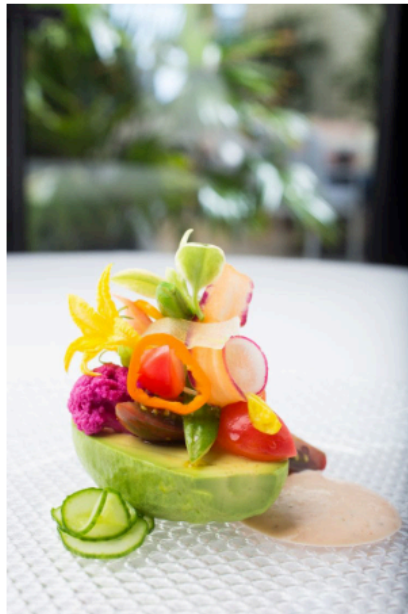


Food

# Thomas Keller mines the past to create something new at Surf Club in Miami

By **Tom Sietsema**

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Avocado Louis at the Surf Club Restaurant. (Matthew Pace/for The Washington Post)



Thomas Keller, left, and chef de cuisine Manuel Echeverri. (Matthew Pace/for The Washington Post)

Two-and-a-half years might seem like a long time to figure out how to make the perfect dinner roll. Then again, the team responsible for recreating a childhood memory of one of the most esteemed chefs in America was working on a tall order. Thomas Keller insisted the rolls be round as globes, with an exterior so sheer and crisp it would shatter on contact with the teeth. The center had to be hot and fluffy, but otherwise unremarkable — no sourdough tang, no hint of any seed.

“People forget how joyous warm bread is,” says Sam Calderbank. He’s the director of East Coast operations for Keller’s restaurant group, which recently added the Surf Club Restaurant, a celebration of Continental cooking in Miami’s Surfside.

As it turns out, however, and despite all the trial and error, “the bread is just a vehicle for the butter,” says Calderbank. Sure enough, the baked spheres are upstaged by their spread: A small cake stand is brought to the table, and an unseen puck of artisanal Vermont Creamery butter is pressed through holes on the surface. Voilà! Diners marvel as the butter takes the shape of individual palm fronds forming a pale yellow canopy on the tray. The gesture makes everyone as giddy as if they were swigging champagne from the trolley that also makes an early appearance at every table.

Long before he became known for such luxe brands as the French Laundry in Napa Valley and Per Se in Manhattan, Keller spent his youth in Palm Beach, where he went to high school. Nonetheless, he says, “South Florida never attracted me” as a place to do business. Over time, however, “I fell in love with the property,” which made its debut on New Year’s Eve in 1930 and attracted a who’s who of notables, from Frank Sinatra to British royals.



The art-deco-style bar. (Matthew Pace/For The Washington Post)

Part of a recently renovated resort that includes a Four Seasons hotel and Le Sirenuse, an opulent Italian restaurant, Surf Club Restaurant opens with a bespoke art-deco-style bar, where housemade Chex mix accompanies a drink order and a piano dominates a rear corner. The wood-paneled dining room beyond is a luxe cocoon whose windows capture bits of beach and water and whose walls display tropical-themed trompe l'oeils. Tiny stools are brought for purses; velvet banquettes practically pull diners into them. If there's a worry in the world, we're insulated from it for the duration of dinner.

A relish tray helps. A happy memory of my childhood in the Midwest, the platter has us painting crudités in a dip reminiscent of ranch dressing, only brighter with lemon and dill oil. Slender cheese straws keep us entertained, too, and when a bowl of saucer-size potato chips is ferried past us, everyone votes to order some. "This gets better and better," a companion says. The menus in our hands, decorated with watercolors of pink flamingos, see competition from the waiters, who show up with welcome distractions, including a silver tray of meat whose cuts are named and promoted. There are only four of us tonight, but we wish we were more. A number of dishes — beef Wellington, Dover sole meunière, Caesar salad (dressed with the help of a silver lemon squeezer in the shape of a bird) — are designed for two.

As with some of his other restaurants, this one subscribes to the mantra ELF, which stands for "energetic, loud and fun," Keller says.





