



## Dining

### Tackle Box: The Best \$13 Meal Georgetown Has Ever Seen

by: Monica F. Jacobs

I must confess that Georgetown is not the first neighborhood I think of when I am looking for a good place to eat. Yes, it is home to a number of well-known, well-established restaurants – including Michel Richard’s Citronelle – but as I am neither a middle-aged Washingtonian living without a budget nor a 20-something Euro hipster, I feel out of place in this otherwise tourist-filled corner of the city.

I don’t feel at all out of my element at Tackle Box, however. Opened early this year next door to its elegant sibling, Hook, this DC version of a Maine lobster shack hits just the right balance of tasty food and comfortable surroundings for this Southern city-girl. Communal picnic tables and benches fill the center of the dining area, and a narrow bar lined with high stools runs along each window alcove like classic Georgetown shop windows filled with diners and excellent food. With no waiters to be found, you should spend a few minutes looking over the long, chalkboard menu and order at the fast-food-like cash registers at the counter in front of the open kitchen. You’ll get a receipt and an order number. Grab a seat, and they will holler when your order is ready on its bright orange tray.

The best thing you can have waiting on that tray is a Maine Meal, the Tackle Box’s \$13 mix-and-match dinner plate. The proteins come crispy or wood grilled, neither of which smacks of New England, according to one dining companion with Rhode Island roots, but the flavors are fine regardless of region. My crispy favorites are the clams and the oysters, as both retained appropriate ocean goodness inside their fried coating. Also, the gentle and appropriate bite of salt and pepper (both black and cayenne, I suspect) are reminiscent of the Sunday chicken of my childhood. I had never had this sort of coating on oysters before, but the meaty clams took to this outside in a more familiar and tasty way. Delicious in either case and more than worth the calories. (It is worth noting that both the clams and the oysters are available alone as a starter – and large enough to share.)

The wood-grilled fish arrives with grill marks and smoky flavor, and the selections change fairly often to serve the sustainable seafood philosophy of the restaurant’s ownership, Pure Hospitality, headed by Jonathan Umbel, owner of the former Blue Gin, and Barton Seaver, the executive chef who left Saint-Ex to open Hook. In recent weeks, tender and flaky trout has been served with grill flavors on the skin side and dark, crisp lines seared into the white flesh. However, the bluefish may be the standout on this menu, so eat it while you can. Exquisitely cooked in a delicate square, this fish really is blue beneath its crisp outside. It, too, arrives with grill marks and an aroma to enrich the sensory experience, and as it is rarely served in restaurants and often badly cooked, this Tackle Box version is a treat for the brave adventurer and the connoisseur alike.

Any of these proteins is also a great excuse to dip into one of the sauces offered with the Maine Meal. My favorite is the lemon-garlic aioli, though I have had it a bit garlicky, a bit lemony and perfectly balanced. The sauce billed as “traditional tartar” resembles other iterations of its namesake, but its creamy texture and light, herbaceous flavor puts most sauces claiming that name to shame. I found both of these best for dipping the crispy menu offerings, and I most often enjoyed the fish with grilled lemons or the spicy marinara – more for itself and the way it blended with the smoke flavor than anything else.

Can you believe we haven't even discussed the side dishes yet? Two sides can be chosen for this plate, and like the protein offerings, they vary. A few staples are more than noteworthy: the crispy bunches of fries – whether sweet or white potato – aren't greasy or salty, and both grilled corn and grilled asparagus show the same smoky crunch as the fish, which lets these vegetables be more than they often are. The grilled broccoli shares this happy fate and retains a fine crunch, though it is a more recent offering, while another recent addition, the beet salad, offered both the earthiness of the root itself and the citrus tang of its marinade. But the roasted summer squash and onions is, for me, the best of all choices. The squash absorbed a bit of sweet flavor of the sliced onions that join in this dish while retaining enough of its own flavor and texture. I savored the last bite and wished for more.

If the Maine Meal isn't for you, Tackle Box also serves rolls, with the \$19 lobster roll slowly becoming legendary in DC. It arrives in a traditional and properly warmed roll and is brimming with lobster meat in a thin, simple sauce. No filler here, as is common in lobster rolls up north, and the amount of chilled tail and claw meat is certainly worth the price. The side of yummy, crunchy fries doesn't hurt either. And without a full-fledged vegetable on the plate, there is even more reason to eat a piece of blueberry pie, filled with tender fruit that explodes on the tongue with a very natural sweetness. The very shiny piecrust wasn't worth the bread, so just eat the fruit and leave the rest.

For a higher price, you can also take Tackle Box home with you in the form of a lobster pot. You will notice the shiny, silver containers around the restaurant, but they aren't just decoration. They are packed to order – \$40 per person, up to two orders per pot – and can be picked up or delivered. When we picked up ours, the lovely pots were in large, brown paper shopping bags, and each featured a knife-jabbed "steam vent" in the lid. The small paper filled with cooking instructions, and the occasional wriggle beneath the lid made clear that we would be cooking our own dinner. However, cooking was easy with a bit of measured white wine to add, and a fine dinner was on the table in just over half an hour. I found these best with more than the allotted amount of liquid, and I preferred off-dry white wine to any of the other options they listed (water, beer, etc.) I also preferred my pot without the chorizo, as did my normally sausage-loving dining companions. Grilled corn, onions and lemons accompanied red bliss potatoes, huge clams, tasty mussels and a lovely lobster in this complete meal. A pot designed for one is large enough to share if you can bring yourself to share the lobster, and the butter they ask you to melt is best with pressed garlic on top – especially as far as the onion and potato are concerned. Ultimately, a fine and satisfying meal that is uncommon in DC. And, perhaps best of all, it brings with it the tasty goodness and fine service of Tackle Box.

So, what isn't quite working here? Just two small things: the macaroni and cheese and the chowder. Now, I make macaroni and cheese from scratch, from an old family recipe that is never written down for fear of exposure, so my standards are high. However, this mac and cheese seems to be made with a béchamel base and tasted distinctly of garlic and the sprinkle of dried parsley on top. And it wasn't baked to crispy goodness but instead stirred – cooked macaroni into sauce and served, which is akin to a sin below the Mason-Dixon Line. And the chowder? Apparently, a New England sin in the eyes of my dining companion mentioned above. Too thin, he declared, and too salty and too heavily flavored with pork. I had to agree. Again, high standards and the taste buds of a purist, but we both felt that these were comfort food classics overly tampered with in a place that felt homey, friendly and filled to the brim with comfort. However, these were the only foods we wasted, tossing them with the environmentally friendly paper plates and napkins and plastic utensils.

All said, Tackle Box is a fine addition to DC's restaurant scene and truly something we didn't have before – a casual, homey but classy seafood place with a surface that says fast food and food that says quality, taste and skill. The prices are right, nearly all the food is right, and the friendly staff and charming interior are just icing on the cake. I wasn't looking for a reason to go to Georgetown, but I have found more than one at this M Street lobster shack.

Tackle Box is located at 3245 M St. NW, near the intersection of M Street and Wisconsin Avenue in Georgetown. They offer their full menu from 11 a.m. to 11 p.m., seven days a week. For more information, call 202-337-8269 or visit [www.tacklebox-dc.com](http://www.tacklebox-dc.com).