

CUISINE

Food With a View

Dockside dining at Ft. Myers Beach



PHOTOS BY RHONDA MANDEL

Cruising through Matanzas Pass, one of the first restaurants boaters can choose to stop is at Snug Harbor (left). Farther along is Fernando's of Martha's Vineyard.

Each island along the Lee County coast boasts its own appeal, giving the region a distinctive and diverse tapestry. One of the best ways to enjoy each island is to take in a meal at the water's edge. Even landlubbers can get into the marine mindset by dining dockside.

Estero Island, aka Ft. Myers Beach, can still transport you to a barefoot feeling even if shoes are required these days. A longtime favorite among boating cruisers, "The Beach" has a reputation as an entertaining and lively place to tie up for awhile, but its variety in dockside dining draws restaurant-goers by boat and by car.

As boaters enter Matanzas Pass from San Carlos Bay past decades-old shrimp boats, one of the first dockside options

they encounter is Snug Harbor's brand-new waterfront restaurant. The facility offers al-fresco choices of a downstairs brick courtyard patio or an upstairs deck overlooking it.

Both provide the same popular menu, plus some new additions, at the same prices as the venue that has served the area for thirty-three years. In addition, Snug Harbor now fills a longtime void by serving not only lunch and dinner, but also a late-night menu until 2 a.m. with live entertainment in its upstairs bar, Chillers.

With shrimp and grouper still coming from the same fleet that has served the restaurant for years, Snug Harbor's new establishment retains a historic feel. Once a signal outpost during training missions for bombers in the 1940s, Snug Harbor has many a story that add to its charm.

Right next door and smack under the

Sky Bridge is the Matanzas Inn with its signature royal-blue and white umbrellas adorning the dockside tables. Serving local seafood specialties for the past nineteen years, the inn offers a quaint and homey feel.

The rustic deck and its watery vista lie calm below the rush of traffic overhead. Here, the waterway still dominates the landscape.

Just across the pass and up a ways is The Bridge Restaurant, best known among locals for its Reggae Sundays. Sprawling deck space and huge windows with views make this a choice venue for getting that island feeling. In fact, on the right sunny Sunday, with the right frame of mind, you might find yourself feeling completely Caribbean and far away from the mainland mentality. The Bridge has been serving up some awesome seafood for the past eleven years. Diners often

By Barbara Linstrom-Arnold

catch a glimpse of dolphins and manatees.

Turning the corner, around the bend to the left at Hurricane Bay is the Channel Mark restaurant. Newer and a bit flashier than its down-home counterparts at Matanzas Pass, it still retains a casual island feel, but save your tank tops for the more rustic venues.

At the Channel Mark, every table has a view of Hurricane Bay and live jazz is the ticket here on Fridays and Saturdays. Fresh fish from local waters is served alongside some delectable Northern Italian pasta dishes. Popular also for its prime rib and steaks, the Channel Mark is the place to go for a more upscale experience.

Heading to the right and down island from the Sky Bridge, past the shrimp boat fleets and anchored live-aboards, you'll be in for a real treat in specialty cuisine at Fernando's of Martha's Vineyard. Docksiding dining at Fernando's looks out on the many boats tied up at Mid-Island Marina. Its is reminiscent of seaside dining in a small Italian fishing village—music, lighting, and all. Easy to find by boat by following channel markers to No. 37, Fernando's is challenging to find by car. City regulations have limited the restaurant to a small mention on the bottom of the Publix sign about halfway down Estero Boulevard.

Offering its own special blend of Italian cooking with a distinctive Portuguese twist, Fernando's use of fresh herbs, crusty bread, and satisfying house wines give this restaurant a signature appeal. Despite its Old World flair, Fernando's maintains a casual, family-oriented atmosphere.

At the south end of Ft. Myers Beach at marker No. 59, you'll encounter The Fish House Restaurant, which features a raw bar and a true rustic feel. Located by land behind the Villa Santini shopping plaza, The Fish House overlooks the estuary waters of Estero Bay. Dining on the deck, you can gaze at the mangrove islands that were once the fishing grounds of the Calusa Indians.

From one end of the island to the other, Ft. Myers Beach offers diverse and interesting experiences in docksiding dining on a natural waterway. From varieties in cuisine to lively choices in entertainment to historic views, each restaurant has a special appeal.

Treat Your Taste Buds

Here is a sampling of what Southwest Florida is serving up. An expanded bill of fare is available under Epicurious, page 70.



