

# Punta Gorda Gourmet

A new generation of restaurants puts this small town on the culinary map



Turtle Club's vintage bricks and tin ceiling seem appropriate for a restaurant located in Punta Gorda's historic downtown.

by Chelle Koster Walton

**B**ehold the latest darling of Southwest Florida's dining scene. That's right: Punta Gorda. Suspend your disbelief and put your cynicism on the back burner until you've pulled up a chair.

Time was when "Punta Gorda dining" meant Karl Ehmer's German restaurant, early-bird dinners, and Fishermen's Village. There's still a lot going on at the Village, and it's still a bit on the touristy side with a focus on traditional seafood preparation and bar scenes. The popular Harpoon Harry's, with its waterside porch, pool tables, and live music, serves the typical menu of bar eats, sandwiches, and steam pots. Its upstairs, upmarket cousin, Captain's Table, takes a more sophisticated stance and is famous for its

salad bar and Friday night seafood buffet. Burgers, fried seafood, lobster rolls, and beer are standard fare at the corner triumvirate of Village Fish Market, Harbor Ale House, and Village Oyster Bar.

But in downtown Punta Gorda, a new breed of restaurants breaks out from the

Midwestern-swayed, sandwich-and-fish joints. The only thing Midwestern here is the prime corn-fed beef at Red Fish Chop House, one of several smart eateries along Marion Avenue helping to turn the historic main street into a homier and more affordable version of Naples's Fifth Avenue South.

River City Grill, hailed by the local press as "the best thing to happen to downtown Punta Gorda," set the pace back in 2003. Its bistro-style menu exhibits imagination with a battery of grilled steaks and fish and specialties that counterpoise the familiar with the exotic.

At lunch, for instance, there's duck quesadilla with black beans, pepper jack cheese, and cranberry-infused sour cream. Seared ahi tuna comes on a bed of mixed greens with sesame-ginger



PHOTOS BY LESTER KUHN

Above: Amimoto serves sushi and traditional Japanese entrées; right: the River City Grill helped usher in Punta Gorda's restaurant renaissance.

dressing. Creative sandwiches include a chicken and prosciutto panini or shrimp and blue crab aioli wrap. Signature entrées range from comfort dishes like pot roast (with a wild mushroom sauce twist) to intriguing offerings such as lamb shank roasted with fresh mint and lingonberries. Seating spills out onto the sidewalk from the huge, brick-walled dining room with its sexy lighting, booths, and bar.

Karl Ehmer is gone, taken not by the wind, but by development. So here is the new Punta Gorda standard, and it spreads quickly. Already River City has opened the new, dinner-only, higher-end Red Fish Chop House next door, with a menu of regional American cuisine. Sea-life murals and retro-style furnishings set the scene for this cross-country culinary tour—think Texarkana cast iron skillet-seared rib eye, Hawaiian baby

back ribs, California seafood skewers, and grilled Newport swordfish.

Turtle Club raises the bar (and prices) even higher with its tried-and-true "gracious coastal cuisine," which has made it a prized local secret at Naples's Vanderbilt Beach Resort for years. If it maintains the same standards for detailed excellence here in its handsome setting of vintage brick and dark woods, it's worth the price. Specialties demonstrate deft-





RED FISH CHOP HOUSE PHOTO BY LESTER KUHN; THE PERFECT CAPER PHOTO COURTESY OF THE CHARLOTTE COUNTY VISITORS BUREAU

Left: Red Fish Chop House focuses on regional American cuisine; above: The Perfect Caper features bold decor and innovative menu items.

ness with seafood and meat, including low-country shrimp and smoked sausage, blackened scallops, and the signature Sea Harvest Platter seared on a flat-top grill and finished with lemon beurre blanc.

Once a strip of hometown shops, the historic buildings along Marion Avenue between northbound and southbound U.S. 41 have come to be known as Restaurant Row. Lined with vintage-style lights and sculptures by local artists and home to Sea Grape Gallery, the stretch is growing into an enclave for art in two disciplines. Visiting gastronomes will want to stop at The Artistic Gourmet

dip, and other specialty items.

