

# The Great Steak Debate

Aging, seasonings set steak house specialties apart

**I**t's Friday night. You want a steak. Scratch that. You need a steak. Nothing else will do.

And when the primitive beast inside you screams for a steak, the call is loud and demanding and specific. It says, "You will treat yourself. You will not slap some store-bought junior varsity piece of meat on the backyard grill for a quick propane bath. You will make a reservation. You will indulge. Now, pick up the phone."

That is the seduction of a steak. Pure gastronomic pleasure or unbridled gluttony, call it what you want. It is the answer to your primal soul. Fat grams be damned.

It is also why there are steak houses. Lots of them. The bad news is you can pick only one—at least tonight.

Shall it be Sanibel Steakhouse or Shula's, Beachview or Bogert's, Cloyde's, Chops, Ditka's or Andre's? What makes one better than the other? That, my friend, is something only you can decide, for there is perhaps no more subjective food criticism than what is or is not a great steak.

Basically it comes down to matters of personal taste, both in the steak and its presentation, and in the atmosphere. So let us start with the steak.

Great beef, no matter the cut, is a matter of four basic elements: grade, aging, cooking method, and seasoning. All are subject to great debate.

## Making the Grade

The grade of beef refers to the grading system of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, which classifies meat into eight categories. Only four grades are typically offered for human consumption—Prime, Choice, Select, and No Roll. From here on, it gets a bit hazy. Prime grade is bestowed only upon roughly the top two percent, which exhibits the best marbling, texture, yield, and a whole lot of other

**By David Grant**



PHOTO BY JIM ANDERSON

**At Sanibel Steakhouse, executive chef Sean Boller serves wet-aged, prime cuts unlike any you could find in the local grocery store.**

qualities that only someone who stares at a lot of carcasses could figure out. Most of this product is shipped to Japan, where the locals don't mind forking over a big stack of yen for a porterhouse. The rest is sold to high-end meat markets and restaurants, including several of our local favorites, like Sanibel Steakhouse and Bogert's.

Second on the beef bell curve is Choice, which makes up a large percent of the market. The cuts at the top end of this rank are often packaged and presented under clever market-

ing campaigns such as Certified Angus Beef and Sterling Silver or Bob's Best Beef, all designed to make the consumer think, "Wow, these must be special steaks, they are \_\_\_\_\_ (fill in marketing brand name here)!" Truth is, they are all pretty good. Not as good as Prime, but better than what you'll find at the local grocer.

The grocer is offering what is currently referred to as "Select," which used to be known as "Good" grade, but everyone knew that Good really wasn't, so they didn't buy it. So,

late in the '80s, the U.S.D.A. started to call it Select, as in "Wow, these must be special steaks, they are Select!" And what do you know, it worked. Of course, lots of that stuff worked in the '80s, but who knew it would last?

The great irony is that Select grade beef is actually lower in fat than the other grades, therefore probably healthier for you. The problem is that marbling (read "fat") is what gives beef its flavor and juiciness and the more of it the better. And since we typically are throwing the diet out the window when we indulge on a steak, we probably ought to go for the good stuff. Which won't help you narrow your options much, since all of the local steak houses serve the good stuff. They leave the Select for the one-in-every-town boys. At least that is what I'm guessing. Could be No Roll, which I purposely won't elaborate on.

### Age Before Beauty

Next up in the beef beauty pageant is the aging process, which falls into two distinct camps—dry and wet. This is where the steakhouse guys start to part company. Some believe that dry aging is the only way to go. Bogert's, for example, contracts with Buckhead Beef in Georgia to dry age its steaks to exact specifications and time (28 days). The dry aging process causes the beef to lose moisture, concentrating the flavors. Oh, and it also turns the outside an interesting shade of green. Not to worry though, they remove that part. I think.

Once the beef has done its time, it is cut, packaged, and shipped for use within four days at the restaurant. "I want to be the guy who serves the best steaks in the area," says Nico Bogert, owner and executive chef. "Dry aging enhances the flavor of the steaks in my opinion."

On the other side of the fence is the wet team. Wet aging is typically a longer process in which the beef is sealed in Crayovac, which keeps the moisture in. This process also breaks down the fiber and connective tissues of the meat, producing a tender and juicy steak. The Sanibel Steakhouse is one of the wet-age proponents. "We sear our steaks at a very high temperature (1700 degrees) to seal that juiciness in and I believe the wet-age process creates a more tender and flavorful steak with that cooking style," says owner Paul Gaeta.

