



# Cape Cuisine

*Slow to start but quick to expand, Cape Coral's varied restaurant scene has something for everyone*

by Chelle Koster Walton

**T**he resounding cry arose over Cape Coral in thin, starved tones: “Why should we have to cross the bridge for good food? Why can’t we have our own great restaurants?”

When it comes to the dining scene, “Cape Coral has always been the red-headed stepchild,” said Valerie Elam, owner of the new Brew Babies restaurant and a Cape resident for twenty years. “It was a great place to get a hair cut or some Italian food. There was a pizza place on every corner.”

When an establishment of fine dining or originality did pop up, it didn’t last long, residents grumbled. So off they drove to Fort Myers or Naples to satisfy their appetites for gourmet.

Then came Rumrunners, and Cape Coral foodies breathed a collective sigh of relief. Because the new contemporary-style restaurant opened at Cape Harbour Marina four years ago with something of a captured audience, it survived against all odds. It helped that its ownership team had successes at and a following from Fort Myers’ Bistro 41 and that they knew how to please local palates with a blend of

comfort and novelty.

Rumrunners proved it could be done and in the ensuing years, more have bravely followed suit. They unanimously credit Rumrunners for opening that door. Another boon has come from the promotion of downtown Cape Coral with special events in recent years.

Yes, there is a downtown Cape Coral—a stretch down and around Cape Coral Parkway from Del Prado Boulevard. The renaissance of Cape Coral cuisine—although started far west at Rumrunners, where The Joint last year joined the scene—centers mostly a block off Cape Coral Parkway on Lafayette Street, which could be considered Gourmet Alley.

Actually it’s not an alley at all, and unfortunately it is severed into parts—typically stop-start confusing as seems to be a Cape Coral roadway trait—but it is reaching its potential as a dining destination.

“Obviously there’s a need for it, as busy as we are,” says Valerie’s husband, Wayne (see Chef Profile on page 80). “People are driving here from Naples. Isn’t that a switch?”



**(top)** Courtyard of Cape Coral’s hot new restaurant Brew Babies.

## LATINO LICKS

One facet of Cape Coral’s culinary scene that stands up for the character of its population presents itself in the string of Cuban, Mexican, Peruvian, and Puerto Rican restaurants, bakeries, delis, and food carts throughout town. Many congregate along Del Prado Boulevard.

PHOTO BY IVAN SELIGMAN

Here are a few top spots for catching the Latin flavor:

- **Azucar Restaurant & Bakery**, 3326 Del Prado Blvd. S., 239-549-2833—Cuban specialties, bread, and desserts
- **Cape Seafood Shack**, 603 Del Prado Blvd. S., 239-242-0065—Ceviche and other Peruvian specialties
- **El Mambo Cuban Restaurant**, 4716 Del Prado Blvd. S., 239-542-9995—Cuban bread and sandwiches, desserts, and fresh tropical fruit juices
- **El Portal**, 1341 Del Prado Blvd., 239-458-3532—Spanish-Cuban cuisine
- **Timbales**, 728 SW Pine Island Road, 239-574-1335

### DRUMMING UP BUSINESS

The music and tastes of Puerto Rico inspired Angelo Lista to open Timbales in a brand-new restaurant in Lighthouse Plaza in north Cape, a pleasant departure from a string of chains. Half Puerto Rican and half Italian, he always dreamed of serving his mother's brand of exotic comfort food. His dream came true in November 2007 when he opened Timbales, named for the drums made famous by Angelo's favorite musician, the legendary Tito Puente.

Although Cape Coral has its share of Cuban restaurants, it lacked one serving Puerto Rican cuisine, which Angelo characterizes as more flavorful and spicy. "Cuban food is more on the bland side," he said. "Puerto Rican food uses cilantro and hot peppers, lots of garlic, salt, olive oil, and onions—stuff with a lot of flavor."