A block south of Marion Avenue on Olympia Avenue, Presseller Delicatessen also sells gourmet food items, along with “not your everyday” sandwiches, salads, and pizzas. It’s also part gallery. Out back lies a delightful bougainvillea-brightened garden for enjoying “food and art à la carte.” Try the Dali (serrano ham and manchego cheese on a baguette) or the Renoir (Norwegian smoked salmon, goat cheese, onions, and tomatoes on a croissant). Down an arbored alley off Marion sits another such garden treasure, Café Ruelle, where coffee is the buzzword but pastries, quiche, and sandwiches with a

French accent provide a quick, tasty repast alfresco.

The ultimate find in downtown Punta Gorda requires a bit of sleuthing, because The Perfect Caper displays no signage. Tucked among the jauntily painted shops on brick-paved Sullivan Street, this boutique restaurant takes Punta Gorda to its pinnacle of creativity. Inside, the bold decor includes a display kitchen, bright sky-blue walls, and black tables. Be prepared for such luncheon surprises as cream of mussel soup with saffron and the apple and brie sandwich. At dinner, wine obsession drives a select menu including a crispy shrimp appetizer fried in shredded phyllo, pear and goat cheese salad, pan-roasted squab with seared foie gras, and chocolate bread pudding with vanilla-caramel sauce.

## Want to Go?

**Amimoto Japanese Restaurant** (pictured), 2705 S. Tamiami Trail, 941/505-1515

**The Artistic Gourmet**, 117 W. Marion Ave., 941/575-6666

**Café Ruelle**, 117 W. Marion Ave., 941/575-3553

**Captain’s Table**, Fishermen’s Village, 1200 W. Retta Esplanada, 941/637-1177, www.smugglers.com

**Club Rain**, 1105 Taylor Rd., 941/505-7246

**Harbor Ale House**, Fishermen’s Village, 1200 W. Retta Esplanada, 941/505-8775,

www.fishville.com

**Harpoon Harry’s**, Fishermen’s Village, 1200 W. Retta Esplanada, 941/637-1177, www.harpoonharrys.com

**The Perfect Caper**, 320 Sullivan St., 941/505-9009, www.theperfectcaper.com

**Presseller Delicatessen**, 209 W. Olympia Ave., 941/639-3990, www.pressellerdelicatessen.com

**Red Fish Chop House**, 127 W. Marion Ave.,

941/639-7655

**River City Grill**, 131 W. Marion Ave., 941/639-9080

**Turtle Club**, 139 W. Marion Ave., 941/637-9477, www.theturtleclubrestaurant.com

**Village Fish Market**, Fishermen’s Village, 1200 W. Retta Esplanada, 941/639-7959, www.fishville.com

**Village Oyster Bar**, Fishermen’s Village, 1200 W. Retta Esplanada, 941/637-1212, www.fishville.com



PHOTO BY LESTER KUHN



PHOTO COURTESY OF PRESSELLER DELICATESSEN

Enjoy sandwiches or salads alfresco in Presseller Delicatessen’s pleasant back garden.

Still two more pleasant surprises are located just a bit from the city core. On Taylor Road, find Club Rain, an even more drastic departure from Punta Gorda’s old guard. A hip spot with dancing and live radio broadcasts during the evening, by day it’s a favorite quick-lunch stop for local workers. Dinner brings a selection of twenty-one martinis and well-crafted specialties such as Rain Grouper, sautéed with mushrooms, shallots, and tomatoes; deglazed with triple sec; and finished with citrus butter sauce.

Finally, drive down U.S. 41 about five minutes from downtown to Towles Plaza, where Amimoto rescues diners from the highway bustle with its soothing sushi-bar setting. Among its classic rolls, the “Punta Gorda” packages tuna, salmon, white fish, and masago; the “Fort Myers” features fried grouper, asparagus, and special sauce. *Obento* lunch boxes and a variety of Japanese appetizers and entrées satisfy the sushi-wary.

Amimoto arrived several years ago as a precursor to what blossoms today on the Punta Gorda dining scene and as a clear sign that the local population hungered for change. The change has come so deliciously and successfully that discriminating diners throughout the region find themselves saying (or should, anyway): “Let’s do Punta Gorda for dinner.”

*Chelle Koster Walton writes about food and travel from Sanibel Island, her home for twenty-three years. She is the author of The Sarasota, Sanibel Island & Naples Book and numerous other books and articles about Florida and the Caribbean.*

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