

G

The Boston Globe
SATURDAY, JUNE 6, 2009

BRING THE FAMILY

LOOKING FOR ADVENTURE WITH THE KIDS

No food fight here

Who: Names columnist Mark Shanahan; his wife, Michelle; and their children, Beckett, 4, and Julia, 8**What:** fine dining, family-style**Where:** Aura Restaurant

Doing dinner with toddlers is hard enough at home — who's got the energy or enthusiasm to take the tykes to a proper restaurant, some place without the mayhem or menu of Chuck E. Cheese or Bertucci's? Interested as my wife and I are in adult food and atmosphere, it can be a daunting proposition when your children are little.

Well, new mom Rachel Klein (below), the chef at Aura Restaurant at the Seaport Hotel, feels your pain. Klein has created "Fine Dining, Family-Style," a Friday night refuge for parents desperate to enjoy a real meal without worrying that their restless 2-year-old is annoying other diners. How is that possible, you ask?

It starts with the menu, which has something for everyone: Babies have a choice of mashed carrots, rutabega, cauliflower, peas, sweet potato, and fruit; and toddlers can opt for the mac and cheese, chicken strips, grilled cheese, pasta, or pizza. (The complimentary baby bread and banana plate is a nice touch.)

But what's really great about Friday nights at Aura is that when the little ones tire of the white tablecloth routine — and they always do, right? — a play space has been set up with blocks, stuffed animals, puppets,

games, and even a small television that plays movies. ("Madagascar" was on the night we were there.) Our 4-year-old found a little girl to race cars with, while Julia, who's 8, drifted back and forth between our table and the movie.

Not surprisingly, the grown-ups all looked reasonably relaxed — and relieved. For a change, they weren't on duty while dining out. The place had the pleasant vibe of a playgroup, but instead of "Miss Rumphius," the parents were reading menus.

And for foodies like my wife, who's not a big fan of burgers and fries, Aura offers a change from the usual Friday night kid fare. (Can you say chicken nugget?) The a la carte menu includes appetizers spring coconut — consommé, ricotta gnocchi, and kampachi crudo, among others — and thoughtful entrees, including cobia, scallops, and lamb. And, yes, there's a full bar.

Klein came out to say hello while we were there, and explained that the idea of "Fine Dining, Family-Style" is a simple one, and it occurred to her after her son, who's not quite 2, was born.

"I wanted to create an environment where you could have a serious meal," she said, "and the kids aren't looked at like lepers."