PHOTO BY KELLY MADDEN

KING'S CROWN: *Royal Resort Fare.* Tradition comes face to face with innovation in the grand and regal dining centerpiece of South Seas Resort. Chef Amy Visco's New World style puts an exciting twist on a number of Old World dishes that have been a trademark of this room's hundred-year history. Heirloom tomatoes with pumpkin seed-encrusted goat cheese or a house-smoked ostrich carpaccio sets the tone. Veal osso buco with a truffle custard and mushroom-and-foie gras risotto is luxurious and decadent. The red snapper paired with seafood succotash and braised fennel is savory and delightful. The dining room and the staff that mans it are polished and elegant. The wine list is exceptional, as are the desserts. Reservations are a must so a gate pass will be ready at the South Seas entrance. *South Seas Resort, Captiva Island, 239/472-7554.*

TARPON BAY: *Fancy Fishing Lodge.* Let's begin with the ceviche bar, since that is the first thing you'll encounter; all matter of shell and fin "cooked" with various citrus, other fruits, and veggies—and every one of them worth trying. How refreshing. How innovative. How about another round? But to linger too long would deprive oneself of a magnificent selection from the sea. A truly seaboard setting overlooking an estuary, the atmosphere is light, airy, and relaxed. The menu is full of day-fresh fish in an exciting manner that is more spa/Californian than anything else, but not beholden to any one theme. Peppered tuna served perfectly rare with a celery-root purée, slow-roasted salmon with parsnips, chanterelles, and lemon crème fraîche, or crispy fried red snapper with ponzu-and-ginger sauce. Now that's stylish seafood. *Hyatt Regency Coconut Point Resort & Spa, 5001 Coconut Rd., Estero, 230/444-1234.*

— David Grant

For stirring appetites to soothing the soul, there's something to be said for taking in a meal right on the water. It's a fine way to make the most of what Lee County's coast is all about.

To reserve dockage or space for large parties, call Snug Harbor Inn at 239/463-4343, Matanzas Inn at 239/463-3838, The

Bridge at 239/765-0050, Channel Mark at 239/463-9127, Fernando's of Martha's Vineyard at 239/463-0026, or The Fish House at 239/765-6766. 🦞

Freelance writer Barbara Linstrom-Arnold often ventures from her Sanibel home to explore neighboring islands.

Innovative Chefs Turn the Tables on Captiva

The change has been sudden, refreshing, and remarkable. Captiva Island, in the blink of an eye, has become a dining destination, a home to haute cuisine the likes of which have not been seen before on this little island. It is a wonderful time to dine on Captiva.

Responsible for some of the changes are three who have transformed dining landmarks with creativity and considerable skill. The Mad Hatter, on Sanibel-Captiva Road at Blind Pass, has long been recognized as one of the state's dining jewels, but under chef Daniel Riedener, the best has gotten even better. The same can be said for chefs Amy Visco and Tom O'Brien, who have taken over the top kitchen at South Seas Resort's King's Crown and at Tween Waters Inn, respectively.

Visco, O'Brien, and Riedener sat together recently to discuss Captiva's dining scene and their future plans. (Chef Paul Minoui of The Village Café and Joe Archambault of Trader's Store & Café, formerly Viva, were invited, but declined.)

Times of the Islands: What would you serve each other if they walked into your restaurant?

Riedener: Nothing on the menu. I would pull something out of my head. For these guys, I would just try to create something from what I have in house. Ask them what they like and just do five or six courses from my head.

Visco: I would want them to try something from my menu and let me know what they think of it. See where I can improve. We're all a team, not really competition. I might need something from them one day.

Riedener: Absolutely. I would love to look at each other's menu and sit together and talk about it. We are a team. I just love cooking and this is the first time for me to meet chefs like you and it's just great to be able to have a discussion about food.

O'Brien: Well if you follow our father Escoffier [perhaps history's most famous chef], we have a duty to share everything and I think when we're out here [on Captiva] and



PHOTO BY NICK ADAMS

Bringing a new zest to Captiva cuisine are (left to right) chefs Tom O'Brien, Amy Visco, and Daniel Riedener.

we are being individuals, it's the more the merrier. The better Amy's food is, Chef Daniel's food is, and my food is, the more it brings guests. So, if all of our restaurants are really top-notch, it brings people to the island for the food.

TOTI: How would you describe your menu?

Visco: I would call it "Florida-influenced fine dining," if there is such a thing.

Riedener: "New American cuisine." New foods, produce that you've never probably heard of, such as salsify. People want to have an experience and try new things, and I try to satisfy them with the menu.

O'Brien: Daniel's right in the sense of "New American cuisine." America's such a melting pot of ingredients and now we have global chefs dabbling in each other's cuisine. My menu is a reflection of that. I'm not held to any one style or theme; in fact, none of us are and because of that I believe you are seeing some dynamite cuisine.

TOTI: What has the response been to the

introduction of new menu ideas and products that your restaurants are displaying?

Visco: Good for the most part. One person said my menu was a little esoteric, but some of the people who come in just want the King's Crown of old. They want the Shrimp Cocktail, the Veal Scallopini. So what I do is say, "Okay, I'll keep the Veal Scallopini on, but I'll use caper berries and orange zest and do it my way." I think that people, when I first explain a dish to them, are kind of apprehensive, then they try it and say, "I love this."

