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Summer Restaurant Guide

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| Photograph by HEATH ROBBINS

Crowd Pleasers

Dining out in groups can be a huge headache. So we asked a few of our favorite foodies where they go for those special occasions when eight is not enough.





SHARE THEE WELL: Mistral's dessert assortment is an instant fête on a plate.

PROMOTION DINNER: *Mistral*

A FAMILY OF FOODIES COULDN'T find a more sophisticated venue than *Mistral* to commemorate one of life's milestones. When the restaurant first blew into its South End/Back Bay location, it was more about loud, trendy clubbing than serious eating. Now in its adolescence, the food created by chef Jamie Mammano and his talented staff is the main event.

The room ain't bad, either. Banquettes lining the expansive room provide large parties with a variety of seating arrangements. The lighting is low and ambient, the noise level is party-perfect, and the decorative touches (from the chandeliers to the urns to the dishes) are Provençal in the true sense of the word. Vases of flowers and topiaries placed next to high white columns are tasteful and dramatic. Along the back brick wall, the two square windows are enormous floor-to-ceiling affairs, while arched windows along the side look out on the picturesque South End skyline.

For starters, I'm happy to report that diners really can't go wrong. Favorite appetizers: onion soup with sherry and Gruyère, confit of duck with foie gras in brioche, tuna tartare with crispy wontons, and Dungeness crab ravioli in thyme-tomato broth that is wonderfully light while the pasta is replete with luxurious crabmeat.

Of course,

Mistral regulars go for the pizza. Grilled and thin-crust, even a simple tomato and mozzarella concoction sprinkled with fresh oregano and red chili oil (at your discretion) is fabulous. Entrées, however, deserve total attention. A whole black sea bass roasted and stuffed with ginger and garlic, garnished with pea vines, rests in a fragrant lime-crustacean broth. Side dishes like roasted garlic mash, fries, or horseradish-whipped potatoes are available. I prefer to fill in the blanks with warm round loaves of bread, cut into quarters and dipped into garlicky chickpea purée.

Pastry chef Joanne Chang makes it impossible to decide among the seductive creations on the dessert menu. We ordered the Mini Clay Pot Dessert Assiette for Two (\$15). What an assortment: warm chocolate torte in a tiny tureen with a rustic pitcher of sauce anglaise, almond-chocolate macaroon cookies, berry panna cotta on a little raised dish, rhubarb sorbet, and apple cobbler with vanilla ice cream. The look conveys a little-girl tea party, an instant fête. Indeed, nothing is ordinary at *Mistral*. Regular coffee is accompanied by a metal pitcher of hot foamed milk. —LA