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DINING HAS BECOME AN IMPORTANT PART OF OUR CULTURAL LIVES. That is especially true in Southwest Florida where a recent influx of talented chefs and innovative entrepreneurs has dramatically improved the food landscape. They have built their restaurants with creativity, hard work, and passion.

As we build on this body of work with each issue, we encourage your involvement. Your suggestions and feedback will only enrich this process. So, take a look at the list, pick one, and go have a nice dinner. You will have only about 87,660 meals in your life. Why waste one?

Cheers,

David Grant, Cuisine Editor

BACCHUS & CO.: *Gourmet Wine Bar.* Shannon Yates has created an oenophile's dream, a bistro where innovative food actually takes second billing to the wine—and at wine store prices, no less. The bulk of the seating is outside, but to catch a seat inside is to be surrounded by all manner of wine with a view of an energetic, open kitchen/bar manned by a hip, talented band of chefs serving up refined Provençal Mediterranean fare. Start with a Bacchus board, one of the creative salads, and whatever special they've thought up that day. It won't disappoint. They show off the grapes well with tastings every Monday and Thursday and frequent wine dinners. The late-night menu that keeps the kitchen open until 1 a.m. should serve as a siren call to all hungry insomniacs and bar hoppers. *The Bell Tower Shops, First St., Ft. Myers, 239/415-9463.*

BISTRO 41: *New American Upscale.* Don't be fooled for a minute by the standard bistro menu before you. The scale is definitely "up" at this place. One look at the elaborate, inventive list of daily specials and you understand why this spot rates high acclaim. Visually arresting presentations with leanings toward Eastern flavor components are paired well with a creative wine list. Seafood specials are typically splendid. A Gorgonzola and walnut pesto-encrusted filet is a frequent special of note. Some regulars come only for the high-end comforts like the Bistro Meatloaf made of veal, pork, and beef tenderloin—just like Mom's...right. We'll stick with whatever chef Ralph Centalanza's inspired mind has led to today. *The Bell Tower Shops, Ft. Myers, 239/466-4141.*

BOGERT'S CHOP HOUSE: *Carnivorous Gourmet.* Dry-aged, prime steaks may be the focus here, but Nico Bogert certainly takes advantage of the global expansion our palates have undergone in recent years. The Indonesian influences of his upbringing in Holland coupled with stints in Italy and Paris have sprinkled the menu and specials board with sophisticated dishes worthy of epicures everywhere. Veal, pork, and lamb chops as well as table-side cooking are treats for those looking for more than a steak. Lots of warm woods, private rooms, and a handsome bar are reminiscent of a big city speakeasy,

and a club behind the Ft. Myers restaurant draws a large dance crowd for the 30-and-up set. *5990 Winkler Road, Ft. Myers, 239/590-6772.*

CHADWICK'S: *Bountiful Buffet.* Fresh vibrant colors, steady island rhythms, and a bill of fare they like to call "Floribbean" are the draws to this South Seas Resort sanctuary at the end of Captiva Island. From the bayou to the Caribbean, each day has a different theme at this tropical buffet spot. The spreads are plentiful and the selections many, with local seafood always in the mix. Champagne brunch, offered on Sundays, is worth special note. Open daily for lunch and dinner, the lounge adds some dancing and nightlife with island music in the latter half of the week. *South Seas Resort, Captiva, 239/472-7554.*

DOLCE VITA: *Fused Mediterranean.* Forget for a moment the charming supper-club feel. Ignore briefly the imaginative Mediterranean-based cuisine. Instead, focus on the essence of Dolce Vita. Its owner, Andrea, dancing in the middle of the room, arms raised in his best Zorba the Greek impression, "Chef Boris" joining the band for some serious conga playing. Now that's entertainment. With a menu that deftly marries world cuisine with Mediterranean principles, interesting choices abound. Main courses include barbecued saddle of wild boar with a tart juniper berry sauce, salmon topped with a balsamic shallot reduction, and a curried lamb shank with golden raisin compote. A delicious macadamia nut pie awaits you at the end. But don't forget, there's dancing to be done. *1244 Periwinkle Way, Sanibel, 239/472-5555.*

