

Monterey County Weekly

The Abalone Chefs



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Seafood savant and Aubergine Executive Chef Justin Cogley has been harvesting some shiny awards lately, from the likes of *Food & Wine* (Best New Chef) and the James Beard Foundation (Best Chef West semifinalist). The far greater prize, for him, came well before, when he installed his very own custom aquarium in Aubergine's kitchen – so he could harvest abalone to order for dishes like his abalone and oyster with pickled sea beans and wild sea lettuce on braised pig's tail cake.

Yes, that dish is a bit different than Pop's classic preparation (see story, p. 18). But they're both brilliant. A look at other inventive abalone treatments follows, including a dish from John Pisto. As Thomas writes in his book – which includes recipes like creamed abalone, fried abalone, marinated abalone and abalone Rockefeller – Pisto used to work at the restaurant Pop Ernest's became, Cerrito's, where they would acquire abalone from Cayucos, de-shell them, throw them in a burlap sack “and pound the sack with heavy two-by-fours.” The center cuts they would use, Pisto remembers, were the size of dinner platters. (To add your favorite abalone eatery to the list, email edible@mcweekly.com.)

Abalone BLT • Abalonetti Bar and Grill

57 Fisherman's Wharf, Monterey, 373-1851 • “Abalonetti” is actually a type of squid recipe inspired by old-fashioned abalone preparation. While calamari is the star here, the gastropod is a point of pride – butterfly cut, panko-breaded and pan-seared – served as both an appetizer (\$17.95), entree (\$35.95) and in an unbelievable BLT (\$18.95).

Abalone au naturale • Aubergine

Monte Verde Street, Carmel, 624-8578 • Cogley's abalone – harvested to order – comes simmered in seawater and served alongside local artichokes and seaweed. It's the highlight of the spellbinding tasting menu (\$145), though individual orders may be accommodated upon special request.

Abalone feast • Fisherman's Grotto

39 Fisherman's Wharf, Monterey, 375-4604 • Farm-raised local abalone (\$40) comes lightly breaded and garnished with citrus bourblanc sauce, spinach risotto and organic veggies, served in shell with two large prawns as escort.

Abalone sliders • Loulou's Griddle in the Middle

Municipal Wharf No. 2, Monterey, (831) 372-0568 • \$14.95 • Benito Carrillo's Friday-night-only special just starred on Guy Fieri's *Diners, Drive-ins and Dives*.

Monterey Bay red abalone • Pacific's Edge

120 Highlands Drive, Carmel, 622-5445 • Executive Chef Matt Bolton has made abalone (\$32) his hallmark, partnering the delicately pan-seared steak with seasonal ingredients like the current complements of artichoke, heirloom tomato and summer truffle.

Abalone bisque • Sardine Factory

701 Wave St., Monterey, 373-3775 • The most famous dish (\$10) at the area's most famous restaurant was once served at the White House. They take wild steak trimmings, smoked applewood bacon and scallions and slow simmer them into a symphony of flavor. They also offer wild abalone center-cut steaks (\$75). "We've been serving it for 46 years," Bert Cutino says. "We used to get it free. Now we pay through the nose for it."

Abalone doré and "Monterey red" • Sierra Mar

47900 California 1, Big Sur, (831) 667-2800 • Exec Chef John Cox does two different treatments as part of his tasting menu (\$120-\$160). For the doré he lightly pounds his steaks, then powders them in black rice flour before carefully sautéing them in miso and brown butter. The red preparation is kelp-cured, served after a three-day marinade in flavor-enhancing local seaweed and sea salt.

"Live" abalone • Whaling Station Steakhouse

763 Wave St., Monterey, (831) 373-3778 • \$30 – \$60, depending on size • Celebrity Chef John Pisto, host of the show "Monterey's Cookin' Pisto Style," serves his abalone classically: After a light pounding and breading, he grills the heady foot with a hint of lemon butter.

