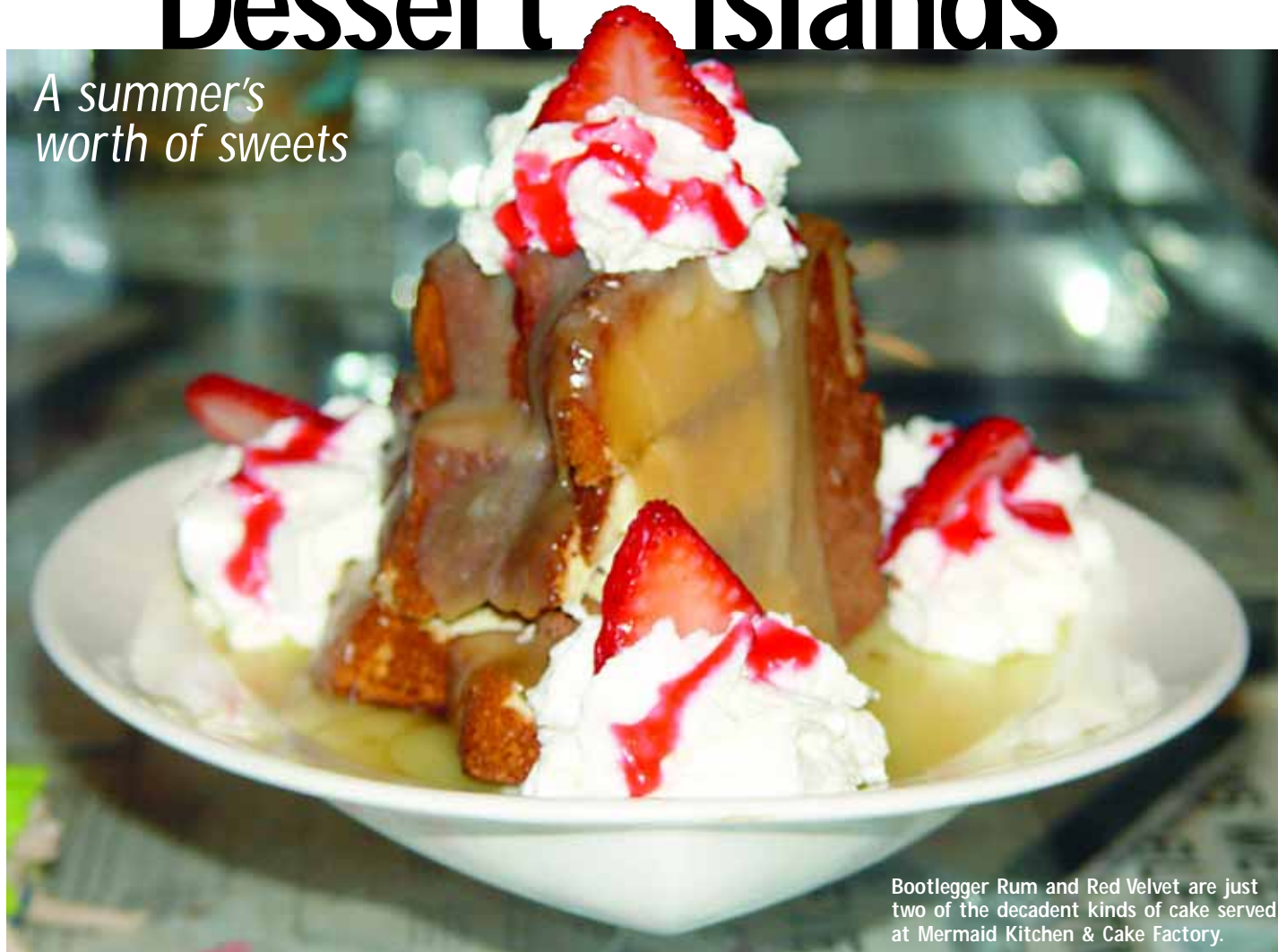


Dessert Islands

A summer's worth of sweets



Bootlegger Rum and Red Velvet are just two of the decadent kinds of cake served at Mermaid Kitchen & Cake Factory.

PHOTO BY FRED BONOURANT

by Chelle Koster Walton

If you were stuck on a deserted island with one fantasy dessert, what would it be? Not that we're exactly *stuck* or *deserted* here on these islands, but one can still fantasize, and it seems as if chefs on Sanibel, Captiva, Ft. Myers Beach, and Pine Island have done just that when they created their grand finale menus. Forget the standard key lime pie or plop of vanilla ice cream. It's summer! Go nuts! Go chocolate! Go high-test sugar! Tomorrow's midday burn will melt it off, or so you can tell yourself tonight. The following restaurants have come up with unique temptations that improve upon the classics or go off in a completely unexpected direction.