PHOTO BY IVAN SELIGMAN



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## pearl LOUNGE WEEKLY CALENDAR

### TUESDAY

#### HOSPITALITY NIGHT

DJ **Melissa Morae** spinning House and Top 40 music 9pm till 2am  
Guests bring a pay stub + picture ID get 50% off drinks all night  
\$3 shots special all night. Ladies night \$1 well drinks all night. No Cover

### WEDNESDAY

#### LATINO DANCE

DJ **Chino & DJ Sheldon** spinning Salsa Meringue 10pm till 2am  
Latino dance class from 9pm till 10 pm  
Special Drink: \$5 16oz Margarita & 16oz Morito

### THURSDAY

#### IN THE BIZ NIGHT HOSTED BY WENDY WHITE

DJ **Manny C** spinning House 9pm till 2am  
Happy hour from 4pm till midnight  
Free sushi and tapas buffet from 7pm till 9pm. No Cover

### FRIDAY

#### HOOK UP PARTY / HOT BODY CONTEST

DJ **Manny C** Choose the colored band that best fits you. 9pm till 2am  
Yellow = down for anything. Red = married, taken, not interested.  
\$3 shots special all night.

### SATURDAY

#### THEME NIGHT / HOT BODY CONTEST

DJ **Melissa Morae** spinning House and Top 40 music 9pm till 2am  
Featuring a sexy theme night with a chance to win a \$200 gift certificate  
Call to find out the theme of the week \$3 shots special all night.



(above) Cape Coral is one of the few places you'll find Timbales' signature dish, the classic Puerto Rican jibarito. (right) Timbales owner Angelo Lista poses with his staff. (bottom right) Lobster bisque from Eight Fifty Lafayette.

One of Timbales' signature dishes is the *jibarito*. A Puerto Rican classic Angelo says you won't find anywhere outside of Puerto Rico but in Chicago and Orlando, it is a sandwich where fried green plantains replace the bun. As filling, you have a choice of slow-roasted

beef, chicken, and pork. Other specialties on the extensive lunch and dinner menu include shrimp in red sauce and roast pork with pigeon peas and rice.

And when he says "flavor," Angelo means it. Hearty piles of food have the taste of motherly love, hearth, and home with a Latin backbeat that makes it hard to stop eating.

Bright and festive in décor, Timbales celebrates Puente with background music and pictures of him on the peach-toned walls. Handsome wood insets dec-



orate the compact bar, and roomy booths fill at lunchtime with a mixed clientele who relish out-of-the-ordinary home-cooking at affordable prices.

### THE CAPE'S MOST TASTEFUL ADDRESS

It has become most chic to name your restaurant for its address. And Eight Fifty Lafayette is the pinnacle of Cape chic.

"A lot of people come through the door and say 'we've been waiting for something like this in Cape Coral,'" says assistant manager Margaret Eggers.

A sister restaurant to, but by no means a clone of, Chip's Sanibel Steakhouse, Eight Fifty covers all the bases from fine dining to casual-and-youthful with a number of varied dining spaces—smart move in a market where niche restaurants seem to go belly-up quickly. Outdoors under a pale yellow awning, a bar dominates with ample seating for the crowd that starts late afternoon to wan-



PHOTOS BY IVAN SELIGMAN

der in for beer and munchies.

The indoor bar goes an entirely different direction with handsome polished wood, a baby grand piano, top-shelf liquors, and fun martinis such as the 850, a raspberry twist on the Cosmopolitan, or the Pine Island mango martini. Two inviting dining rooms, hidden from the outdoor scene with dark wood plantation shutters, set the right atmosphere for fine steaks and tapas. "We call it progressive cuisine," Eggers said. "The presentation is dramatic."

Opened in December 2007, the kitchen staff is still tweaking the menu, Eggers said. Look for Sanibel Steakhouse favorites such as scallops casino and cowboy steak, plus seafood entrees and tapas such as Kobe sliders, lobster spring roll, and ahi tuna bites, and a killer lobster bisque (see recipe).

Every Thursday, Friday, and Saturday, a pianist entertains in the bar, a deejay on the patio.

850 Lafayette St., 239-541-4898,  
[www.850restaurant.com](http://www.850restaurant.com).

### Lobster Bisque Recipe

from Chef Ben Gerlaugh at Eight Fifty

- ¼ lb. rough-chopped Vidalia onion
- ¼ lb. rough-chopped carrot
- ¼ lb. rough-chopped celery
- 3 T. clarified butter
- 1 lb. rock lobster shells only
- 1 c. chopped fresh, uncooked lobster
- ¼ c. peeled garlic
- ¼ c. peeled shallot
- 2 tsp. paprika
- ¾ c. Chablis
- ½ gallon water
- 1 qt. tomato juice
- 2 qt. heavy whipping cream
- 1 c. sherry
- ¼ c. chopped parsley

#### Directions

Sauté onion, carrots, celery, with lobster shells, lobster meat, garlic, and shallots in clar-

ified butter. Add paprika, wine, and water. Reduce for forty-five minutes, then strain. Add remaining ingredients. Simmer for thirty minutes. Bring soup to a boil and thicken with roux (half butter, half flour cooked together) to desired thickness. Add salt and pepper to taste.



