

DATEBOOK



HANG
Loose
THIS
Summer!

Cirque
du Soleil
flies into
town.

Our super guide to the best around the bay — circuses, festivals, fairs and shows. Plus, the best (and worst) concert seats.

ALSO INSIDE: LIZA MINNELLI ♦ 'OTHELLO' BALLET ♦ GREIL MARCUS

BOOK REVIEW SECTION: TRASHY FICTION FOR SUMMER



Forrest Gump look-alike Steve Weber greets the lunch crowd at Bubba Gump Shrimp Co. on Pier 39.

MICHAEL MALONEY / The Chronicle

YOU NEVER KNOW WHAT YOU'RE GONNA GET

Bubba Gump's at Pier 39 runs with the movie theme but stalls in the kitchen

By Maria Cianci
CHRONICLE STAFF CRITIC

Think of it as a theme park instead of a restaurant, and Bubba Gump Shrimp Co. on San Francisco's Pier 39 is fun. But this restaurant — spawned by the movie "Forrest Gump" — isn't a place to go for food.

I know what a friend meant when after dinner he said, "Nothing tastes fresh." Whatever fresh ingredients are on the menu are jumbled in with many that look or taste commercial and processed. Many dishes don't have a prepared-from-scratch taste and bring to mind the term "fake food."

But the ambience — created by the interior design and wait staff — delivers a good-time experience, especially on a packed Saturday night, when the crowd's energy and the staff's enthusiastic performance feed each other.

When it's busy and you've been wait-listed, you can head up a few steps to the bar. (Don't necessarily order liquor. Drinks can be sweet or have an off-flavor.) When a table becomes available, the hostess booms your name into the microphone and calls, "It's chooooooww time!"

Even on nights when the 262-seat restaurant isn't filled and things are more subdued, the staff is geared up for show time.

It isn't surprising to learn that Paramount Pictures, maker of the 1994 Oscar-winning movie, is the joint owner of Bubba Gump Shrimp Co., with Rusty Pelican Restaurants Inc. The first Bubba Gump was opened last year in Monterey, the Pier 39 outlet in February. There are plans to open a third on Maui this winter.

Perhaps in the heat of the movie's success, the idea of opening a restaurant dedicated to the life and times of Forrest Gump sounded good. Now it feels forced. Even so, it is possible to appreciate the interior for its size, design and meticulous details. Even cynics may have fun strolling the place as if it were a Hollywood set.

The restaurant, in a second-story, hard-to-find location, curves around the tip of the pier and commands a panoramic bay view. It's a perfect setting for the coastal seafood shack that has been created with weather-beaten slatted and beamed ceilings, fishing nets, neon beer signs and plank floors. Wood tables are carved with "Gumpisms" and stacked with red, white and blue plastic plates and a tin bucket filled with brown paper towels and condiments.

Remember Forrest's run across America? A map marking the route with blinking lights hangs by the front door, and license plates from all the states hang everywhere. Story boards and reproductions of the movie's props are numerous — Forrest's Alabama football jersey, white bench suit and Army uniform; Jenny's wedding dress; Hawaiian shirts. (It helps to have seen the movie.) Photos from the movie are everywhere. Even the women's rest room — with posied wallpaper that could have come from Forrest's boyhood home — looks like a photo album.

Brace yourself for the souvenir shop outside the restaurant and the Forrest Gump bench across from it, complete with that damed box of chocolates and running shoes nailed to the deck. Sit down, put your feet in the shoes, smile and have someone snap your picture. Oh, come on.

Inside, monitors continuously run scenes

BUBBA GUMP SHRIMP CO.

Pier 39, Building M210 (at the tip of the pier), San Francisco
(415) 781-4867

Continuous service 11:30 a.m.-10 p.m.
Monday-Thursday, 11 a.m.-11 p.m.
Friday-Sunday, Full bar. Major credit cards accepted. No reservations. Street parking difficult. If you park in the expensive lot across the street from Pier 39, be sure to have your waiter validate the ticket.

OVERALL ★½

Food	½	Atmosphere	★★★
Service	★★★	Prices	\$\$

PLUSES: Oscar nominee for design in a theme restaurant. For full effect, go on Saturday, the busiest night.

MINUSES: No reservations may mean a short wait on busy nights. The food won't win an Oscar.

RATINGS KEY

★★★★ Extraordinary ★★★ Excellent

★★ Good ★ Fair □ Poor

(\$) Inexpensive: entrees less than \$7,

(\$\$) Moderate: \$7-\$14,

(\$\$\$) Expensive: \$15-\$20,

(\$\$\$\$) Very Expensive: more than \$20

cynics.

