

THE 2008 FOOD ISSUE

Where to eat now

The very best new restaurants and chefs

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How the moth flap gave organics wings

San Francisco



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BURGER KING:
Epic Roasthouse's heroic 3/4-pound hamburger—made from freshly ground filet, rib eye, and lamb—commands attention in a year in which the most noteworthy new restaurants have been either over-the-top splashy or intimate and heartfelt. See pages 102 and 116.

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SAN FRANCISCO
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On the waterfront

At **Waterbar** and **Epic Roasthouse**, Pat Kuleto competes for the attention of big-spending diners.

BY JOSH SENS

PHOTOGRAPHS BY MAREN CARUSO

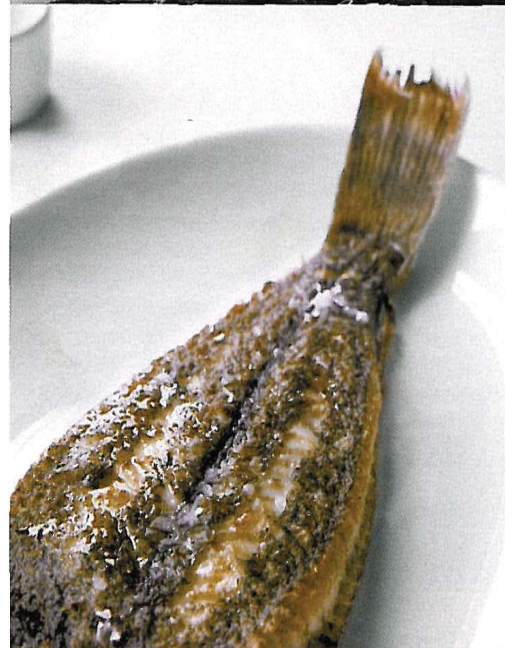
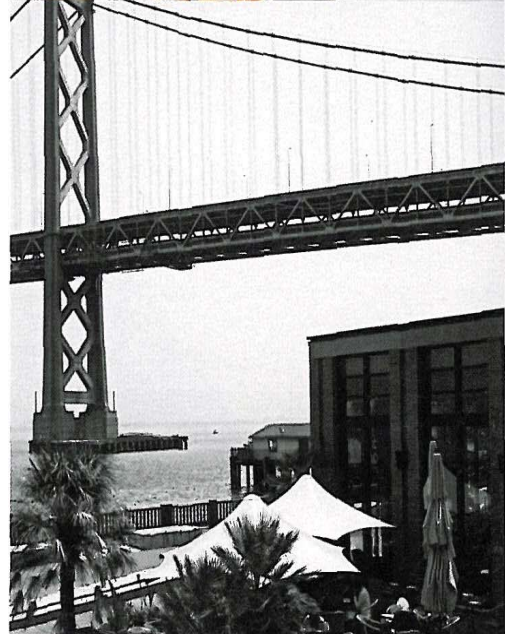
In Xanadu did Pat Kuleto two pleasure domes decree. Correction: He built them on the Embarcadero, a twin billing of extravagant surf-and-turf restaurants that has cemented his reputation as the San Francisco food world's Kubla Khan.

How much pleasure Epic Roasthouse and Waterbar actually deliver is another question. The answer partly hinges on how much stock you place in tricked-out interiors, views that take your breath away, and prices and portions that do the same.

The 275-seat Waterbar flaunts its seafood theme with two cylindrical, Sea World-worthy fish tanks that frame the dining room from floor to ceiling. The animals inside them—a fluttering eel, some bug-eyed rockfish—are for display only. But not so the lobsters, which occupy a series of smaller tanks set in a brick wall alongside the open kitchen. You can have a lobster grilled, chilled, wood oven-roasted, or draped across a giant shellfish platter with clams, oysters, plump crab claws, and more. The assortment is decadent and delicious, although for \$90, you half expect the oysters to come with pearls.

Waterbar, however, is a restaurant not of small gifts but of grand gestures. The menu casts a wide net, sweeping the sea for a mixed catch of sashimi and seiche, as well as a diversity of whole fish, which rank as the sharpest entrées on the list. Sole. Turbot. Black bass. John Dory. Preparation—whether fried, grilled, or wood oven-roasted—varies with the season and the whim of the kitchen. Sometimes there's a choice, sometimes not. On a recent evening, sole was caked in salt to seal its sweetness, oven-roasted, then presented intact for dramatic impact before the server whisked it off to be filleted. But never mind the showmanship—the dish's greatest strength lies in its simple flavors.