Chips and dip. (Matthew Pace/For The Washington Post)

“We want it to feel like a party, an escape,” says Calderbank. So there’s live music almost every night of the week and lots to engage diners. The smooth presentation of the showier dishes is the result of abundant pre-opening practice, he adds. “Staff ate lots of Wellington and Dover sole” leading up to the August debut.

Keller and company, including chef de cuisine Manuel Echeverri, researched classical European menus and lists from old Hollywood and New York society haunts to come up with a blueprint. (The heyday of Continental cuisine, based on French techniques dating to the time of Escoffier and including German, Italian and Swiss accents, was between the 1950s and 1970s.)

*[An ambitious new New York restaurant proves Korean fine dining is ready for its close-up]*

Oysters Rockefeller is a bright take on one of the best-known old-school dishes. To protect the oysters from overcooking, Echeverri covers them with a spoonful of creamed spinach, followed by an espuma flavored with fresh tarragon and Pernod. The airy foam, a staple of modernist kitchens, lightens the eating and harks to Echeverri’s tenure at the contemporary, seafood-centric Bazaar MAR by José Andrés.

One of the fussier dishes — tricky for the kitchen, at least — is crab Louis, hold the seafood, which is replaced by an avocado half. Echeverri says he employs concentration and tweezers, a tool in every modern chef's kit, to build a tower of see-through radishes, crisp snow peas and carrot ribbons atop the avocado, which arrives on a pool of what tastes like Thousand Island dressing. The monumental salad was an appetizer Keller says he designed and first served for an Oscar party for Vanity Fair.



Oysters Rockefeller. (Matthew Pace/For The Washington Post)  
on-adevstam.com

The top chef thinks of celery as a “mundane” vegetable. “Who eats celery, except in a bloody mary?” he asks when I talk to him by phone. His lack of passion for the common vegetable must have been seen as a challenge, because among the first courses at Surf Club is celery Victor, a San Francisco classic created by chef Victor Hirtzler two years before the Titanic sank, in 1910 at the St. Francis hotel. At the Miami restaurant, cooks cut celery stalks in half and braise them to softness, then set them on a dressing of buttermilk and cream cheese and finish with toasted walnuts and tiny peppers.



The restaurant's nod to pasta primavera, created in the early days of the American culinary revolution of the late 1970s, relies on housemade, shell-shaped pasta and lightly cooked vegetables that change depending on what Echeverri finds at the market. But the real thrill of dinner here is the chance to splurge on, say, lobster thermidor, a lovely layering of textures featuring soft claw and knuckle meat, a disk of puff pastry and cognac-spiked cream sauce: revisionist history at its most seductive.

Curious diners can visit the two-level kitchen. As at all Keller venues, the pass, where servers pick up orders, is lined with white linen, to which a motivational quote is affixed with green tape. The messages, typically from managers, change daily and sometimes reference an issue from the day before. "Sense of urgency," one might read.



Breadsticks. (Matthew Pace/For The Washington Post)

Beef Wellington rolls to the table on a cart, where the \$132 entree for two is sliced to reveal pink short ribs and a mousse of beef, spinach and mushrooms wrapped in a crepe followed by brioche. Participants get two thick slabs on a pool of a winy truffle sauce, which is, aside from the staging, the most memorable part of the revised warhorse. The brioche is too much sweet bread.

The sundae bar brings another jolly on a trolley. But the more distinguished desserts are those that come without fanfare on wheels: steamed cheesecake garnished with candied kumquats and pecans, and coconut cake roulade served on a pool of lime creme anglaise.

The bill is modern, in that service is included, and the cost of the lighthearted evening is steep. Keep in mind you're paying for time travel and attention to detail.

For the record, it took more than 50 trials to nail Keller's memory of a long-ago dinner roll.

*Surf Club Restaurant, 9011 Collins Ave., Surfside, Fla. 305-768-9440. [thesurfclub.com](http://thesurfclub.com). Prices: Entrees \$26 to \$132 (for beef Wellington for two) .*

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