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All the World—One Region

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DINING

But we're not. So we must make do with the next best thing. Fortunately, Houston has a rich mix of restaurants that specialize in "fruits" of the sea—and oceans and rivers and lakes. They range from funky fish houses out in the boondocks like **Dido's** in Brazoria or the **Stingaree** in Crystal Beach to high-ticket eateries in the Galleria–River Oaks nexus like **Oceanaire** and **Pesce**.

And you can't just say, "Hey, let's get some seafood!" There are various schools of fish, you might say. Sushi, of course. Talking about that requires an article all to itself. Certainly the whole Cajun/Creole-influenced approach, probably best known from places like the **Pappadeaux** and **Babin's** chains and solo operations like **Denis** and **Mardi Gras Grill**, plays a prominent role. And there's a really intriguing Latin American style seen at **Café Red Onion**, **Tampico Seafood**, **El Pueblito** and similar establishments serving up zesty ceviche and delicacies like *huachinango veracruzana*. You can often find luscious whole fish—steamed and wonderfully spiced with chili paste—in a handful of Thai, Vietnamese and

Chinese venues like **888** and the venerable **Kim Son**.

Naturally, there are traditionalists who insist that the best—certainly the most "authentic"—approach is something usually called Gulf Coast Seafood, as characterized by warhorses like the **Monument Inn**, **Brennan's**, **Mandola's Gulf Coast Kitchen**, **Goode Co. Seafood**, **Massa's** and, in Galveston, **Gaido's** and **Clary's**. I especially need to take note of an outstanding newcomer to that group, called **Danton's**, that is quickly establishing itself as one of the tops in the city. The old school attitude of the Gulf Coast Seafood group, at its best, successfully incorporates a little of all those other styles and relies on locally harvested flounder, catfish, redfish, oysters, shrimp, crawfish and so on.

So, depending on what you're in the mood for, you can set sail for just about any of those places and enjoy a delightful seafood experience.

As for me, my current favorite is an establishment that doesn't really fit too neatly into any of those categories. That's one reason why I find **REEF** so appealing.

Chef Bryan Caswell and partner Bill Floyd left the high-toned culinary pursuits of the Hotel Icon's restaurant Bank (now closed) to set up their own pleasantly less pretentious operation in Midtown, a minimally decorated space with light fixtures that call to mind seashells, cool aquamarine colors, tables made from a mother-of-pearlized Lucite and a kitchen that is open for all to see.

As the name indicates, the food is aquatic (but not exclusively so) and the intention is to offer "fresh" fish to Houston. That's "fresh" as in novel. Instead of the usual finny fare that we see all over our local menus—like catfish, tilapia, tuna, salmon and sea bass—**REEF** has been offering such delectable oddities as spearfish, wahoo, tilefish, amberjack, escolar and tripletail. The prices aren't going to drown your budget, with most fish entrées in the low to mid-\$20 neighborhood.

Even rarer than the fish themselves may be the chef's decision to steer clear of battering and deep-frying these deep-sea delicacies. Of the two dozen or so fish dishes I've seen on the menu, which

changes depending on availability, I don't recall a single "fried" selection (other than a soft-shell crab). Nothing against frying, mind you, but why mask the fragile flavors of a near-perfect piece of flounder or snapper by encrusting and frying it? Or overloading it with ultra-lush or pungent toppings? At **REEF**, the fish—which are mostly roasted, grilled or baked—are allowed to shine on their own.

As if to underscore their distinctive nature, these fish are often paired with unconventional side orders like collard greens, plantains, Chinese long beans and artichokes that expand the flavor spectrum. But this isn't a mad scientist run amok in a kitchen. **REEF** doesn't insist that these inventive concoctions are the only thing to eat. The menu has a "Simply Grilled" section with a few of the fish, plus chicken or ribeye, offered a la carte—along with a few side selections like mashed potatoes, polenta, crispy fries, asparagus—for those with more conventional palates.

There are a lot of fish in the sea—and **REEF** is putting some of the better ones on a plate just for you.

PHOTOS BY SHANNON FURMAN

