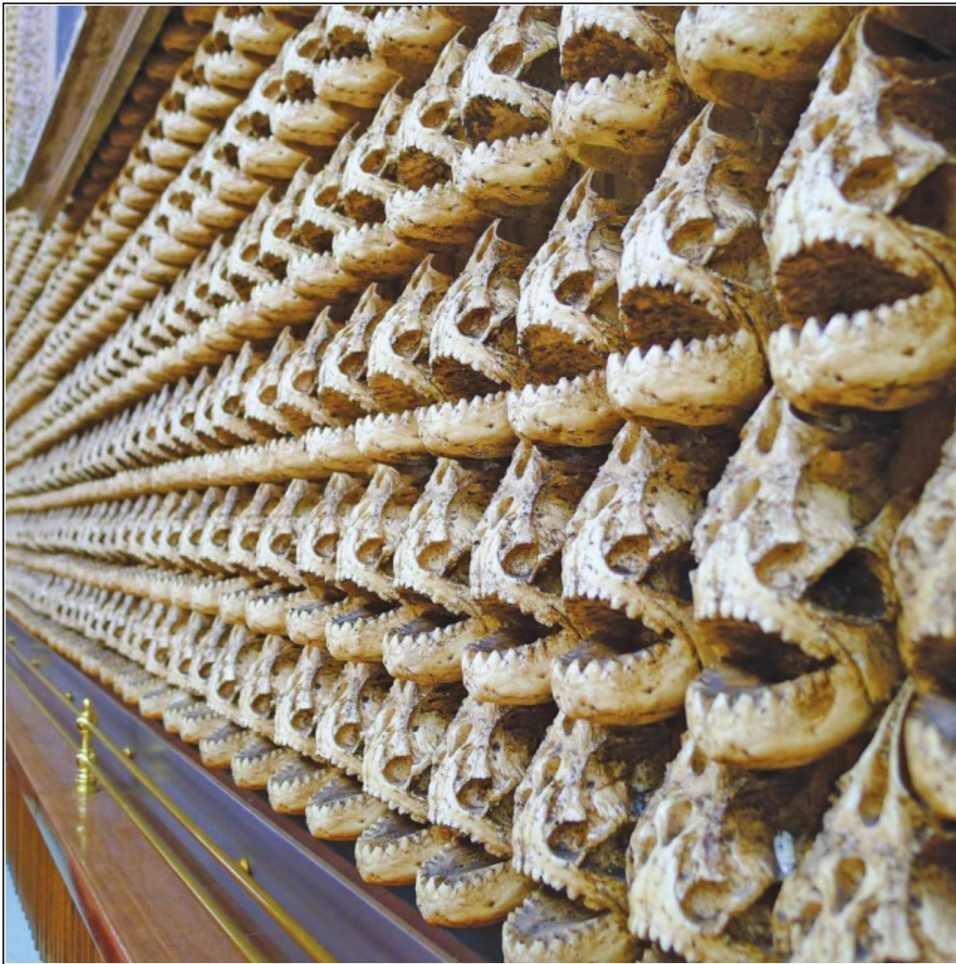


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Ironside looks more ambitious than it tastes

Little Italy restaurant serves perfect oysters and \$19 lobster rolls

By [Michael A. Gardiner](#)



Wall o' piranhas

- Photo by Michael A. Gardiner

Little Italy's [Ironside Fish & Oyster](#) was one of San Diego's most eagerly anticipated restaurant openings of 2014, bringing together the cool factor of owners Consortium Holdings (Noble Experiment, Polite Provisions, Craft & Commerce), the cuisine of two-star Michelin Chef Jason McLeod, a raw-bar concept and a design by Paul Basile. A "can't miss" project, it made it only half way.

One step in the place (1654 India St.) and the jaw drops; Basile's design is that good. It is Titanic done as steampunk fantasy, featuring a lighting fixture cradled in the curl of a massive octopus tentacle, a wall of piranhas below stowed Victorian luggage and an immense diver's helmet sitting at the corner of the oyster bar as if resting momentarily before going back down for more. It is nothing short of spectacular.

And while you might not be able to eat design, you can certainly soak up a vibe. At Ironside, you do. The look and feel of the place is energy and energizing, loud and electric. Every inch of it shouts that this is the place to be.

Ironside's oysters are wonderful. Each day brings fresh offerings from Baja's Kumiai to Washington's Kumamotos and Fanny Bays from Canada.

Beautifully and freshly shucked and served with a simple, elegant mignonette, there's absolutely nothing wrong with them. It's difficult to imagine our Kumiais being done any better, anywhere, ever. They were minerally, briny and as mysteriously perfect as oysters ever could be.

Did I mention that Ironside features a two-star Michelin chef? Had I not, you probably wouldn't have known it after eating there. Certainly, the oyster program is wonderful. But how far can an oyster program take you? The fish and chips were, in the end, just fish and chips. They were well-executed—better than at Princess Pub across the street. But they were just fish and chips. Similarly, the fried oyster po' boy was, ultimately, a po' boy. There's only so far you can go with a po' boy.

Perhaps McLeod's best shot at pushing that envelope was the \$19 lobster roll. That's a lot of money to pay for a lobster roll. It's a lot of lobster, though, and in very big and perfectly buttery chunks. And it's served in a spectacular brioche vertical bun. It was delicious. And it was \$19. For a lobster roll.

That gets at the central problem at Ironside. While it's billed as Consortium Holdings' "most ambitious, culinary-focused concept to date," the reality is that its raw-bar concept leaves little room for culinary ambition. Simple, fresh seafood, perfectly executed, can be spectacular. But it doesn't exactly make for an "ambitious, culinary-focused" menu.

With Ironside, Consortium Holdings did what it does so well: It created a beautiful space with a great atmosphere and ambitious bar programs (drinks and raw). Unfortunately, the culinary ambition promised both implicitly and explicitly is still left wanting. You can have a great time and great oysters at Ironside, just not great, ambitious food.

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