

# 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

**AMY'S OVER EASY CAFÉ:** *Sunnyside Wake-Up Call.* It has been said that all breakfast joints should be measured by their Eggs Benedict. I don't know by whom, but if that is the case then this place deserves high marks both for its exceptional traditional Benny and a next-level presentation featuring—get this—gulf shrimp. Only on Sanibel. But, hey, it works, as does everything else in this quaint, cozy eye-opener, from the oversized glazed cinnamon roll to the eggs fixed in more ways than you'd dream, and even the fruit-yogurt and granola parfait for those who would rather not blow their diets on breakfast. Strong coffee, fresh juice, and beer and wine are available, because when you're on vacation, it's never too early. Oh, by the way, an equally good lunch menu rolls out at 11 a.m. daily. 630-1 Tarpon Bay Road, Sanibel, 239/472-2625

**BACCHUS & CO.:** *Gourmet Wine Bar.* This place is 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.*

**BEACHVIEW STEAKHOUSE:** *Caddy Chef.* 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.*

**BLU SUSHI:** *CobaltCool.* Hip. Trendy. Ft. Myers fashion-magnet. Does it really matter that this place serves the absolute best sushi in the area? Once you gaze into the beautiful and all-apparently-available crowd, while holding your exquisitely chilled Martini du Jour in an ultra-fashionable, blue-stemmed glass, fish is the last thing on your mind. But then you would be missing out on some seriously creative food. Start with, well...start with whatever the chefs decide to send you. In fact, set down the menu and tell the chefs to just bring it. In their hands, you cannot possibly go wrong. Next, order a nice bottle of chilled sake (think dry white wine), kick back, and enjoy the show. Between the sushi slicing and the power flirting, you might never want to leave. 13451 McGregor Blvd., Ft. Myers, 239/489-1500.

**BOGERT'S CHOP HOUSE:** *Carnivorous Gourmet.* Dry-aged, prime steaks

might 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/Wonkaville that happens to serve food delivered by khaki-colored Bubble Scouts. The menu is chock-full of oversized, crazily named dishes—as if you'd expect anything less. Parents take special note: Your children couldn't possibly be loud enough to attract any undue attention here. 15001 Captiva Drive, Captiva, 239/472-5558.

**CANTINA LAREDO:** *Fancy Fiesta.* For those who consider the words "gourmet" and "Mexican" mutually exclusive, prepare to be awed and humbled. With attractive and polished service that starts at the front door and continues, full of the tiny touches that put the "fine" in fine dining, Cantina Laredo will forever change Mexican as you know it. From the tortilla soup, elaborately garnished and poured table-side, to the three-dollar specialty iced teas, presented with wine-bottle finesse, to some scathingly delicious desserts flambéed before your eyes, the experience is grand and fun—and quite tasty, by the way. The menu itself is far from what you might expect, as well. Slow-roasted pork, marinated in a cascabel chile marinade; shrimp and mushrooms stuffed in a grilled poblano, and then wrapped in carne asada steak; chicken mole enchiladas worthy of a thorough plate-licking. It is all far from standard and full of flavor. Viva Mexico! 5200 Big Pine Way, Ft. Myers, 239/415-4424.

**CELTIC RAY PUBLIC HOUSE:** *Great Gaelic Gourmet.* You'll have to fly a few

thousand miles to find anything more Irish than this. The cozy, communal setting oozes Celtic charm and history. The beer list might be the finest in Florida, with an array of tap handles featuring the best lagers, stouts, wheats, ciders, Belgians, and bitters. Those who are not fans of the suds should opt for a lambic—a spontaneously fermented Belgian beer often fused with fruit to create a sweet, champagne-like beverage that alone is worth the trip. A decent wine list is also available. The food is hearty, flavorful, and true with well-done staples such as Bangers and Mash, Breton chicken, toasties, and more. Most items are served with colcannon, a mixture of mashed potato, leeks, and greens that is quite tasty. The topper is that not one menu item is more than \$10. Live music three or four nights a week and lively conversation at all hours. Simply put, this is the most complete and thorough commitment to the Irish pub concept that I've seen in Southwest Florida. Slainte! 145 East Marion Ave., Punta Gorda, 941/505-9219.