Riedener: The Mad Hatter is a small place—forty-five or forty-six seats—and the people that come here know and expect a certain style of food and I try to make them happy. We've developed a reputation and my job is to keep it up and keep them very, very pleased.

O'Brien: Every restaurant here should have its own identity and one thing I noticed when I first came here was that there was a lack of that. I think it's happening now. We're all separating out, staking our claim to a style.

Epicurious

DINING HAS BECOME AN IMPORTANT PART OF OUR CULTURAL LIVES. That is especially true in Southwest Florida where an 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

TOTI: What local products are you including in your food?

Visco: Sapodilla fruit, which actually grows—I won't say where—on a couple of trees on the island. It's a round fruit that looks like a large kiwi with a sweet pink flesh. Tastes similar to a papaw, kind of a cross between a banana and an apple. Really, though, I use anything local I can find.

Riedener: To be honest with you, Florida doesn't offer too much in the way of vegetables. [The other chefs nod in concurrence.] It's hard to get produce here. If you want to use local, you have to look at fish and those kinds of ingredients.

O'Brien: Honestly, I've been avoiding the Florida culture, because I think there is so much of it already out there. We all source from the same places, and something that has been making me a little bit crazy is, I bring in product and on the box it says, "Florida grown," yet we can't get it direct here.

Visco: That's so true. I get something a week later and it says, "Grown in Florida," but I don't get it from Florida.

O'Brien: So I'm going mad because I'm paying fifty or sixty dollars a pound for popcorn shoots and I know they are right around the corner.

Visco: Local farmers, help us! Please, come visit us.

TOTI: Where would you like to see your place two years from now?

Visco: I'd like to see the King's Crown with a four-diamond, triple-A rating. That would be great. I'd like to make the menu a little bit more complicated, to use more exotic products that I can present in a way that is comfortable to the customer.

Riedener: Since this is my place, I would just love to keep the standard, to keep my clients. You know, this week we are booked every day and that's what I want.

TOTI: So a full house is your measure of success?

Riedener: Absolutely. If people dine here and they are delighted and happy, that's all I want. That's it. A good, busy-running place where everyone is happy; then, I'm happy.

O'Brien: Ultimately, I would like to steer the Old Captiva House, after we go through the renovations, to present a lodge-style cuisine. That's what I see there. There are so many things you can do with it. It's about comfort. You can take very unusual ingredients and still give it a rustic touch. I guess if I want to be noted for anything on this island, it's the fact that I'm bringing a new experience.

— D.G.

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. Catch a seat inside 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 and killer sushi. Start with a Bacchus board, one of the creative salads, and whatever special they've thought up that day. 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, Ft. Myers, 239/415-9463. 2226 First Street, Ft. Myers, 239/226-4200.*

BEACHVIEW STEAKHOUSE: *CaddyChef.* In a world where delivery rarely meets expectations, it is a rare treat to be delightfully surprised. Beneath the typical country club setting and rather mundane menu lurks a terrific dining experience. With polished, prompt service and a kitchen that knows what tastes good and why, Beachview is one of those places where the written menu fails to indicate the treasures that lie ahead. Lump crab barely held together with corn mango salsa and avocado tartar, blackened shrimp paired with creamed spinach. Who knew? It starts great and just gets better. The steaks are seasoned, cooked, and garnished perfectly, right down to the fried cloves of garlic. The fish presentation never masks its freshness with over-the-top sauces. And for dessert, a Granny Smith crisp with cinnamon ice cream. Yum. *1100 Parview Drive, Sanibel Island, 239/472-4394.*

BIG HICKORY FISHING NOOK: *Seaside Seafood.* There is a certain comfort in a seafood restaurant fronted by fishing boats and backed by a bait-and-tackle shop. Once inside, you'll find a serious approach to seafood in this hidden hideaway just south of Lovers Key.

Solid, casual menu with humorous touches and a playful special board shows off chef Charles Hartung's considerable skills. Owner and former radio guy Michael Bode brings in nationally known soft jazz artists during season for reservation-only dinner concerts. Highbrow entertainment for such an off-the-beaten-path place. Same goes for the food. *26107 Hickory Blvd., Bonita Springs, 239/992-3945.*

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. Some regulars come only for the high-end comforts such as the Bistro Meatloaf made of veal, pork, and beef tenderloin—just like Mom's...right. *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. He has sprinkled the menu and specials board with sophisticated dishes worthy of epicures everywhere. 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.*

THE BUBBLE ROOM: *Eccentric Wonderland.* The unwritten law of Captiva states that all first-time visitors must visit this nostalgia museum/food palace. The atmosphere is a mad scientist's creation of Christmas/antique/