The Sanibel Steakhouse's are not the only restaurants with machines that reach absurdly high temperatures. In fact, it is standard practice in the steak-house industry and probably explains why all the chefs wear long-sleeved

# 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 62.*



**THE ISLAND HOUSE:** *Neighborhood Grab Bag.* The mid-island location makes this a natural locals' spot on Sanibel, although the fact that the consistent, capable kitchen delivers quality meals at a reasonable rate helps. The broad menu runs the gamut from seafood, pasta, and beef to lunchtime lighter fare. The barbecued baby back ribs hold a special place in many islanders' hearts and apparently quite a few judges', if the awards on the wall are any indication. Other notables include Bayou Shrimp, Pecan Crusted Grouper, and a Jambalaya chock-full of andouille sausage, shellfish, and spice. The adjoining Bungalow wears the sports bar/beer joint theme well and serves as an ample start or close to the evening. 975 Rabbit Road, Sanibel Island, 239/472-8311.

**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. Skip the House Salad and opt instead for the Fried Green Tomato version paired with a bleu cheese dressing. 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.

shirts when they are in public.

The high-temperature, flat-top grills sear the meat, which keeps the juices from exiting. How they complete the cooking process varies between traditional grilling, top broiling, or baking. The important part is that they get the temperature right, which is quite a trick considering that one man's "medium rare" is another's "Hey, is that thing still moving?" Just remember to read the house instructions on its version of temperatures before ordering, and if it is a little undercooked, send it back. Have some more wine. Remember you are indulging. Relax; they'll get it right eventually.

### For Every Steak, a Season

The final piece to the steak puzzle is the seasoning, which runs from the simple salt-and-pepper route to elaborate blends of herbs, spices, and voodoo rituals. Every steak house does it differently and refuses to tell its "secret ingredients." You'd think they were all descen-

dants of Colonel Sanders. Some, like the Ruth's Chris chain, like to roll the beef in a slab of butter before throwing it in the oven, just in case the bleu cheese dressing and onion rings didn't sufficiently scare your arteries. Whatever the method, the desire is to create the perfect steak, the kind that melts in your mouth and leaves you babbling to anyone within earshot, "That was the best thing I've ever tasted in the history of my life. I'm going to come back twice a week until I tap out the Visa."

And that, in a nutshell, is what makes a steak. And the winner in my book of Great Steak Houses is The Sanibel Steakhouse, all three of them. I could just rent a limo and hop from one to the other every day. Until the Visa taps out, that is. 🍷

*Dedicated non-vegetarian and all-round food enthusiast David Grant is food editor for Times of the Islands.*

# Epicurious

DINING HAS BECOME AN IMPORTANT PART OF OUR CULTURAL LIVES. That is especially true in Southwest Florida where a recent influx of talented chefs and innovative entrepreneurs has dramatically improved the food landscape. They have built their restaurants with creativity, hard work, and passion.

We feel that all of the restaurants listed in our guide deserve your attention. We won't, however, cloud your impressions with overblown critiques and personal preferences. Only you know what you like.

Instead, we will highlight their efforts. Point out what

makes them unique and what we feel might be worth your attention. Introduce their products, people, and atmospheres. And we'll try not to be too darned serious—after all, food is fun!

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

**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—and at wine store prices, no less. The bulk of the seating is outside, but to catch a seat inside is 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. Start with a Bacchus board, one of the creative salads, and whatever special they've thought up that day. It won't disappoint. They show off the grapes well with tastings every Monday and Thursday and frequent wine dinners. 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, First St., Ft. Myers, 239/415-9463.*

**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. Seafood specials are typically splendid. A Gorgonzola and walnut pesto-encrusted filet is a frequent special of note. Some regulars come only for the high-end comforts like the Bistro Meatloaf made of veal, pork, and beef tenderloin—just like Mom's...right. We'll stick with whatever chef Ralph Centalanza's inspired mind has led to today. *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. The Indonesian influences of his upbringing in Holland, coupled with stints in Italy and Paris, have sprinkled the

menu and specials board with sophisticated dishes worthy of epicures everywhere. Veal, pork, and lamb chops as well as table-side cooking are treats for those looking for more than a steak. 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.*



PHOTO BY NICK ADAMS

**When you go to Dolce Vita for a Mediterranean-style dinner, stop at the bar and let Eric Lipka fix you a drink.**

**THE BUBBLE ROOM:** *Eccentric Wonderland.* The unwritten law of Captiva states that all first-time visitors must visit this nostalgia museum/food palace. We could start with the décor, but the magazine isn't large enough to cover the details. Suffice it to say the atmosphere is a mad scientist's creation of Christmas/antique/Wonkaville that happens to serve food delivered by khaki-colored "Bubble Scouts" in strange hats who would be visual over-stimulation enough. 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. Besides, they'll be too busy staring at all the knickknacks on the walls and watching the toy train that circumvents the dining rooms. *15001 Captiva Dr., Captiva, 239/472-5558.*

**CHADWICK'S:** *Bountiful Buffet.* Fresh 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. Open daily for lunch and dinner, the lounge adds some dancing and nightlife with island music in the latter half of the week. *South Seas Resort, Captiva, 239/472-7554.*