**CHADWICK'S:** *Bountiful Buffet.* Fresh



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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. *South Seas Resort, Captiva, 239/472-7554.*

**DOC FORD’S SANIBEL RUM BAR & GRILLE:** *Novel Cuisine.* It’s a sports bar. It’s a tropical grill. It’s a rum bar. It’s a visualization of a famous local literary character’s life and times as seen as a restaurant. All that and more. Such is what happens when a band of local restaurant folk pair with author Randy Wayne White and set out to develop a restaurant. The finished product delivers a menu that runs full compass, from gourmet finger food (to satisfy the sports-bar side) to tasty tropical treatments (for serious foodies). Kick it off with Cartagena Shrimp Sausage

Quesadillas or Ceviche Cocktail and then find your way to the Banana Leaf-wrapped Snapper made ethereal with Masa Harina, Ancho purée and lime juice. Cuban-fired Pork Chops are yet another winner, but in truth the entire menu is on point. The drink menu is home to a standout Mojito, complete with its own colorful glass. The mid-island location makes the adjoining Bungalow a natural spot for locals to gather for a game of pool or darts and to listen to live music or a deejay. *975 Rabbit Road, Sanibel 239/472-8311; The Bungalow, 239/395-3502.*

**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 and a curried lamb shank with golden raisin compote. *1244 Periwinkle Way, Sanibel, 239/472-5555.*

**GRAMMA DOT’S SEASIDE SALOON:** *She Sells Seafood by the Seashore.* In a word, this place is cute. Cute décor. Cute marina setting. Cute staff. Cute edible flower on every plate. But you don’t love Gramma’s just ’cause it’s cute. You love it because the food is downright tasty. The menu is small, but everything is done well, especially the grouper, shrimp, and anything else seafood-related. Everything comes with a to-die-for Twice-Baked Potato Ball and perfectly done fresh vegetables. As for desserts, they are homemade and quite good. Just what you would expect from Gramma. *Sanibel Marina, 634 N. Yachtsman Drive, Sanibel, 239/472-8138.*

**THE ISLAND COW:** *Bovine Bounty.* If you can’t find what you want to eat at this place, then you just aren’t hungry. With a massive menu chock-full of everything

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from omelets to fish to pasta, this is no beef joint, despite the obvious heifer references. The casual funkiness of the place comes full circle with the evening Cow Calling Contest when, at the sound of a cowbell, customers belt out their best "Moo" for a shot at a T-shirt and hot fudge sundae. If there's a wait for a table, head out back to the "Pasture" for a beer in a neon-colored Adirondack chair. The fish dinners are a good choice, unless it's breakfast; here you might consider the fish omelets. Hey, I like the way they do fish! 2163 Periwinkle Way, Sanibel Island, 239/472-0606.

### 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. Food ranges from splendid seafood inside to first-rate pub fare in the lounge. The baked stuffed grouper is almost legendary. 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 liking, 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 for dinner fare. This is a locals' joint that is not fancy, just good. 1700 Periwinkle Way, Sanibel, 239/472-9300.

### KEYLIME BISTRO: American Parrot-head.

A bistro that brings 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. The eclectic menu is all over the map and filled with interesting twists—grilled red



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leaf lettuce, hearts of palm, and artichokes tossed in a tomato-orange vinaigrette, escargot baked with bleu cheese and tomato. Relaxed lunchers opt for a Ship to Shore Bloody Mary served with two prawns for their needs, nutritional and otherwise. Great food, entertainment always, late-night bar—this could be habit-forming. 11509 Andy Rosse Lane, Captiva, 239/395-4000.

**KING'S CROWN:** *Royal Resort Fare.* Tradition comes face to face with innovation in the grand and regal dining centerpiece of South Seas Resort. 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.*

**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. Tres bien. 15660 San Carlos Blvd., Ft. Myers, 239/415-4375.

**LA CASITA:** *GourMexican.* Fresh, funky, and purple, just like a well-made sangria. If Pee-wee's Playhouse were ever reincarnated as a hot spot for Mexican food, it would look at this place with envy. But within the lavender-hued walls there's some serious food going on. Moving beyond the Americanized "Mexican" we've come to expect, La Casita says its focus is on the regional cooking of Guanajuato—home-style cooking with an emphasis on freshness. Clever starters such as fresh fruit or cucumbers sprinkled with lime, salt, and red pepper, or chopped

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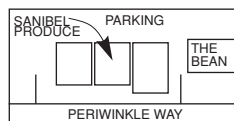


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shrimp marinated in lime juice and jalapeños with tomato, onion, and cilantro let you know you are not in TexMexville anymore. The ensalada de la casa with its piquant, flavorful garlic-ginger dressing is a must. The entrée list features a number of inventive dishes. The place is clever, genuine, and purple. What more could you want? 15185 McGregor Blvd., Ft. Myers, 239/415-1050.

**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 plumpest of oysters worthy for consumption, a much appreciated gesture. 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. 6520 C Pine Ave., Sanibel, 239/472-5353; 1036 Periwinkle Way, Sanibel, 239/472-6939; 239/945-0110; Waterfront at 16501-B Stringfellow Road, Bokeelia, 239/283-5959 or VHF 16.

