

At Plano's Fish Shack, It's Not About The Location, The Presentation Or Even The Service--It's All About The Fish

By Jesse Hughey Thursday, Feb 25 2010

At **Fish Shack**, location is not everything. Nor is presentation. Nor, come to think of it, is appearance, plate-arrival timing, or even the name of the place—when's the last time you wanted to eat in a shack, anyway?

What matters at the humble, gulf-style Fish Shack—what should matter at every seafood restaurant—is fresh fish, prepared simply and honestly. And that's where it succeeds. Thank God, because if it didn't, there would be little reason to visit this former Long John Silvers location set on a drab stretch of 15th Street too close for comfort to the Plano Police Department and otherwise populated by fast-food restaurants, churches, a Quick Lube and depressing office complexes. Well, except for the \$1.50 drafts during happy hour—if you wanted to roll the DWI dice that close to PPD HQ.

A DWI was a very real possibility during a Sunday night dinner visit, when we happily discovered that the place had Kona Fire Rock Pale Ale and Longboard Lager on draft for just \$2.50. But the ceviche alone made it worth the gamble. An enormous scoop of the citrus-marinated whitefish—spiked with diced onion, tomato and cilantro—sat on a tostada, surrounded by a scattering of thick tortilla chips and garnished with fresh, cayenne-sprinkled avocado slices. Long after we finished our meals, we kept coming back to it, yet still had plenty to take home—and it still tasted fresh the next day, without a hint of past-its-prime fishiness. Not quite as impressive was our other appetizer, a plate of rubbery calamari, which arrived several minutes after the ceviche and mere seconds before the entrees.

Then again, such distinctions as "appetizer" and "entree" don't quite fit at this casual, counter-service joint. The menu certainly doesn't have such categorizations. The protein portions are large enough that any could be shared with fellow diners or make a meal on its own. And the food arrives the instant it's ready; if that means the server brings out four hush puppies, then the final two of your half-dozen order a few minutes later, so be it.





The half-dozen coconut shrimp were jumbo-sized with a generous, light, crispy coating. It was fried-seafood perfection, defined by what it wasn't: greasy or salty. Instead of camouflaging weak crustaceans with an extra dose of seasoning salt or an oil-soaked batter, the place lets the prawn and shredded coconut dominate the flavor. The quartet of dips (ranch, tartar and ketchup along with the traditional accompaniment, orange marmalade) was almost beside the point, though a dab of marmalade complemented the shrimp with a nice, zesty sweetness.

The only significant misstep was a mistake with an order of rainbow trout. Of the two preparation choices, grilled or blackened, I ordered the latter—but the fish arrived sporting grill marks. Yet it looked so inviting, with a generous dusting of brick-red seasoning mix and black char marks against the tender fillet that I didn't even consider sending it

back. Glad I didn't—it was cooked to perfection, moist but not slimy, and with just enough salt and seasoning to accent the flavor without overpowering the fresh fillets. It came on a bed of rice with a side of sautéed squash, zucchini, mushrooms and tomatoes—all tender and buttered, but not soggy. A smaller, more easily remedied problem was that a layer of sweating skin topped the tartar sauce in one of the dipping cups, evidence that it had been sitting out a bit too long. But that was a one-time occurrence.

The rainbow trout, by the way, was recommended by one of two friendly, college-age counter girls, who had a polite dispute with each other when I asked whether the trout or the salmon was better. One made a convincing case for the salmon, which is wild-caught rather than the fatty farm-raised version. But the trout won out when the other said it was one of the most popular menu items among the employees.

A lunch visit on Fat Tuesday was an even more hazardous DWI gamble, as happy hour prices applied all day long. On this visit, the crab cakes proved the winner. Each the size of a burly man's palm, the cakes offered a crispy breadcrumb coating that gently gave way to reveal a delicate, meaty interior almost completely void of filler and with just a subtle blend of seasonings. Whether the slight tanginess was from bell peppers, onions or Worcestershire sauce is almost beside the point—the primary flavor was buttery crab. Also beside the point: presentation. Though the meal was described on the menu as a "fried basket," it was actually served on a plate—though the assembly indicates the plating wasn't for aesthetic reasons. The patties; two small to-go ramekins of ketchup and tartar sauce; and creamy, sweet coleslaw (which probably wouldn't be unfamiliar to KFC customers) in a lidded Styrofoam tub were randomly scattered across the huge plate.

Hey, you don't go to a place with "shack" in its name for the fancy presentation.

That day's crawfish special—\$7.95 for a pound with corn and potatoes—was shrugged off by a mudbug-loving companion as "OK, but not as good as Pappadeaux's." Of course, it's early in the crawfish season. Under the salty peppered seasoning was a distinct taste of lake water. They went unfinished. (In fact, the leftovers are still in the office refrigerator if any reader wants to pick them up. They've probably already served their purpose of scaring the bejeezus out of the co-worker whose identical to-go box I replaced.) Far better were the grilled tuna and the daily lunch special of catfish fillets and hush puppies. The heart-shaped tuna fillet—the size of a quarter-pounder patty—was thick and juicy with just a faint salinity. The catfish—which arrived blackened, as requested this time—was almost as good, but the addictive golf-ball-sized hush puppies may have been the real star. The Mexican-style shrimp cocktail turned out to be a parfait glass full of small but not quite popcorn-sized shrimp with layers of fresh avocado chunks and thick, cilantro-studded tomato sauce that offered a bracing but not overwhelming level of spiciness.

That restraint with the salt and spices was key to what elevates Fish Shack above and beyond the vast majority of the area's casual, gulf-style fish-fry joints. Rather than pummel your taste buds into submission with Tony Cachere's seasoned salt, Fish Shack complements the seafood with a subtle dash or two of spice. Too weak for you? Well, there are plenty of hot sauces to choose from on each table. Likewise with the batter on fried items. Everything from onion rings to chicken tenders to even the disappointing squid had but a thin, crispy layer of batter that allowed the vegetable or protein to rightly take center stage.

During our Fat Tuesday visit, owner Frank Mihalopoulos told me the fish was delivered four times per week. Considering how fresh everything tasted, that's quite believable.

Other than three sizable flat-screen TVs, the interior isn't much to look at. The kitchen's admirable restraint is evident in the décor, ranging from random nautical kitsch to family Mardi Gras pictures. That understatement is fine by me—it's awfully hard to focus on the food when a place looks like someone detonated a King Cake.

Though the place has been around less than a year (it opened June 15), it already feels like a well-established hangout, with an ethnically diverse clientele of families, couples and solo diners who all seemed to be on a first-name basis with the staff. Most of the customers may be from the neighborhood, but Fish Shack's seafood is worth the trek from any part of Dallas or the surrounding suburbs—even if it means driving past the Plano Police Department.

Fish Shack

700 E. 15th St., Plano, 469-229-0838. Open 11 a.m.-10 p.m. Sunday-Thursday, 10:30 a.m.-11:30 p.m. Friday-Saturday. \$-\$\$

<http://www.dallasobserver.com/2010-02-25/dining/beloved-shack/>