FERNANDO'S OF MARTHA'S VINEYARD: *Northern Italian.* Word of mouth is what brings you here. Tucked behind Mid-Island Marina on the southern end of Ft. Myers Beach lies a restaurant whose food is the reason behind the full tables. The focus is on fresh, from-scratch cooking—house-made mozzarella, hand-stuffed raviolis, signature bread born in Boston and baked to order. Look hard toward the Farfalle Fernando, Fusilli Toscana, or any of the veal dishes. Should the Lobster Ravioli grace the special board that evening, consider yourself obligated. Now, *mange!* *4675 Estero Blvd., Ft. Myers Beach, 239/463-0026.*

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Chef's Profile: Earl Ross



PHOTO BY GREG ROSS

With a face like this, how could dinner go wrong? Earl Ross, executive chef of McT's Shrimp House & Tavern.

NAME: Earl Ross

TITLE: Executive Chef, McT's Shrimp House & Tavern

WEARING THE BIG WHITE HAT SINCE: 1999

BACKGROUND: A decade of restaurant work with stints in Italian (Linos, Morettis & Pronto, all in Chicago), French, Mexican and Japanese (Murasaki in Lansing, Michigan).

JAPANESE: "Something I hadn't done. I love Asian food. It's all about fresh ingredients and simple cooking methods to bring out

the natural flavors in food. Sushi, Teppanaki, Yakatori, you name it. It's an art without being fancy."

THAT PROBABLY MAKES YOU AN IRON CHEF FAN? "I was watching the Japanese version before it ever showed up on Food Network. Those guys are amazing."

SO, WHO DO YOU WANT TO CHALLENGE IN KITCHEN STADIUM? "The Chinese Iron Chef (Chen Kinechi). Definitely. Chinese food is way cool. What he can do is very creative."

HOW DOES THIS TRANSFER TO A SEAFOOD JOINT LIKE MCT'S? "It is all about using the freshest ingredients and having the people who know how to cook it. I love all kinds of seafood. Every kind is unique and it is fun to combine the different flavors to create a great dish."

ANY PERSONAL FAVORITES? "I have a lot of favorites: Grilled Tuna with a Wasabi Guacamole. The tuna is grilled rare and set on a grilled pineapple with a sesame-oil drizzle and julienne tomatoes. The hot and cold sensation works well."

KITCHEN TOOL YOU CAN'T LIVE WITHOUT: "Tongs are part of my arm."

ANYTHING ELSE? "This is taking way longer than five minutes. Dude, I got to work."

THE ISLAND HOUSE: *Neighborhood Grab Bag.* The mid-island location makes this a natural locals' spot on Sanibel, although the fact that the consistent, capable kitchen delivers quality meals at a reasonable rate helps. The broad menu runs the gamut from seafood, pasta, and beef to lunchtime lighter fare. The barbecued baby back ribs hold a special place in many islanders' hearts and apparently quite a few judges', if the awards on the wall are any indication. Other notables include Bayou Shrimp, Pecan Crusted Grouper, and a Jambalaya chock-full of andouille sausage, shellfish, and spice. The adjoining Bungalow wears the sports-bar/beer-joint theme well and serves as an ample start or close to the evening. 975 Rabbit Road, Sanibel Island, 239/472-8311.

THE JACARANDA: *Local Legend.* Those who say you cannot be all things to all people have not set foot in "The Jac." It's a romantic, intimate dinner house, a relaxed, open-air gathering place, an energetic nightspot—all that and more. A selection from The Big Drink Menu sets the tone. Food ranges from splendid seafood inside to first-rate pub fare in the lounge. The baked stuffed grouper has reached legendary status. Chef Brad Kilburn augments an already large menu with a number of well-chosen specials. Reggae bands, well-tanned vacationers, and attractive locals make for an easy transition from

the dining room into the lounge. This place hops year-round. The question is dinner, or dancing and drinks? The smart ones do it all. 1223 Periwinkle Way, Sanibel, 239/472-1771.

