



# Emeril Reacts to Fisher's Menu in Orange Beach, Alabama

By The Cooking Ladies

Two days before Fisher's at Orange Beach Marina opened to the public, Emeril Lagasse tied up his yacht within walking distance to the restaurant. A big game fishing enthusiast, he was there for the Orange Beach Billfish Classic. Johnny Fisher invited Emeril ashore to check out his new menu. Back in the kitchen, Johnny's team was anxiously lighting ovens and firing up kitchen equipment for the very first time. Stress levels were high. Emeril accepted Johnny's offer bringing his crew of eight along as well.

"There was no time to treat Emeril as anything but another restaurant guy," Fisher said. "My entire staff was undergoing intensive around-the-clock training. We kept serving him dishes and he kept saying, 'Yah, baby, that's a winner.'" Fisher had a connection to Lagasse through his chef, Bill Briand, who trained under Emeril. This explains the Lagasse-Louisiana influence on Fisher's menu. On opening night while the wine sommelier discussed pairings, and the bartender and wait staff scurried to serve drinks and take orders in the front of the house, Emeril hung with the cooks in the kitchen.

"Come on, baby. You're good. You can do it," Emeril encouraged while the cooks whisked sauces, braised vegetables, drizzled dressings, and garnished plates to impress the crowd. Johnny Fisher is an idea guy, a detail guy, who created his namesake restaurant after holding management positions with House of Blues in New Orleans and Lulu's in Gulf Shores. Fisher's, in Orange Beach, offers two luxury, waterfront dining experiences, without pretense, under one roof. Formal dining Upstairs, and family fun Docksider.

As we sit waterside with Johnny, we recognize all the signs of an owner who cares. Even though he is engaged in dialogue, his eyes never stop checking on staff or watching for a sign from a customer that attention is needed. He excuses himself to say hello to a regular. His young daughter arrives, he hugs her, and allows her to play make-believe greeter. "I've created a place and I love selling it," Johnny says. "A restaurant has to have a culture. If the owner is not there, it's not happening."

Fisher's Upstairs is impressive. Antique heart-pine floors. Onyx bar. Chairs covered in ocean-foam-off-white linen. Walls of windows overlook yachts, palm trees, and wind-rippled water. Floor to ceiling glass doors open out to a dining deck and bar that any cruise ship would envy.

Upstairs signature cocktails are named after the charter boats moored at the marina below. Floating atop the Saltwater Margarita is a saltwater foam created by combining orange juice, lime juice, sugar, salt, and gelatin. Swizzle-stirred into the drink before sipping, it invokes the scent of the ocean that any old salt would recognize. The Intimidator, on the other hand, is made with house-smoked bourbon. Prior to mixing with sweet vermouth and bitters, the bourbon receives a shot from the bartender's smoking gun. The scent of cherry wood swirls into the bourbon creating a perfect pre-dinner cocktail, reminiscent of outdoor grilling.

We indulge in Shrimp and Grits, a combination of Gulf Shrimp, shiitake mushrooms, bacon lardon, red-eye gravy, and stone-ground yellow grits; Crispy Pork Cheeks with sweet potato purée and basil oil; and Seared Jumbo Scallops with roasted cauliflower and ginger herb salad. A man at the table beside us beckons to Johnny.

"Are you Fisher? I want you to know we're really enjoying the fact that we are dining and not just eating. Good job." We could not have said it better. Fisher's Docksider offers a lighter menu in a more casual décor. Palm and citrus trees surround an outdoor lounge where white lawn furniture is nestled on lush, manicured grass – the same brilliant-green grass that cushions the cleats of the Atlanta Braves and Miami Marlins. Another Johnny Fisher detail.

Two restaurant concepts, fine dining and fun, under one waterfront roof at the Orange Beach Marina. Will the creativity end there? Likely not. Fisher already has more ideas for the Orange Beach restaurant scene. Who knows what Emeril might experience next year when he returns for the annual billfish tournament. "Yah, baby!" ■