In case you've never asked, the first place most island dessert devotees head

to when in need of a sugar buzz is **Mermaid Kitchen & Cake Factory** on Sanibel. Katie Gardenia reinvented cake here back when she opened the place in 2001, and even before then, when she was part-owner of Captiva's **Bubble Room**. Though Katie has moved away, her legacy lives on at both spots. So if you're looking for sweet decadence in monstrous proportions, head to either.

In honor of the occasion of this article and my forthcoming birthday, I took the opportunity to begin celebrating a week in advance at Mermaid Kitchen. The trick is to go light on your lunch or dinner entrée; the *real* main course (as the restaurant's name implies) is a piece of cake. A *big* piece of cake, so ask for a lot of forks.

The Orange Crunch, also on the Bubble Room menu, spikes yellow cake



PHOTO BY LAUREN DAVIES

Matanzas Inn knows how to satisfy a sweet tooth with its Turtle Ice Cream Pie.

with Grand Marnier and fresh orange juice (Hey! It's healthy!), then layers it with almonds and orange cream-cheese icing. The Mermaid Cake is a sweet cloud of chiffon cake and whipped cream studded with hand-placed toasted almonds and chunks of honeycomb praline. There's not a bad cake on the menu, so also consider the Bootlegger Rum Cake swimming in warm butter-rum sauce and layered with chocolate mousse, the Raspberry Delight featuring almond flavoring and white chocolate frosting, and the classic Red Velvet (also a Bubble Room tradition).

Another of my island favorites comes from **Dolce Vita**. The Black Forest Cake is served with an unlikely but oddly complementary scoop of passion fruit sherbet. The sweet tartness of the sherbet serves as the yin to the cake's dark, rich, chocolate yang, resulting in pure delight. What could be better than having your cake and your chocolate too?

At the **Lobster Shack** on Pine Island, the menu describes a make-your-mouth-water chocolate subversion of chocolate layer cake, chocolate sponge cake, and chocolate cream covered with dark chocolate ganache rimmed with chocolate flakes and raspberry drizzle. What actually arrived, however, was a slightly altered, still multi-chocolated version that layered ganache, chocolate mousse,

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RedFish BluFish offers a passion fruit crème brûlée (above and left) served atop tangerine jus; caramel and pecans adorn Tarpon Lodge's Bananas Foster Cake (right).



and chocolate sprinkles on a walnut-and-chocolate-crum crust with chocolate drizzle. Just down the road, **Matlacha Oyster House** gives you Double Trouble Chocolate Cake, similarly decadent with chocolate mousse between two layers of chocolate cake, sprinkled with walnuts.

In Ft. Myers Beach, **Warfields Steakhouse** does cake with a Latin flair. Its Tres Leches, the house specialty, consists of vanilla cake soaked with three

sweet creams, an ultra-sweet version of the Latin American confection. On Pine Island, **Tarpon Lodge** cake-ifies a flaming tableside tradition with its Bananas Foster Cake. Layers of dense, moist banana cake get slathered with creamy white frosting and caramel, then studded with pecans.

Tarpon Lodge also dazzles with its twist on crème brûlée, made with the complementary flavors of mocha and Kahlúa. **RedFish BluFish**, Captiva's newest dining sensation, struts its progressive stuff with molded passion fruit crème brûlée domes atop a slick of tangerine jus for the perfect blend of sweet and tart.

In certain circles, I am known as the "pie queen." I inherited my mother's pie recipes, and my love of pie has motivated

PHOTOS ABOVE BY LAUREN DAVIES

Want to Go?

Restaurants on Lee County's islands offer plenty of options for satisfying a sweet tooth. Here's where the author gave in to her dessert desire.

The Bubble Room, 15001 Captiva Dr., Captiva, 239-472-5558, www.bubble roomrestaurant.com

Dolce Vita, 1244 Periwinkle Way, Sanibel, 239-472-5555

Gramma Dot's, 634 N. Yachtsman Dr., Sanibel, 239-472-8138

Island Pizza & Pasta, 1619 Periwinkle Way, Sanibel, 239-472-1581

Lobster Shack, 3135 Stringfellow Rd.,



Mermaid Kitchen's Orange Crunch Cake

St. James City, Pine Island, 239-283-5300

Matanzas Inn, 416 Crescent St., Ft. Myers Beach, 239-463-3838, www.matanzas restaurant.com

Matlacha Oyster House, 3930 Pine Island Rd. NW, Matlacha, 239-283-2544

McT's Shrimp House & Tavern,

1523 Periwinkle Way, Sanibel, 239-472-3161

Mermaid Kitchen & Cake Factory, 2055 Periwinkle Way, Sanibel, 239-472-1242, www.themermaidkitchen.com

