front porch, too, as you'd expect here in a converted historic home. The many specialty pizzas feature a wide array of sauces, meats, and cheeses.

Once part of Mystic Drawbridge Ice Cream, which abuts the 95-year-old bascule bridge that spans the Niantic River, [drwb@24](#) occupies an unassuming, two-level storefront nearby on West Main Street. Since it opened in the spring it now serves a full breakfast menu, and its lunch selections also rely on local ingredients.

Steps away, Chapter One, which opened in 2016, has a unique offering: free late-night bacon strips at the bar. Another specialty is its 28-day dry-aged steaks. Large front windows that open to the street complement its prime location.

Angela Kanabis has a unique perspective on Mystic's upwardly mobile food scene. Her mother, Carol, opened [Bravo Bravo](#) 28 years ago, steps from the east span of the drawbridge and still a mainstay for Italian fare.

"There's always been a solid foundation here. But it's definitely evolving and growing," she said.

Two years ago Kanabis opened [Red 36](#), its name a play on the navigational markers in the harbor on which it is perched, surrounded by a marina.

With an airy floor plan and a roomy deck outside, Red 36 specializes in local shellfish and seafood influenced by cuisines from the Pacific Rim to the Mediterranean to Mexico and the Caribbean.

“It’s a global world at this point,” she said. “Chefs are inspired from food around the world.”

And the new wave of ambitious chefs, bakers, and restaurateurs in Mystic also are inspired by their access to sustainable food and produce from land and sea.

“We’re geographically blessed,” said Meiser. “Something’s happening here that’s pretty special.”

Gary Santaniello can be reached at gsantaniello@mac.com.