

## Potomac Pleasures

At National Harbor, water views accompany the shellfish and sushi

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### [Moon Bay Coastal Cuisine](#)

210 Waterfront St., National Harbor  
301-965-2000

**\*1/2 (out of four)**  
**SOUND CHECK: 77 Decibels**  
**(Must speak with raised voice)**



UNLESS YOU'VE BEEN LIVING on Gilligan's Island, you know there's a new addition in Prince George's County. It's called the Gaylord National Resort and Convention Center, and it's one of four enormous places to meet, eat and sleep created by the Nashville-based Gaylord media and entertainment group. (Similar Titanics are in Tennessee, Florida and Texas.)

Nothing about the sprawling resort's spring debut in the newly built National Harbor was inconsequential. Let's review the clips. Gaylord reportedly interviewed 16,000 people for 2,000 positions. The glass-enclosed atrium -- about the size of the dome that swallowed the citizens of Springfield in "The Simpsons Movie" -- is spacious enough to accommodate two large houses, with acres of room to spare. Not all the ink spilled on behalf of the subject made its publicist smile: Some of the first patrons to check in checked *out* with norovirus, and mice were discovered in a few guest rooms. (The critters have since been eradicated.) I let the hype die down before I made the first of several treks, unassisted by my car's GPS device, which could not provide directions to National Harbor, big as it is and a mere 10 minutes from the District.

There are five primary places to eat at the Gaylord: a sports bar, a steakhouse, an Italian eatery, a nightclub and a seafood restaurant. The last was the first to catch my eye, in part because of its prime position off the lobby (diners cross a 35-foot-long plank bridge to reach the arched brick entrance) and in part because who doesn't like to eat lunch or dinner on the water? Depending on where you land at Moon Bay Coastal Cuisine, you can find yourself at a table facing the Potomac River or a table overlooking a stream -- a stream that happens to run *inside* the hotel.

Disney could not conceive a better backdrop for raw oysters and grilled fish. Like the glass-and-steel canyon in which it resides, Moon Bay is super-sized, a series of airy rooms with floors the color of sand, curtains tipped in coral blue and a soundtrack that bounces from

reggae to the Beach Boys. The rattan chairs encourage leisurely dining, and grouped tables play the role of private rooms; one big square can seat a dozen diners.

Picture a sanitized South Beach on the Potomac. At the helm: Duane Keller, 45, whose résumé details time at the late Alexandria restaurants Potowmack Landing and Blue Point Grill.

Though Keller's menu approaches the size of this newspaper, it's not a taxing read. The possibilities start with a handful of appetizers, mostly featuring seafood; flow into Asian-style rolls, because if a restaurant aims to be trendy these days, it has to have sushi; play up a few classics (crab cakes, paella) as main courses; and throw in some turf -- "Not the Fish" -- for contrarians.

Oysters make a good launch. The fresh ones, free of detritus in their shells, glisten, and they're flavorful enough that you won't need sauce to perk them up. Salmon Three Ways also would be on my short list of candidates for a first course; the herbed tartare, the folds of smoked fish and the cured salmon tucked into a tiny tea sandwich with cream cheese put the ubiquitous fish on a pedestal. Crunchy ringlets of fried squid appear in a napkin-lined copper pot with an escort of three dips: gingery tomato chutney, pesto made with watercress and a rich rouille. They constitute a good shared snack. At lunch, there's a satisfying lobster roll that's light on the mayonnaise and sweet with tarragon. Leagues down on the pleasure scale is the crab gratin, which sounds great on paper but fails on its promise of a "horseradish crust." Let's just say the lavosh, used for scooping, is more fun to eat than the creamy but bland shredded seafood.

You won't confuse many of the rolls with anything you'd find at, say, Sushi-Ko in Glover Park or Chevy Chase. The kitchen likes to make its rice-wrapped dishes big and fat, and it isn't afraid to stuff them with such American crowd-pleasers as lobster and beef (you know, Surf & Turf). More restrained, and more refined, is the National River. Inside is crunchy shrimp; outside are dewy scallops. Accents of sesame seeds and green-tea mayonnaise tie the flavors together and add up to a lot of pleasure.

So does the mahi-mahi, moist beneath its teasing coat of spices. One of four "Dayboat Selections" and possibly the single best entree, the fish includes a fine hash of asparagus, potatoes and bell peppers, plus a choice of sauces. The

enhancers run to the traditional hollandaise and the trendy (lobster) foam. I say, stick to what's classic.

Moon Bay grills a decent flat-iron steak, which it treats to garlic butter and a cone of rosemary-flecked french fries. But the restaurant's glazed pork loin, while tender, is most interesting for its cheddar-infused grits.

I've had waiters who live up to Gaylord's training, in which customer requests are met with "Consider it done," and I've had waiters who won't stop interrupting the conversation at my table. "Here's your wine glass," one of the offenders says -- to each guest, each time he

sets a glass in front of the guest. "Here's your first course," he later tells each of us, separately. "Here's your entree," he continues the annoying pattern. Is he reminding himself what to do or trying to boost his tip? By the time our main courses are cleared, we Consider Him Intrusive.

The most entertaining way to end a meal is with a petite confection priced at \$3 and staged on a suspended Turkish tray. Served in what look like votives, the small sweets have included satisfying panna cotta draped in raspberry sauce and peanut-butter-turtle cheesecake. (As this review was going to press, a new pastry chef was hired; Keller says she plans to keep the minis and add combinations of her own.)

Who dines here? It depends on the day of the week and the type of convention, a hotel spokeswoman says. Weekends tend to find lots of locals, some of whom arrive at the resort via water taxi from Alexandria. Weekdays see more out-of-town groups. As one might imagine, a group of Ethiopian soccer players and their fans set a different tone than did a crowd of nurses.

For years, I've despaired of the paucity of independent restaurants in Prince George's County. With the opening of the Gaylord, I find myself staring at several competitors under an \$865 million roof.

Choices are good. Quality is better. So I cheer the arrival of Moon Bay Coastal Cuisine even as I hope it grows into more of a keeper.

*Open: lunch daily 11:30 a.m. to 2 p.m.; light fare daily 2 to 5 p.m.; dinner daily 5 to 10:30 p.m. All major credit cards. Valet and validated parking. Prices: lunch entrees \$12 to \$20, dinner entrees \$19 to \$34.*