**LIGHTHOUSE RESTAURANT AND BAR:** *Waterfront.* There is something about watching the sun fall into the mangroves around a marina of moored yachts that just makes food taste better. Classically prepared dishes centered on fresh seafood and prime beef are the forte here. Shrimp Scampi, Steak Diane, and Veal Marsala are three solid choices on a large, well-executed Continental American menu. The social, circular bar of Dade pine from an old whiskey distillery makes for a good start and finish point. 14301 Port Comfort, Ft. Myers, 239/489-0770.

**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 esteemed outpost with an infused cuisine of classical European techniques 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. 6460 Sanibel-Captiva Road at Blind Pass, Sanibel, 239/472-0033.

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**MATZALUNA:** *Well-Smoked Italian.* One is struck by the intoxicating smell of wood at the door; there's nothing quite like the smell of a fire. And it is that very aroma emanating from the oven that flavors the pizzas so wonderfully. The Cinque Formaggi with Gorgonzola, ricotta, spinach, and artichoke hearts is but one favorite. There's a full selection of fresh pastas, chicken, seafood, and veal for those so inclined. The festive atmosphere is a strong draw for families, but not as strong as those crisp, hot pies. 1200 Periwinkle Way, Sanibel, 239/472-1998.

**MCGREGOR CAFÉ:** *Café with Curb Appeal.* From the street, it looks inviting and fun—a respite along busy McGregor Boulevard with outdoor dining. Once there, you forget about the street altogether. The setting, inside and out, is immediately relaxing and social. The food fits the mood—comfortable, casual, and easy to like. The menu is full of fairly common dishes with an uncommon twist, like the Mediterranean Tuna Salad. The weekend brunch menu is a local favorite, and everything is done with a touch of uniqueness, right down to the iced teas served in oversized canning jars. 4305 McGregor Boulevard, Ft. Myers, 239/936-1771.

**MCT'S SHRIMP HOUSE AND TAVERN:** *Casual Seafood.* A line of locals waiting for the unlocking of the doors is a strong indication that you've stumbled onto something good. 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. McT's features upside-down trees draped in lights, video games for the kids, and a great bar. 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. Lots of eye appeal for the kids and a huge menu for Mom and Dad with interesting choices such as Matambre, stuffed tenderloin of Argentinean heritage, or a Brazilian snapper rolled in romaine with crab meat and

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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. Sample the great outdoor patio with live music. *Andy Rosse Lane, Captiva, 239/472-3434.*

**OLD CAPTIVA HOUSE:** *Old Florida/New American.* Exceptional rustic lodge cuisine is presented at one of Captiva's most celebrated locations at this famous resort. Chef Tom O'Brien is always changing menu centers on the bounty of the season with special attention to fresh fish. The ever-growing global market basket is on full display here with dishes such as Pepitas Crusted Pacific Rockfish with Avocado Relish and Black Beans, Sautéed Swordfish Saltimbocca, or Jerk Rubbed Grouper with Pumpkin Tart. Beef, veal, and duck lovers will find equally inspiring dishes. An eclectic wine menu complements the presentations and the view from the Sunset room is simply breathtaking. *Tween Waters Inn, Captiva, 239/472-5161 ext. 421*

**PARROT KEY CARIBBEAN GRILL:** *Tropical Marinaville.* Everything tastes better when it's served with boats, sunshine, and a little local color, and this waterside haven delivers plenty of all. A breezy, colorful setting begs for fruity cocktails and food with a tropical touch. The Mussels Martinique presents an interesting palate contrast with coconut milk, chipotle, and ancho chiles finding common ground around those succulent sea morsels. A full selection of fresh seafare with Caribbean touches highlights a



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diverse menu. But those not in the fish mood should be more than pleased with the interesting strawberry-kiwi-mango barbecued baby-back ribs, or a filet mignon presented *au poivre* rubbed in chipotle peppers and finished in a brandy-mango demiglace. All in all, a festive tropical feet-on-the-dock getaway. 2500 Main Street, Ft. Myers Beach, 239/463-3257

**PINCHER'S CRAB SHACK:** *Crackin' Crustaceans.* From blues to kings to snows to stoneys, this place is all about crabs! The walls are covered with nautical artifacts and humorous pieces, the bar is full of beer, and the air wafting with Old Bay. Decent turns are done to all manner of seafare from fried oysters to the obligatory grouper. But truth be known, if you darken this door, then roll up the sleeves, order the Spiced Garlic Blue Crabs and a couple of beers, and settle in for one of the best pounding, picking, and pulling meals you'll ever have. Those who prefer a more pristine form of dining would do well to settle on the crab cakes, lumpy and delicious. 3301 Bonita Beach Road, Bonita Springs, 239/948-1313; 12571 McGregor Blvd., Ft. Myers, 239/415-4009; 13021 North Cleveland Ave., North Ft. Myers, 239/652-1313.