RedFish BluFish, 14970 Captiva Dr., Captiva, 239-472-1956, www.redfishblufish restaurant.com

Rosie's Island Market & Deli, 362 Periwinkle Way, Sanibel, 239-472-6656

Tarpon Lodge, 13771 Waterfront Dr., Pineland, Pine Island, 239-283-3999, www.tarponlodge.com

Warfields Steakhouse, 19220 San Carlos Blvd., Ft. Myers Beach, 239-463-3510, www.warfieldssteakhouse.com

PHOTO BY LAUREN DAVIES

me to add to that repertoire. Recently I met my male pie-loving counterpart in artist Jim Sprankle. His favorite? The key lime pie at **Gramma Dot's**.

When it comes to which restaurant has the best key lime pie, I'm not even going to go there. But for a concentrated, pop-in-your-mouth, key-lime-pie sensation, try **Rosie's Island Market & Deli's** Signature Pelican Poop. Al dente on the outside and chewy inside, like any good truffle, these delectable tidbits, available in key lime and several other varieties, will make your mouth burst with flavor and your body jolt with a sugar rush.

Because I never make them myself, I love the candy pies, like **Matanzas Inn's** Turtle Ice Cream Pie, which can be found on Ft. Myers Beach. Sanibel's **Island Pizza & Pasta** caught my eye with its Milky Way Pie. I hadn't heard of it before, so I bit. And then I bit again. Then I begged my son to finish it, a narrow wedge of caramel, fluffy chocolate, and chocolate crumb crust so thickly rich you have to suck the spoon.

And of course, there can be no discussion of famous island desserts without mention of the Sanibel Mud Pie at **McT's Shrimp House & Tavern**, a

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Warfields Steakhouse serves two desserts with Latin flair, a traditional Tres Leches made with vanilla cake and three sweet creams and a Café Con Leche made with a trio of liqueurs.

PHOTOS BY LAUREN DAVIES

deliriously chocolate ice cream tradition for more than twenty years. And while we're on the topic of ice cream, how can we possibly neglect **Queenie's Ice Cream**, available throughout Sanibel and Captiva at places like Latte Da Coffee & Gift Shop and McCarthy's Marina. Well, we can't, because of the romantic story of

Vanessa Viglione (aka Queenie), one of our own. Her foray into ice cream making began as a birthday present from her guy; he enrolled her in an ice cream-making school at Pennsylvania State University. It's the stuff dessert fantasies are made of. So give me a tub of Queenie's and a Bubble Room

cake and yes, I could live happily on a desert island. But please, send pie. 🍰

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.

Connoisseur A GUIDE TO THE FINER THINGS

We recently spoke with **George Blanckensee**, director of food and beverage at Sanibel Harbour Resort & Spa and a private wine collector, to get some tips on buying wine.

Times of the Islands: What should a layman look for when wine shopping?

George Blanckensee: Over the last several years, wines [have been] coming out of California co-ops, similar to *negociants* in France. They take wines from small, local vintners and blend and bottle them, selling them at a good value. Many of these are "secondary" labels to well-known brands. Some have been extremely successful, doubling from original prices of about \$8 and generating their own secondary labels.

TOTI: So, you can find a good bottle of wine for about \$10?

GB: Yes, but it takes a little effort. Of course, it is easier to find a better white for \$10 than a red. You might need to go

to \$20 for a Cabernet, less for a Merlot.

TOTI: Where are the best values today?

GB: For me, the best values are Australian.

TOTI: What is the best wine you have ever had?

GB: A 1928 LaTour and an '82 Mouton. That Mouton really got this Californian into Bordeaux wines.

TOTI: How can you describe the difference between good Californian/American wines and those of France?

GB: Today, the style of many domestic wines is to be more "fruity." Our growing season is warmer and longer, so there are more residual sugars. Some refer to this style that accentuates the fruit as a "fruit bomb." This is not a bad thing and doesn't imply excess or sweet-



George Blanckensee

ness. Many an Australian Shiraz exhibits this style. To mellow this fruit strength, new oak or toasted oak is used. In France, the growing conditions are different and they rely on *terroir* for flavor, as well as the natural sugars.

TOTI: How do you pick from a wine list at a restaurant?

GB: Actually, some of the higher-end wines might be a better value in that they can't be marked up, percentage wise, the same as a less expensive wine. Also, look at French wines. A moderately priced one is often a good value, especially from the Loire or a Chablis.

TOTI: Any other advice?

GB: Don't be overly concerned with conventions. Drink what you like, even if it's chicken and a Cab. You know what tastes good to you. —Fred Bondurant

PHOTO BY FRED BONDURANT

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