JERRY'S: *Family Fare.* Welcome to the perfect breakfast. A coffee cup that is never empty, eggs done exactly to your style, a table next to Sanibel's finest, and a waitress who calls you "Hon." Now that's how you start a day. But there is more than breakfast to this family-style restaurant conveniently located inside a supermarket. Big burgers and chicken sandwiches for lunch, prime rib and spaghetti nights for dinner fare. This is a locals' joint that is not fancy, just good. 1700 Periwinkle Way, Sanibel, 239/472-9300.

KEYLIME BISTRO: *American Parrothead.* Thank Sandra Stilwell and Randy Hunt for bringing a little local color into our lives. Make that a heaping bunch of pastel-colored, energetic charm that engulfs you at the front door and fills you with the cavalier casualness that island life is all about. Fun, funky drinks, stylishly painted fish, and a convivial coastal menu—if you can't kick back and relax here, better check for a pulse. Chef Lee Seifert's eclectic menu is all over the map and filled with interesting twists—grilled red leaf lettuce, hearts of palm, and artichokes tossed in a tomato-orange vinaigrette, escargot

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baked with bleu cheese and tomato. Great food, entertainment always, late-night bar—this could be habit-forming. Careful, though; too many visits and you'll start to miss *Miami Vice*. 11509 Andy Rosse Lane, Captiva, 239/395-4000.

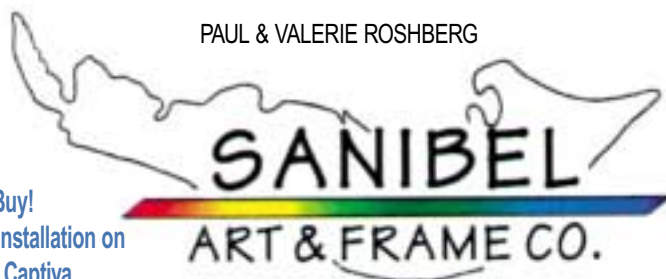
LA BRASSERIE: *Fantastic French.* When I think of France, what come to mind are rich, luxurious food, magnificent wine, and very ill manners. Fortunately, the operators of this diamond in the rough present an attitude that is warm and pleasant, which leads to a glorious dining experience. The setting is industrial yet warm, the appointments clever, and the food traditional yet quite contemporary. Homemade pâtés, decadent soups, salads of duck confit and mushrooms bathed in truffle oil, coq au vin, steak frites. It's all there and all guaranteed to let your mind drift to the vine-covered provinces surrounding Paris. For a special treat, call a few weeks ahead and reserve "La Cave," a six-seat chef's table just outside the kitchen. 15660 San Carlos Blvd., Ft. Myers, 239/415-4375.

LA VIGNA ITALIAN RESTAURANT AND GRILL: *Modern Rustic Italian.* This place understands that great Italian cooking comes from the heart. With virtually everything made from scratch or shipped directly from Italy, you'd be hard pressed to find a place this Italian in Italy. An open, expressive kitchen and light, uplifting room help convey the festive atmosphere. The waiters act as extensions of the chefs, making the menu merely a starting point. Anything from the wood-fired oven is a worthy selection. The scallopini dishes are otherworldly. Pastas, breads, and sauces are made daily. And the possibilities are as endless as your imagination. The staff will gladly recommend pairings from the diverse wine cellar. 1625 Periwinkle Way, Sanibel, 239/472-5453.