As if at an audition, each server recites a variation on a routine that explains the menu and drink list (written on pingpong paddles — remember the tournament?). They also outline the rules for getting a waiter's attention.

"OK, how ya doing? Still with me? Good," says an eager waiter. "See these?" He points to red and blue license plates on the table. "You need something? Flip this red one up; we'll come running. Everything OK? Keep this blue one up. OK?"

We nod. He leaves. We can't resist. We flip up the red one. As if a siren has sounded, a waitress comes running. "What do you need?" "Just testing," we say, impressed.

What we could really use is fewer cutesy menu descriptions — "far from home coconut shrimp," "from da crab pot at Mama Blue's" and "championship pingpong salad."

"Bucket of boat trash" is the biggest seller, says a waitress. "Mmmmmmm, that does sound good," replies a friend.

"Who gets the salmon?" asks a waiter, delivering plates one packed Saturday night. Silence. Then one of us helps out, "I have the mahi mahi."

"Yeah, that's it, that's it, yeah," he agrees.

There are dishes here that make you wonder, "What is this?" But neither the salmon (\$14.95) nor the mahi mahi (\$13.95) is among them. They are OK.

Not OK: the tough, vein-in shrimp topped with commercial-tasting cocktail sauce (\$6.95); Bubba's "far out" spinach and artichoke dip (\$5.50), an oily mass served with poor-quality tortilla chips; the "all American nachos" (\$4.25) that trade tortilla chips for potato chips and are topped with runny, brown liquid-smoke flavored cheese; the shadow-of-

from the movie. If this is hard to bear, focus on the waiters and waitresses. They are great — with kids, with tourists who speak minimal English and with getting you what you need with a chipper smile. They don't seem to mind

the-real-thing "classic" Caesar salad (\$3.95); and the pease porridge-textured white clam chowder (\$3.25).

Truly gruesome was the "Alabama shrimp spaghetti" (\$11.50) with a piercingly lemony sauce and shrimp that smelled as if they had sunned for days on a dock; and the "authentic" Key lime pie (\$4.50) with a thick white topping that has the dense, greasy texture of fabricated fat.

"Mama Blue's Southern charmed fried shrimp" (\$12.95) tastes of commercial breading.

"These taste like muffins," a diner says about another dish, gorgeously fat and golden coconut-battered shrimp (\$14.95). Sure enough, the breaded, sweet and extraordinarily thick coating tastes just like a muffin.

"Bucket of boat trash" (\$16.50) is also fried — a mass of french fries topped with more breaded shrimp and slipper tail lobster. Throw it overboard.

"Shrimper's net catch" (\$9.95) isn't breaded and fried, but one night the beer-steamed shrimp tasted watery and sans the "secret recipe Cajun seasoning." At the table, the waiter douses the shrimp with "brown butter." Better to refuse it and ask for some of the nicely pungent tartar sauce.

"New Orleans barbecued shrimp and sausage" (\$12.95) is inedible because of all that shiny brown sauce that tastes like sweet liquid smoke.

French fries are thin, crisp, good and usually hot. The creamy, pungent chopped cole slaw is also good — and has a fresh, crisp bite. Both come with many of the entrees. The crisp potato chips are good.

One of the best dishes is the "skillet roasted vegetables" appetizer (\$5.50), even though the corn on the cob can taste waterlogged.

If you can accept the quasi-Asian concept of the pingpong salad (\$8.95), it's OK. The spicy, barely sweet dressing has some character. Mama Gump's garlic bread (\$2.95) is oily but tastes garlicky and has a great crust. The pork chops (\$11.95) are acceptable — without that very orangy-sweet sauce. The Dixie-style baby back ribs (\$6.95) are tender and meaty. Must they pour that sweet liquid-smoke flavored sauce over them?

And you can't escape that box of chocolates. "What's this one?" we ask our waitress, who has pulled the box from behind her back to reveal a few chocolates in a sea of white papers. "Life is like a box of chocolates," she drones. "You never know..." Groans from the entire table.

The long, thin chocolate with a caramel center is yummy but expensive (75 cents each). The chocolate cake (\$4.50) is fine — a little oily but moist and with velvety chocolate frosting. Smoothies (\$2.75/\$3.75) are also sweet enough for dessert.

One last thing you can't escape: the staff's trivia quiz. It's hard to predict at what point in the meal your waiter will pull the quiz, but rest assured... What town and state did Forrest Gump live in? What talk show did he appear on? And do you remember what he did after he caught the football? How did Forrest get into school?

That's entertainment, from Bubba Gump Shrimp Co. ■

Michael Bauer is on vacation.