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EATING OUT: MADE IN THE SHADE

Food is just as cool and contemporary as the ambience at the Zinc Bar in new Manhattan Beach hotel

by Merrill Shindler

Zinc is rated: 3 stars.

(4 Stars is Excellent, 3 Stars is above average,
2 Stars is Good, 1 Star is okay)

I was a great fan of Metlox, the pottery company that sat for many years at Manhattan Beach Boulevard and Valley Drive in Manhattan Beach.

The warehouse store was always having the oddest sales. I remember them well, for they made so little sense. If you purchased \$50 or more of pottery, you got half off.

The first time I wandered into the store -- which was really more like a big garage with dishes and plates stacked to the ceiling - I didn't know about the sale. I bought \$48 worth of dishware. The clerk told me that all I had to do was buy \$2 more, and it would cost me just \$25. It was totally screwy. But who was I to argue?

The Metlox factory closed in 1989. And its space has stood empty until recently, when an impressively modernist shopping center began to rise on its ruins, with a boutique hotel on the

Valley Drive side.

This is no Ramada, no Radisson, no Hilton and no Day's Inn. It's called Shade, and it's the creation of Michael Zislis, the restaurateur who is best known for the nearby Rock 'n Fish. As hip and cool as Rock 'n Fish may be, it pales in comparison to Shade.

Like its name, the hotel is ephemeral and understated, with decor by Christopher Lowell of the Discovery Home Channel. It may be the grooviest destination in town. And it's got the longest bar in the South Bay to prove it.

Aside from its length, the bar (and its adjacent lounge) is a fine spot at which to while away the time, meeting and greeting friends, chatting up the locals, or staring at the game-of-the-moment on several big screens.

The seats at the bar are more body-friendly than usual; the modular conversation areas in the lounge offer a sufficient degree of privacy, and even something akin to quiet. That Lowell is onto something -- his design sense isn't just clean and elegant, but comfortable as well.

In the morning, light flows through the windows at Shade like quicksilver -- tangible and intangible at the same time. It's breakfast time at Shade -- where breakfast is actually the biggest of the two meals offered. Clearly, they believe in the advice offered by our mothers, that breakfast is the most important meal of the day.

The thing about the breakfasts that's so appealing is that most of them have a pleasant little twist to their preparation: such as the

wildflower honey and lime yogurt served with the platter of fruits and berries; the house variation on eggs Benedict (called a Shade Benedict) that's served on a crumpet instead of on an English muffin, with a light dusting of truffles atop the hollandaise; the French toast built around buttery brioche; and the house omelette, a good combination of smoked bacon, sausage, ham, peppers and onions, tweaked with extra sharp Grafton cheddar.

There are breakfast dishes here that smack of blessed indulgence: the Dungeness crab and artichoke frittata, an open-faced omelette tricked up with a dollop of crème fraiche and slices of avocado -- sort of a greatest hits version of breakfast; and the imported smoked salmon from Petrossian (the caviar people), served with bagels and cream cheese dotted with chives, with capers, onion and tomatoes on the plate for good measure.

And then, there's the kitchen sink version of breakfast. Called "The Ultimate Shade Breakfast (For Two)" it runs \$100 and includes eggs, sausage, bacon, fruit, yogurt, French toast, smoked salmon, bagels, juice, Perrier Jouet Champagne and Lavazza coffee. It sounds more like breakfast for six.

Dinner at Shade is a somewhat less-structured meal, consisting of a choice of 13 "small plates" (some of which are bigger and some of which are smaller).

Unless you're a morning drinker, it's also the time to put the bartenders through their paces. As bartenders tend to, they're having some fun with the drink menu. There is, for instance, a "Martini Lunch" -- a martini made with Ciroc Vodka, served with olives stuffed with smoked bacon and feta cheese.

There's a snappy thing called a "Bloody Mary Pacifica" that's a Smirnoff Vodka bloody with a pickled green bean and a bleu cheese olive floating in it; there may be some symbolic meaning there, but it avoids me.

Actually, I prefer a nice cool glass of the Firestone Double Barrel Amber on draft, which goes very well with small plates such as the quartet of tiny ice cream cones, filled variously with salmon tartare, ahi tartare, crème fraiche and a wasabi sauce; the only downside is that the four tiny cones are gone in just a couple of bites each.

More substantial are the trio of burgers -- "sliders" would be a good name for them -- made of grilled sirloin and cheddar, seared ahi with aioli, and chicken with apple.

Following the current trend toward fondue, there's a revisionist version made with brie, artichokes, sourdough and tortilla strips. Not exactly what we used to make in our Harvest Gold fondue pots, but worth the effort when you're bending an elbow at the bar.

Oysters are served with a ginger, soy and lime dip; there's a plate of yellowtail sashimi, a shrimp spring roll and seaweed salad; there's a lamb chop; there's a charcuterie platter; and there's a steak sandwich. They're all small, but substantial for a snack, early or late.

I'm sure that Zislis wouldn't mind at all if you began or ended your meal at the Zinc Bar, with Rock 'n Fish positioned in between.

Whatever you do, the Zinc Bar at Shade has changed the order of things in Manhattan Beach. You don't have to live here to live here. All you have to do is check in for the night.

Merrill Shindler talks about restaurants from 5 to 7 p.m. Saturday and Sunday on KLSX-FM 97.1.

Zinc Bar

Address: Shade Manhattan Beach Hotel,
1221 Valley Drive, Manhattan Beach.

Details: Full bar. Valet parking.
Reservations essential for groups.

Phone: 310-546-4995.

Prices: Breakfast, \$9-\$100 (for two).
Small Plates (Dinner), \$10- \$15.

Cuisine: New American.

Cards: MC, VISA

Hours: Breakfast and dinner, every day.

On the menu:

Petrossian Smoked Salmon and Bagels \$14

Free Range Organic Eggs (with Bacon, Sausage or Ham) \$12

Shade Benedict \$15

Dungeness Crab and Artichoke Frittata \$15

Brioche French Toast \$13

Shade Omelette \$13

Ultimate Shade Breakfast (for Two) \$100

Duck Confit Wontons \$12

Charcuterie Platter \$15

Sashimi, Spring Roll, Seaweed Salad \$12

Seafood Tartare Cones \$15

Chips and Dips \$12

Steak Sandwich \$12

Shrimp 'n Chips \$14

Burger Trio \$13