LAZY FLAMINGO: *Cold Beer Raw Bar.* The oysters are fresh, the beer's cold, and the conversation's friendly. Hey, I'm home! The discerning staff presents only the plumpiest of oysters worthy for consumption, a much-appreciated gesture. For those who prefer their oysters on the roasted side, The Pot is a couple of dozen oysters or clams steamed in beer and flavored with special spices. There are steaming hot, nicely spiced shrimp eager to be peeled. Did I mention the beer was cold? The well worn, center-stage bar makes for some great social interaction as you watch the oyster cracking. Sports fans are drawn here nightly. 6520 C Pine Ave., Sanibel, 239/472-5353; 1036 Periwinkle Way, Sanibel, 239/472-6939; 3522 Del Prado Blvd., Cape Coral, 239/945-0110; Waterfront at 16501-B Stringfellow Rd., Bokeria, 239/283-5959 or VHF 16.

MAD HATTER: *New American Euro Wonderland.* A pretty, pink cottage with a million-dollar view and a world-class chef. Sounds like paradise to me. Swiss-born chef Daniel Riedener continues to uphold the well-deserved reputation of this highly esteemed outpost with an infused cuisine of classical European tech-

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niques and Far Eastern fare. Sweet chili and soy-glazed Yellowfin Tuna encrusted with sesame seeds is an architectural delight set upon chilled soba noodles and wasabi oil. So, too, the encrusted Rack of Lamb with Asiago and roasted corn risotto cakes. Imaginative wine list to match the fare. 6460 Sanibel-Captiva Road at Blind Pass, Sanibel, 239/472-0033.

MCT’S SHRIMP HOUSE AND TAVERN:

Casual Seafood. A line of locals waiting for the unlocking of the doors is typically a strong indication that you’ve stumbled onto something good. In case you missed the raw bar next to the host stand, let it be known that seafood rules the roost here—shrimp, oysters, and fish in all shapes, sizes, and sauces with twenty-one choices on the appetizer list alone. Home of the Mother of all Early Bird Specials—hence the line to get in—McT’s features upside-down trees draped in lights, video games for the kids, and a great bar. Hard to make a bad dinner selection; the Sanibel Steamer has gained a cult-like following. Save room for the Famous Sanibel Mud Pie, a tower of chocolaty goodness that has made the rest of the dessert menu nearly invisible. 1523 Periwinkle Way, Sanibel, 239/472-3161.

MORGAN’S FOREST: *Jungle Food.*

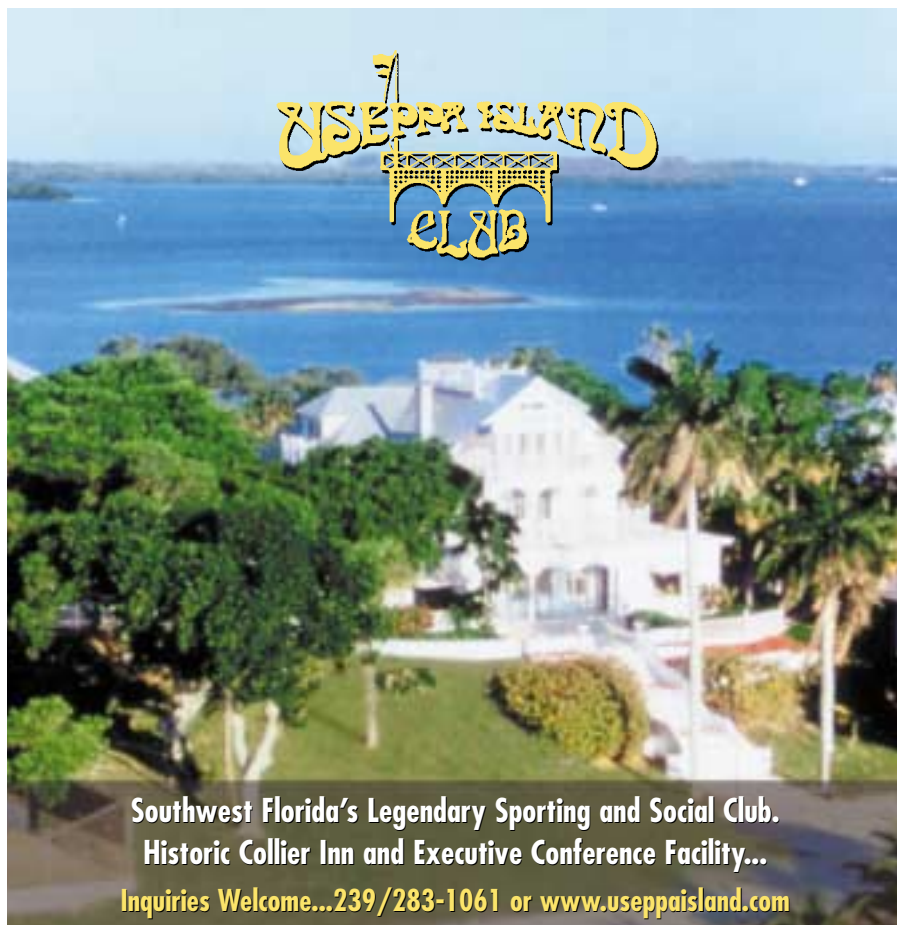
Tropical, lush, and very green. No, it’s not a salad, but an entire restaurant complete with trees, birds, and vines. If you ever wanted to take your family to a South American rain forest for dinner, then here’s the spot for you. Lots of eye appeal for the kids and a huge menu for Mom and Dad with interesting choices such as Matambre, an stuffed tenderloin of Argentinean heritage, or a Brazilian snapper rolled in romaine with crab meat and butter, grilled and topped with a mushroom béarnaise sauce. Save room for some Tropical Forest Pie. And don’t forget to bring your pith helmet. 1231 Middle Gulf Drive, Sanibel, 239/472-4100.