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## CHEF PROFILE: VALERIE & WAYNE ELAM, BREW BABIES

“Leave ‘em wanting more.” That could be the motto for Valerie and Wayne Elam, co-owners and chefs of Cape Coral’s latest sensation, Brew Babies.

It all began when Valerie, a professional musician and recording artist, wanted a little place where she could make music. So why not a coffee shop? They just happened to have this title company storefront they could convert. Okay, and some wine in the evening, since Wayne, a California native, knows his way around a wine cellar. Well, customers wanted something to eat with their java or vino, so why not do a little menu of noshes? Wayne, after all, had restaurant experience out there in California.

So Valerie did her music in the courtyard and so did their 17-year-old son, Dallas. They brought in other musicians, and the place jammed. The courtyard turned into this funky garden decorated with a waterfall, New Age doodads, and a red velvet couch. The coffee house took on a welcome-home vibe that the neighborhood embraced. Valerie was making homemade soups and desserts for lunch. Salads and sandwiches featured fresh ingredients and creative flair. Two nights a week they served tapas. Pretty soon, folks were demanding dinner items, so they added a couple. And then the Elams closed the place and took off to a differ-



ent Cape—Cod—for the summer.

When then reopened in October 2007, the menu had grown, and so had the restaurant—with a new dining room on the other side of the courtyard. The restaurant opens only Tuesday through Saturday for lunch and Wednesday through Saturday for dinner, and reservations for Saturday night dinner fill the book weeks in advance. A nightly changing menu showcases Wayne’s talents—spice-rubbed pork loin with cranberry chutney, seared diver scallops with ruby red grapefruit and shallot sauce, rosemary-marinated grilled lamb chops, and the like. Valerie’s carrot cake, cobblers, and crème brûlée also hit high notes.

“We have no freezer or fryer here,” says Wayne. So everything has to be fresh. He makes sure he buys what he can locally. His wine list is well-researched and nominally marked-up.

The Elams host wine tastings and live

art evenings throughout the season. (They will close again in July for a couple of months.) “Luckily people like what we like,” Valerie laughs off their success. “We don’t care if they eat or drink. We welcome them to just come and listen to the music. It’s like your own little place to go.”

1520 Lafayette St., 239-542-2224, [www.brewbabies.com](http://www.brewbabies.com).

## A PEARL IN THE ROUGH

As many of the new generation of Cape restaurateurs have figured out, folks here like entertainment with their dinner, and vice versa. The new Pearl Lounge relies most heavily on its live music and bar revenues, but is also making waves with its extensive sushi menu.



**Brew Babies’ Chef Wayne Elam (above) and (below) Brew Babies’ clever courtyard, where you can hear great blues and jazz. (middle) Pearl Lounge tastefully creates a quintessential lounge atmosphere.**



In a setting that screams “lounge”—fringe, molded bar stools, sofas, lights, and a huge bar—it’s no surprise to find a menu of thirty-six different flavors of martini—from butterscotch to plum. The Tomatini—lime vodka with bloody mary mix, wasabi, and ginger. The Martini Salad ties the food in with the drink, and it’s just a round-robin of sipping, chewing, and dancing going on.

General manager Jerome Sanchez, formerly with Blu Sushi and Thistle Lodge, says the crowds range from twenty-one-year-olds to seventy-five-year-olds. They all come for different reasons—the older clientele for \$16 early birds (4 to 6:30 p.m.) and regular dinner, the younger for party.

“We thought Cape Coral was ready and needed something like this,” says the



veteran restaurant manager. “It’s time. Why should we have to go to Fort Myers? Why shouldn’t we have something nice? We deserve this.”

Besides expert sushi, the menu handles four entrees—Kobe steak sliders, filet mignon, Hawaiian mahi, and chicken breast stuffed with brie and roasted peppers, plus a fish of the day. Three desserts round out the menu in this chic, hip new setting that is helping to reinvent Cape Coral.

1403 Cape Coral Pkwy. E., 239-549-2800, [www.pearl-lounge.net](http://www.pearl-lounge.net).

Chelle KosterWalton, Times of the Islands Travel & Cuisine Editor, reviews more local restaurants in her Sarasota, Sanibel Island & Naples Book.



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