

Treasure Island's Mersea Has Excellent Food and Even Better Views

Since we're enjoying the balmiest possible winter, you should go check out this restaurant-bar made of shipping containers (and a bocce court).

Peter Lawrence Kane



Double Wagyu cheeseburger.

The more time I spend on Treasure Island, the more confusing I find it to be. Beyond the flea market and the music festival that's on hiatus, you can drink beer on a fake beach and wine in a submarine, kayak in Clipper Cove, or meander around streets with suburban-paradise names like Striped Bass Court. There's plenty of ruin porn to Instagram without feeling predatory, more than a few piles of slag and rubble, and the occasional contemporary office building.

Officially, the future looks bright. San Francisco has partnered with a developer to erect 8,000 new dwellings, 25 percent of which are to be below-market-rate. But there's also a nefarious cancer cluster, owing to radioactive materials the Navy dumped there a half-century ago — something that should give prospective inhabitants pause in light of *Curbed's* revelation that a [larger development at Hunters Point](#) may have been less than forthcoming about the extent of the contamination.

The southern and western edges of the 400-acre artificial island are where the action is for now. There's more Art Deco and fewer barracks-like homes, and as of last month, a restaurant-bar built from shipping containers. [Mersea](#) — pronounced "murr-SAY," according to its voicemail message — stands out as a sort of *Dwell*-baiting dream made manifest directly across the street from the water's edge, like a Philip Johnson Glass House with curtains that soften its right angles and nearly unobstructed views of Downtown San Francisco.

Mersea is certainly capitalizing on that vista — along with a bocce court and a mini-golf course — but unlike tourist traps that operate in that vein, food and drink make it even more worthwhile. Simply put, this kitchen has a flair for the creative. A **coconut-milk ceviche** with very salty chips (\$12) was creative and light, a nice alternative to all the citrus baths fish gets dunked into. Somewhat heavier, a **short-rib spaetzle** (\$16) was very nicely done, creamy and gooey over enough pickled vegetables to give it snap. As a side, even the small portion of **french fries** is fairly enormous for only \$3; you might as well just do it.

Although I love brioche on a burger, I wasn't wild about the beef-to-bun-to-sauce ratio on the **Double Wagyu cheeseburger** (\$12), which was gloppy and lean on meat. There was no tomato to be found on either it or the **nachos**, a \$10 special on a recent Sunday, although they were nothing short of unique. If you insist on the standard fixings, you'll arch an eyebrow here, but these came with a "green salsa" made with cilantro blended into the sour cream over juicy shreds of carnitas. A **whole roast chicken** for \$14 with a big heap of roasted squash, mushrooms, and onions was delicate and homey, and the **Jersey Girl sandwich** (a steroidal McMuffin with a Taylor pork roll, kimchi, arugula, and a fried egg, \$11) was a great breakfast-for-lunch sandwich.



Whole roast chicken.

If you wanted to go with a large-ish group and just have drinks outside, Mersea would be a good bet. The four local beers on tap are each available by the pitcher for \$25 or \$26, and there's a dozen-and-a-half wines by the glass or the bottle. In general, the all-\$12 cocktails don't display the same originality as the kitchen, as most of them follow the spirit-plus-two-juices formula, but the **Santarita** involves house-made cucumber puree and the **M3**, or "MeeSun's Mersea Mule," balances the ginger with a hint of coconut.

Overall, this would be a superb place for an afternoon gathering of a big group of adults with small children in tow — or anything relaxed, really. The real problems with Mersea are structural in nature. The layout is simply not conducive to the service method they've gone with, which is a hybrid of fast-casual and standard table service. To order, you have to crowd around a big communal table, and the line is always long even when the venue isn't that crowded. There isn't a designated cashier, so that poor person sometimes has to run food and mix drinks as well as input orders. What results is a pile-up, and every time I went to the counter, no matter where I positioned myself or how aware I tried to be as a body in space, I was standing in someone's way every 90 seconds or so.

Having actual servers who check on tables, refill water, and maybe take a drink order would go a long way to addressing this. I understand that puts a pressure on payroll, but another potential solution was already built in to Mersea's design: a separate ordering window. Annoyingly, someone chose to block it off, funneling everyone indoors to wait on the same line even if all you want is a couple beers. As you're standing in a low-ceilinged shipping container with windows for walls, in the afternoon, when you get enough bodies in there, it starts to get very warm.

Any kitchen should instinctively realize that when a two-top orders three things — ceviche, nachos, and a burger, say — it should stagger service. Mersea just sends everything all out at once, seemingly without exception. We're having an incomparably beautiful winter, but even on the balmiest afternoon, food cools off quickly on an islet in the middle of the Bay and if you have to scarf down those nachos before the burger gets cold, it dampens the fun a bit. Lastly, Mersea advertises itself as being open for breakfast, lunch, and dinner, with the breakfast items (served from 7 to 11 a.m.) at the top of the online and paper menus. Unfortunately, Mersea currently opens at 11 a.m. daily. Wouldn't it be nice of them not to trumpet breakfast until they're open for breakfast?

Until they get their act together, I would go at off-hours or else come armed with patience. Otherwise, real thought has gone into this place. Sunsets on a winter evening when you don't even need a jacket are one of the greatest things about living in California, and if it does get chilly, there are heat lamps. And since Treasure Island isn't quite a touristy mecca, there's sure to be at least a little local color. One night we arrived and the communal table was full of tipsy graduates from the firefighters' academy across the island. They were trying to sing Tony Bennett's "I Left My Heart in San Francisco," but they didn't know the melody, so by the time they got to the "San Francisco" part of the first line they were basically singing Scott McKenzie's "San Francisco" by mistake. Be sure and wear some flowers in your hair, even if it isn't departmental regulation.

Mersea, 699 Ave. of the Palms, Treasure Island, 714-350-3889, or mersea.restaurant