THE MUCKY DUCK: *Resort Comfort Food.*

Just as Captiva was becoming a destination for the world, the Mucky Duck flew in and made a home smack dab where the best sunsets in town are found. A quarter-century later, this British pub and hijinks shack has gained worldwide recognition and a steady stream of regulars who come to roost during their annual two-week escape from life. Start at the bar with a fresh pint from a long list of beers brewed on the other side of the pond—some even drawn the “proper” way with a nitrogen mix. The menu is a combination of Resort American and English Pub grub, and of course there’s always (hello!) duck. Owners Victor and Kathy Mayeron lead a merry band of mischievous pranksters, who force you to have fun no matter your mood. Sample the great outdoor patio with live music for drinks and starters. Sunsets served free nightly. Andy Rosse Lane, Captiva, 239/472-3434.

NOOPIE’S JAPANESE SEAFOOD AND STEAKHOUSE:

Japanese Teppanaki. There is something disturbingly fun about watching a man chopping things up. Rapidly. On a hot grill.



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Three feet from your face. Therein lies the appeal of a Japanese steak house. Noopie's, a small gem tucked in a corner of the Sundial Beach Resort with three cooking tables, is an island treat. For cocktails have a Noopie's Punch or a Purple Haze, a blend of sake and Chambord. Accomplished Teppanaki masters mesmerize you with flying salt shakers, sizzling shrimp, and onion volcanoes. The food is good, but the show's better. Just remember to keep your hands by your sides. 1451 Middle Gulf, Sanibel, 239/395-6014.

RC OTTERS: *Otterly Beach American.* The menu may be daunting, with over 115 choices not counting breakfast, but look at it this way: It's got something for just about everyone. Open from early morning 'til late evening and there's music outside more often than not. The menu doubles as the island's Sunday comic section. Micro-brewed beer on tap includes a nicely malted Island Tan. Interesting twists on a Caesar salad with house-cured salmon, blackened scallops, etc. The big selection of sandwiches is highlighted by Uncle Hank's Grouper Reuben. There's also a kid's menu that's the size of most restaurants' entire menus. Attire is mostly flip-flops and T-shirts, ties optional. 11506 Andy Rosse Lane, Captiva, 239/395-1142.