**RC OTTERS:** *Otterly Beach American.* The menu may be daunting with more than 115 choices, not counting breakfast, but look at it this way: It's got something for just about everyone. It's open from early morning 'til late evening and there's music outside, more often than not. Interesting twists on a Caesar salad with house-cured salmon or blackened scallops. 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.

**RISTORANTE FARFALLA:** *Ethereal Italian.* There is something quite comforting about an Italian restaurant whose owner is the one manning the flames in the back. And at Michael Fattah's place, the food is made with freshness and a flourish that showcases how elegant this type of cuisine can be, when placed in the right hands. Paper-thin filet carpaccio, freshly roasted peppers, perfectly al-dente calamari, portobellos sautéed to their full meatiness—everything is done well and we haven't left the antipasti yet. For

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The advertisement features a background image of a tropical beach with turquoise water and white sand. The text is overlaid on this image. The title 'North Captiva' is at the top in a large, elegant script. Below it, the phrase 'North Captiva Island, understated elegance.' is written in a smaller script. A paragraph of text describes the island community. A call to action provides a website for listing portfolios. The Century 21 logo and name are prominently displayed, along with the phone number. At the bottom, another website is provided for vacation home accommodations.

main courses, it would be a shame to miss a from-scratch risotto or any of the marvelous house-made pastas. That said, Fattah does a mean filet of sole, the veal is nothing short of outstanding, and the Bistecca Al Pepe Verde is three streets past decadent. The wine list is strong, especially on the Italian front, and the desserts...Fuggedaboutit! You're too full by then. *Corkscrew Village, 21301 Tamiami Trail South, Estero, 239/495-9912.*

**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 might 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. This is provocative cuisine done well. Remember to save room for a soufflé. *2761 West Gulf Drive, Sanibel, 239/472-1141.*

**ROY'S:** *Haute Hawaiian.* The Bonita outpost is everything one would expect from the Yamaguchi chain. Menu steeped in exotic seafood, and Hawaiian, Far Eastern, and European fusion. Full boat of handpicked unusual wines and sakes. Lick-your-plate-clean sauces that add magic to every dish. The room is alive, the staff well informed, and the specials usually include a fish you've never tried before. If only the other chain restaurants could do it this well. *The Promenade, 26831 South Bay Drive, Bonita Springs, 239/498-7697.*

**RUMRUNNERS:** *Waterside Wonderland.* Finally Cape Coral has a restaurant it can be proud of. World-class food, million-dollar setting, and prompt, polished service all delivered with a less-than-you-might-imagine price tag. Former Bistro 41 co-creators Todd English and Jeff Gately have created a similar menu heavy on creature comforts such as English's famous Meatloaf, the Bistro salad, Seafood Potpie, with an always inspiring daily special sheet that highlights the kitchen's considerable talents. Plenty of patio dining for those in need of dinner al fresco. *The Marina at Cape Harbour, Cape Coral, 239/542-0200*

**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



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**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. 1473 Periwinkle Way, Sanibel, 239/472-5700; 13401 Summerlin Road, Ft. Myers, 239/437-8325; 24041 S. Tamiami Trail, Bonita Springs, 239/390-0400.

**THE SEAFOOD FACTORY:** *Fish Foundry.* Given the name, it's guaranteed 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. 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.

**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.



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**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.*

**TOUCAN GRILLE:** *Island Hoppin' Colorful.* Bold and colorful are the best ways to describe this slice of the tropics. A bright, festive room with perpetually cheerful staff and a welcome array of pastel-colored froufrou drinks go a long way toward relaxing the most hardened of diners. The menu is a global journey with roots in the spices, fruits, and seafood of the Caribbean islands. Start with golden fried coconut shrimp with a sweet-and-sour sauce or a well-lumped crab cake paired with mango salsa and a zippy Dijon-horseradish sauce. Any of the fresh-fish offerings work for the main course, although a special fondness is sure to be developed for the Chile Rum Glazed Salmon. Jerk chicken or barbecued ribs are solid choices for those preferring land fare. And dare not leave without a taste of the coconut rum ice cream, topped decadently with macadamias, toasted coconut, and fried banana. Tasty. *4480 Bonita Beach Road, Bonita Springs, 239/495-9464*

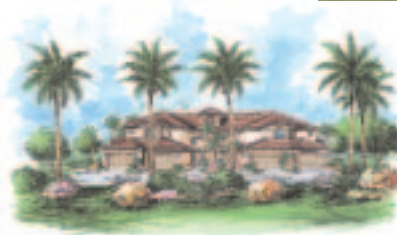
**THE VERANDA:** *Southern Cracker Charm.* This hallowed downtown landmark continues to exude Old Florida class and character with its gorgeous multi-room setting, tuxedoed staff, and high-end Southern fare. Blue Crab-Stuffed Artichoke Fritters and Southern Fried Grit Cakes with Andouille Sausage are two worthy starters. 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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