Compare that with the overwrought but underwhelming fish and chips: The restaurant serves a whole crisp rock cod arched in a trophy pose, like the one that got away, then swam into the Fry-O-Lator. It's a playful take, but the batter is bland and the fish is, well, fishy, even when doused in a tangy rémoulade. The ambitious effort winds up falling flat. ▶



Top: Waterbar parades its bold intentions with a \$90 shellfish platter; **middle:** Tucked beneath the Bay Bridge, Waterbar offers one of the best views in town; **bottom:** Salt-baked sole is presented at the table before being filleted in the kitchen.

WATERBAR
399 EMBARCADERO (BET. HARRISON AND FOLSOM STS.), S.F., 415-284-9922, RESERVATIONS RECOMMENDED, WHEELCHAIR ACCESSIBLE
\$\$\$\$ ★½

EPIC ROASTHOUSE
369 EMBARCADERO (AT FOLSOM ST.), S.F., 415-369-9955, RESERVATIONS RECOMMENDED, WHEELCHAIR ACCESSIBLE
\$\$\$\$ ★★½

The same could be said of the restaurant itself. Waterbar delivers some sprightly seafood. Service is enthusiastic and attentive. And desserts, like chocolate silk (chocolate mousse layered on pistachio crust), are sure to satisfy a bionic sweet tooth. But despite—or perhaps because of—its steep construction cost (a reported \$20 million for it and Epic), the restaurant has the feel of a disjointed theme park. Blame the high prices, but also cast a wary eye on the design. At night, the fish tanks give off an exotic glimmer. But by day, the murky water lends the gloomy bearing of a shipwreck exhibit. As for the drab-colored glass globes above the bar, they look dated anytime.

Waterbar's best visual feature is its view of the Bay Bridge, but the cheesy interior distracts you and detracts from the mood. Fitting, perhaps, that at a restaurant so concerned with superficialities, true beauty lies not inside but out.

The aptly named Epic Roasthouse also goes for the grandiose, but the approach plays more successfully here. Kuleto sates his craving for outsize stage props with a giant water pump (a replica of one used by firefighters after the 1906 earthquake), which sits in the heart of the dining room. Over the top in almost any other context, the pump, with its nostalgic nod to manly heroics, feels apropos here. It taps into the red-blooded spirit of the steakhouse. Like others in its lineage, Epic is a leather-bound den of indulgence, with all the bells and whistles turned up a notch.

On his big, burly menu, chef Jan Birnbaum rustles up a herd of steakhouse standards, but rides them sidesaddle to show his flair. He seasons New York strip with an earthy dash of coriander, coffee beans, and black peppercorns, and gussies up his rib eye with black-pepper crème fraîche. He also stamps the Epic brand on an old-fashioned burger: Ground daily from beef, lamb, and veal trimmings, it comes bulked up to an improbable $\frac{3}{4}$ pound, even before you add pickles and onions. At \$25, it's a beauty and a doozy.

Diners can also choose from a full stable of sides, some of them straightforward (such as beef tartare or baked oysters Rockefeller), others embellishments on tradition. Birnbaum enriches spinach salad with house-cured bacon and a poached duck egg, and he replaces the iconic chilled iceberg wedge and blue cheese with a chunk of bib lettuce, lovingly dressed with goat cheese, tangerines, and a lively scallion vinaigrette.

Like Waterbar, Epic announces its commitment to seasonal and sustainable ingredients. That's commendable, even if some would find such a claim amusing from restaurants that so openly celebrate excess. Riddle me this: Is it ever sustainable to order a 26-ounce steak?

Then again, restaurants are all about wants, not needs—and Epic more than meets desire halfway. From soup to nuts (in this case, from a wood-oven onion soup to a housemade rocky road sundae), it caters to uncompromising appetites, satisfying those who like to have their warm chocolate soufflé and eat it, too. ■

Like Waterbar, Epic Roasthouse announces its commitment to seasonal and sustainable ingredients. But riddle me this: Is it ever sustainable to order a 26-ounce steak?



Top: At Epic, the hefty rib eye is intended to serve two; middle: The dining room is classic steakhouse, but with all the stops pulled out; bottom: The Epic burger is a $\frac{3}{4}$ pounder made with beef, lamb, and veal.