RIVIERA: *Northern Meditalian.* This has all the trappings of a great romantic restaurant—twinkling lights, Old World warmth, and continentally suave owner/maître d'. Mix in the sensual notes coming from the piano and you may feel tempted to skip dinner and head back to the room. But then you'd have missed out on an array of interesting Mediterranean/Italian specialties. Langoustine, sea scallops, and shrimp poached and drizzled with truffle oil; ravioli plump with artichoke; hazelnut-crusting yellowfin tuna with asparagus, artichoke, citrus filets, and polenta; venison filets roasted with braised pears, chestnut puree, honey porto jus, and juniper berries. This is provocative cuisine done well. Remember to save room for a soufflé. 2761 West Gulf Drive, Sanibel, 239/472-1141.

THE SANIBEL CAFÉ: *Home-style Cooking.* Ken Boyce is a stickler for consistency, and for the better part of seventeen years, he's kept things the same. With family recipes from generations gone by, they turn out good old-fashioned breakfast, lunch, and dinner fare. Celebrity sandwiches include The Snooty Fox and The Rusty Pelican. All the beef is Certified Angus. Eggs Benedict and tasty waffles are available anytime. And Ken will probably be manning the grill. 2007 Periwinkle Way, Sanibel, 239/472-5323.

SANIBEL GRILL: *Local Color.* Matt Asen knows all about marketing. And for this venerable sports grill, he chooses to promote...himself. More precisely, over a decade of photo ops with him and just about every athlete, celebrity, and star our country has to offer. This makes for an interesting bend on the old sports-bar-as-worship-hall theme we so often see. Much-better-

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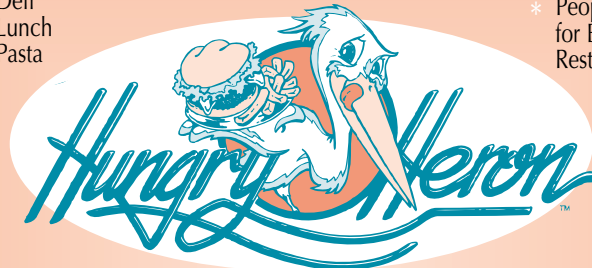


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than-typical pub fare, seasoned bartenders, and the often-sought, seldom-found neighborhood-bar feel explain the popularity of this spot. The baby-back ribs and Crunchy Grouper are worthwhile before, during, or after the game. 703 Tarpon Bay Road, Sanibel, 239/472-HIKE.

THE SANIBEL STEAKHOUSE: *Steak House.* A true beef connoisseur knows there is more to life than the filet mignon. Here, the porterhouse or dry-aged rib eye gain the nod, although it's impossible to go wrong when prime beef is the option. With A+ quality ingredients and some serious skill in the kitchen, this is everything those high-end chain steak houses want to be. Savory crab cakes, meltingly wonderful carpaccio, and a wine list built for high-end beef. The food at the three Sanibel Steakhouses is true to course, but each restaurant has its own ambience. On the island it's intimate, cozy, and charming. In Ft. Myers, the feel is the men's club charm of the traditional steak house. In Bonita, you're surrounded by architectural splendor, truly one of the most beautiful rooms around. 1473 Periwinkle Way, Sanibel, 239/472-5700; 13401 Summerlin Blvd., Ft. Myers, 239/437-8325; 24041 S. Tamiami Trail, Bonita Springs, 239/390-0400.

THE SEAFOOD FACTORY: *Fish Foundry.* Given the name, you can guarantee some serious attention is given to our friends from the sea. But this carefree spot gives attention to beef and pasta with equal aplomb. Start with some Crazy Shrimp in one or more of five funky flavors. She Crab Soup is a staple that deserves consideration as you make your way through the extensive menu. The Lowcountry Supper also pays homage to the Carolinas. Locals know that the Seafood Platters of Shrimp, Oysters, Scallops, and/or Grouper are especially tasty when you take the buttermilk-and-battered route. 2499 Periwinkle Way, Sanibel, 239/472-2323.

