

cuisine

by David Grant



LOCATION SHOTS BY RHONDA MANDEL/FOOD SHOTS COURTESY OF CASA YBEL

Restaurants to Remember

Stone crab claws, porterhouse steaks, and other island culinary delights

Ah, January, the first month of a new year. A fresh start. A clean slate. A season begins.

But before we rush off and put 2004 past us, let us linger a minute and reflect. While the past year will forever tie Charley and Tollgate to our little islands, there are more permanent treasures on Sanibel and Captiva that outweigh those temporary inconveniences. And a remarkably large number of them involve food and wine, my two specialties. So let us indulge, shall we, and take a quick accounting of the places and people that give these two strips of land their life, their vibrancy, their soul.

Sanibel is a night of jazz at Ellington's as chef Amy Visco leads a virtuoso performance in the kitchen that makes the music taste so good.



PHOTO BY RHONDA MANDEL

Executive chef Amy Visco and general manager Audrey Kassem orchestrate the dining experience at Ellington's.

It's a warm handshake and hello from Patrick Harder greeting you at the door of the Jacaranda as you decide between some action in the bar, a quiet corner table, or a night alfresco with some new friends.

It is a night of all-you-can-eat shrimp at McT's when you miraculously find room, three plates later, for a slice of mud pie.

Captiva is a trip to the Mucky Duck and asking for a table with a view of the water, just to see the response of those who haven't seen it before. No, it never gets old. Better yet, saunter outside and clink a few glasses as the sun does its daily dance out of town and realize there's no better place on earth to welcome the night.

It's a lazy Saturday afternoon at 'Tween Waters' pool bar, followed by dinner at the Old Captiva House and a nightcap in the



PHOTOS BY RHONDA MANDEL

Crow's Nest, all of which leave you with the firm understanding of why Tween Waters is the consummate island resort.

Or dessert at the Bubble Room. A cold beer at RC Otter's. An outdoor table so you can watch the traffic and nosh a little at the Sunshine Cafe.

Sanibel is an afternoon bike ride fueled by a pit stop at Schnapper's for a dog with extra onions and mustard. Lunch at the Hungry Heron. Sushi and sunset at the Thistle Lodge.

It's halftime during a game at the Sanibel Grill, as you walk around admiring all the photos and wonder how the heck Matt Asen finds time to attend every sporting event that's mattered in the past couple decades while he runs all these restaurants. Better yet, how's he get tickets?

It's sitting down to a pound of chilled jumbo stone crab claws that were in Pine Island Sound this morning and now sit on a table in front of you at the Timbers tonight.

Captiva is finding a table outside at Keylime Bistro for a cocktail or brunch. Or occasionally both with a couple hours of shuteye in between, because the vibe of Andy Rosse Lane is all about checking your stress at the curb. Now that's therapy. Then it's back to the Crow's Nest for the crab races. I've yet to pick a winner.

It's walking into the Mad Hatter with a group of friends and watching their faces turn from puzzled bemusement to pure

joy as each bite of the magic sent from Daniel Rieneder's kitchen makes them realize that the best food can be found in the most unlikely places.

Sanibel is a porterhouse, medium rare, enjoyed with a nice Cabernet and the wife in the back room at the Sanibel Steakhouse, still the best resort steak joint the world has ever known.

It's lunch at Traders. Pizza at Matzaluna and the veal at the Riviera. It's soup and a shared plate at the Greenhouse Grill. It's Mayor Marty mixing you a mojito from his personal stash at Doc Ford's. It's the shrimp tail landing in the hat at Noopie's.

It's the wide-eyed wonder of my children as the rain forest sings, the animals swing, and the fog rolls through Morgan's Forest.

It's dinner and dancing, then a little more dinner and dancing, then a cognac and more dancing at Dolce Vita.

And then it is time to go home.

Sanibel and Captiva. Two strips of land that they call barrier islands. Two strips of land that felt the fury of nature, that lost a few trees, a little beach, and a couple months of life. Two strips of land that now stand before you resilient and hopeful, ready and proud.

Sanibel and Captiva. Welcome back home. 🌴

David Grant is the cuisine editor of Times of the Islands.

Diners on Sanibel and Captiva have lots of options, thanks to folks like (from top to bottom) owner Sandy Stilwell and manager Tim Padden at Keylime Bistro; hostess Molly McDonald and owner Patrick Harder at Jacaranda; general manager Chris Owens at Sanibel Grill; servers Jillian Kennedy and Kate Pozezniak, manager Michelle Tabbernee, and chef Sean Boller at the Sanibel Steakhouse; and co-owner John Armenia, executive chef Aziz Bouras, and co-owner Andrea Mucciga at Dolce Vita.