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Carlson's Landing executive chef Kyle Bledsoe holds an entree, quail stuffed with brioche foie gras and caramelized onions with local carnival squash puree and roasted root vegetables, in the dining room of the restaurant in Essex.

'An elevated yacht club experience'

Rabine's new Carlson's Landing offers upscale waterfront dining

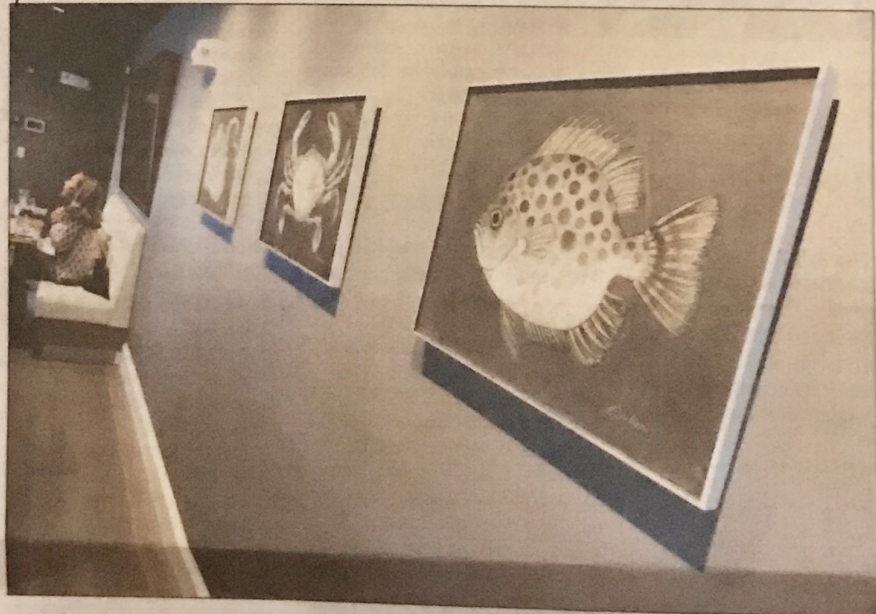
By Lisa Reisman

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Given Robert Rabine's culinary reputation, it's initially hard to fathom the inclusion of the classic Fishwich on the all-day menu at Carlson's Landing, the upscale waterfront restaurant that recently opened in Essex.

This is the same Rabine whose Cafe Routier was the restaurant of choice for the late chef Anthony Bourdain while in Madison to promote his bestselling "Kitchen Confidential" in 2002. Its cuisine, by chef Jeffrey Renkl, was pronounced by Hartford Courant food critic Greg Morago "in a league of its own."

"My mother never really took an interest in cooking," said the low-key, amiable Rabine at the stylish gathering place on a recent afternoon, reclining on a cushioned seat overlooking the picturesque Essex Marina and a glittering swath of the



Paintings by Melissa Barbieri line the walls at Carlson's Landing in Essex.

Connecticut River.

Hence, the Fishwich, with American cheese and tartar sauce on an Irish potato roll, an homage to his mother's

dinner preparation of Mrs. Paul's Fish Sticks — or, depending on the night, SpaghettiOs, Frozen Banquet fried chicken, or La Choy

chow mein — for him and his four siblings.

The Swordfish Puttanesca tells a different story.

See Landing on A12

LANDING

From page A1

It's the Clinton resident's take on the Tuna Puttanesca recipe of his grandmother from whom, along with his grandfather, young Rabine "discovered food, real food that was actually cooked," he said — including his grandfather's Italian wedding soup and his grandmother's meatballs and sauce.

To put himself through college at San Diego State, Rabine worked in the restaurant business, learning food service operations from the ground up.

"I liked cooks and I liked their attitude," he said. "I liked the free-wheeling nature of a restaurant kitchen."

After 20 years working in fine dining in California, he landed at the venerable Robert Henry's in New Haven, followed by Madison's Cafe Lafayette, before he and Renkl founded Cafe Routier to rave reviews.

Late last year, Rabine, known to ShoreLine Times readers for his Oedipal Epicurean column, which he penned from 2011 to 2019, got a call from a former Cafe Routier customer; he and Renkl sold the bistro in 2005.

On the recommendation of interior designer Lawrence Hamre, longtime Essex resident Rick Carlson, owner of the Essex Boat Works, was looking for a consultant for an upscale waterfront restaurant on his property that was near completion.

"I knew Rick," Rabine said, as soft jazz filtered through the intimate, mellow-lit space amid the aroma of lobster fresh from the oven. "Rick has exquisite taste."

Specifically, it seems, housing the restaurant in a building designed by Centerbrook Architects, acclaimed for, among other creations, the steamboat dock of the CT River Museum; with Hamre's interiors; and original undersea artwork by the renowned local artist Melissa Barbieri.

Not surprising, then, that when Carlson asked him to find the right



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The bar area at Carlson's Landing in Essex is the center of the restaurant's several signature cocktails.



Above left, the dining room at Carlson's Landing in Essex. Above right, the cocktail Purple Rain contains pea flower infused gin, Wild Moon Lavender Liqueur, a lemon-honey mixture and is topped with a lavender flower.



tenant and to negotiate the lease, "I saw the possibilities and decided to take it for myself," Rabine said.

Then came the challenge. Whereas Cafe Routier's un-

assuming exterior promised little, the idyllic setting and stylish interior of Carlson's Landing has "diners expecting almost perfection," Rabine said.

At the same time, he mused, "a dazzling view does have the potential to elevate the dining experience."

By the indications of two diners

from Madison on a recent afternoon, the latter option seems to hold true.

"Outstanding," said Kimberly Esty, who enjoyed deviled eggs with fried capers and an "extraordinary" swordfish BLT for lunch.

"Everything — the decor, the view, the attentive service — it makes for a nice, mellow afternoon in a beautiful place," Libby Bohannon said, as she sipped on a cappuccino.

No wonder, it seems, given a top-notch staff that includes Johnson & Wales alumnus Chef Kyle Bledsoe who's trained under Chef Pascal Barbot of Astrancee in Paris, as well as assistant managers Suzanne O'Sullivan, part of Jonathan Rapp's team at Chester's River Tavern, and Hannah Chimanski, who's worked with Daniel Boulud and was trained at Mandarin Oriental's hospitality school.

There's also the unique concept — to satisfy boaters and foodies alike with "an elevated yacht club experience of pristine seafood and classic American fare," as the website of Carlson's Landing reads.

"I wanted our cuisine to be market-fresh seafood-centric because look at where we are," Rabine said, gesturing at the 400 boat slips in the marina, "and also to have a retro feel, meaning flavors that people recognize. I think that's comforting to a lot of folks."

That might mean the familiar taste of local oysters, buttery lobster rolls, and deviled crab fritters included on the all-day menu. Or the three simple fish or meats grilled or seared with a seasonal vegetable on the newly-introduced surf 'n' turf menu. Or even the dinner menu, with lighter and more complicated fare, which is in development, according to Rabine.

Of course, it all comes back to the Fishwich.

"It's one of our most popular items," he said with a grin.

Carlson's Landing is at 63 Main S. in Essex. carlsonslanding.com; 860-767-2727. Wrap-around deck for outdoor seating in the summer.