SIAM HUT: *TopShelf Thai.* Who would figure you had to travel to Cape Coral of all places for top-flight Thai food? This charming spot, nestled into a quite forgettable strip mall, serves as a haven for fans of curries, lemongrass, and iced coffees. Kick off the meal with either the Glew Za, pan-fried dumplings filled with ground pork, ginger, and scallions, or the Naem Sode, a traditional salad of ground chicken, lime juice, peanuts, onions, and chili peppers. The curry offerings are all splendid, with the Panang a particular standout. Excellent fish, shrimp, and frog leg selections, plus the obligatory Pad Thai. 4521 Del Prado Blvd., Cape Coral, 239/945-4247.

SUNSHINE CAFÉ: *Continental Luminance.* The open kitchen takes up most of the "dining" room, but everyone snags the outdoor tables anyway at this perfectly comfortable slice of Captiva. A small, yet clever wine list sets the pace for a leisurely meal. An accomplished, well-chosen menu shows that sometimes it is indeed best to do few things, but do them well. The Asian duck appetizer with warm roasted veg-

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etable compote is worthy of a plate licking. So, too, the whole roasted garlic and goat cheese. The Kahuna Steak with its special Sunshine marinade has developed a loyal following. 14900 Captiva Rd., Captiva, 239/472-6200; 8750 Gladiolus, Ft. Myers, 239/489-2233.

THISTLE LODGE: *Tropical Rendezvous.* From the walk-through gazebo onto the cut-stone walkway leading into a charming Victorian-style mansion, this is a restaurant steeped in the ways of romance. Once inside, a subtle blend of rattan, bamboo, and tropical greens complete the relaxing tone. Terrific island cuisine with a focus on seafood adds to the allure, as do glorious views from almost any table. The outdoor dining is one of the area's best. Following dessert, we recommend a walk on the beach. Casa Ybel Resort, Sanibel, 239/472-9200.

TRADER'S CAFÉ: *Boutique Bistro.* For those who've longed to be able to order an armoire with your appetizer, an end table with your entrée, and door knocker with dessert, your prayers have been answered. Equal parts global-home-furnishing store and eclectic bistro, creative selections abound, be it furniture or food. The island menu, with its West-Indies-plantation-house atmosphere, draws influence from a variety of cuisines. The Asian BBQ Lollipop Chop with Shiitake Garlic Potatoes, and the Blue Crab Stuffed Shrimp over Rock Shrimp Risotto are two such examples. The Bonita location leans heavily on inspiration from the wood-fired oven. 1551 Periwinkle Way, Sanibel, 239/472-7242; 26501 South Tamiami Trail, Bonita Springs, 239/949-0202.

VARIAN'S: *Downtown Upscale.* Hip downtown eatery where the fashionably appointed Ft. Myers urbanites dine. Great champagne drinks like the Flirtini—Citron, pineapple, and the bubbly stuff. The small, creative menu includes Bavarian influences such as Wiener schnitzel, Munich-style Onion Steak, and house-made spaetzle. Tuna and beef carpaccio captures the essence of two filets best appreciated rare. The seasonal menu changes...well, seasonally. A good people-watching spot later in the evening. 33 Patio de Leon, Ft. Myers, 239/461-2727.

THE VERANDA: *Southern Cracker Charm.* This hallowed downtown landmark continues to exude Old Florida class and character with its gorgeous multi-room setting, tuxedoed staff and high-end Southern fare. Blue Crab-Stuffed Artichoke Fritters and Southern Fried Grit Cakes with Andouille Sausage are two worthy starters. Skip the house salad and opt instead for the Fried Green Tomato version paired with a bleu cheese dressing. The main course roster would run traditional if not for the Southern touches that give it such mouth-pleasing style. The polished service and ample wine list complete the refined ambience that lends this place its timeless style. 2122 Second Street, Ft. Myers, 239/332-2065.

- D.G.

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