**D'AMICO & SONS:** *Twin Cities Italian.* Affordable Italian gourmet food for quick eat-in or take-away served in a visually appealing trattoria-type setting that's wrapped with a neighborhood feel. There's little doubt that this Minnesota-based group is onto something. Homemade foccacias and artisanal breads, day fresh salads, tasty sandwiches and entrées. The Tuscan Pot Roast is comfort food at its finest. *Bell Tower Shops, Ft. Myers, 239/489-0001; Promenade, Bonita Springs, 239/947-0033; Neapolitan Way, Naples, 239/430-0955.*

**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

# WILL YOU BE HAVING WINE WITH DINNER?



77 to choose from . . .

and that's just the Cabernets.

sauce, salmon topped with a balsamic shallot reduction, and a curried lamb shank with golden raisin compote. A delicious macadamia nut pie awaits you at the end. But don't forget, there's dancing to be done. *1244 Periwinkle Way, Sanibel, 239/472-5555.*

**DUSSELDORF'S ON THE BEACH:** *Hops Haus.* There are three great things about this place and all of them center on beer. First is the beer itself—hundreds of them in all shapes, styles, and ethnic backgrounds. Heaven on earth for all malt aficionados. Next is the food to eat while drinking the beer—hearty, German fare from Jaeger Schnitzel to Knockwurst to Gulasch. This is just the base one needs when sampling the suds. And finally, the people themselves. Imagine *Cheers* set in Dusseldorf without the subtitles. Friendly folks with a steady supply of opinions and knowledge about, you guessed it, beer. Join the Beer Club as thousands before you have and sample your way through the ever-growing selection. The nightly entertainment itself is worth a visit. *1113 Estero Blvd., Ft. Myers Beach, 239/463-5251.*

**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. A selection from The Big Drink Menu sets the tone. Food ranges from splendid seafood inside to first-rate pub fare in the lounge. The baked stuffed grouper has reached legendary status. Chef Brad Kilburn augments an already large menu with a number of well-chosen specials. 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 style, 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 nights for dinner fare. This is a locals' joint that is not fancy, just good. *1700 Periwinkle Way, Sanibel, 239/472-9300.*

**KATIE GARDENIA'S KITCHEN & MERMAID CLUB:** *Eclectic Global.* A visual mélange of mermaids, murals, and Sanibel-Captiva memorabilia surround diverse tables full of highly creative cuisine. Asian, Mexican, and island influences share equal billing on an inven-

tive menu. Blue cornmeal-crusted cracked conch served with a black bean and corn salsa and a beurre blanc spiked with chili, vanilla, saffron, and rum acts as a good starter. Entrées include an adobo-style prime rib, chili rellenos, a sage-crusted lollipop chop, and a Caribbean seafood stew. The Legendary Katie Kake is one of a dozen impressive desserts. Famous on the islands for her culinary expertise, proprietress Katie Gardenia has brought forth a place with sensory overload and epicurean treats. *2055 Periwinkle Way, Sanibel, 239/472-1268.*

**KEYLIME BISTRO:** *American Parrothead.* Thank Sandra Stilwell and Randy Hunt for bringing a little local color into our lives. Make that a



**As winner of The Jacaranda's annual Win Dinner for a Year contest, Laura Sweeney (center) gets dinner for two once a week for an entire year at The Jac. Sister restaurant McT's Shrimp House & Tavern has a similar deal, won this year by Mrs. Sonin Fleming.**

PHOTO BY JIM ANDERSON

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. Chef Lee Seifert's eclectic menu is all over the map and filled with interesting twists—grilled red leaf lettuce, hearts of palm, and artichokes tossed in a tomato-orange vinaigrette, escargot baked with bleu cheese and tomato. Great food, entertainment always, late-night bar—this could be habit-forming. *11509 Andy Rosse Lane, Captiva, 239/395-4000.*

**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. It's all there and all guaranteed to let your mind drift to the vine-covered provinces surrounding Paris.

For a special treat, call a few weeks ahead and reserve "La Cave," a six-seat chef's table just outside the kitchen. *15660 San Carlos Blvd., Ft. Myers, 239/415-4375.*

**LA CASITA:** *GourMexican.* Fresh, fun, and purple; just like a well-made sangria. If Pee-wee's Playhouse were 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. La Casita's 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 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. *15185 McGregor Blvd., Ft. Myers, 239/415-1050.*

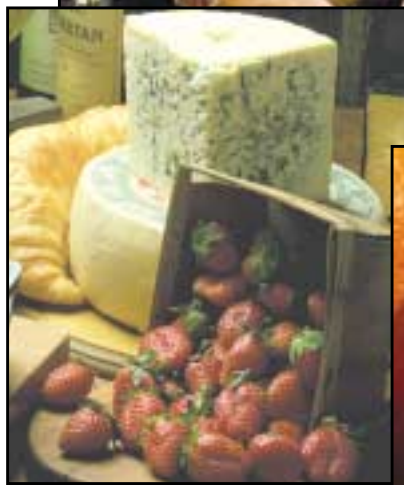
**LA VIGNA ITALIAN RESTAURANT AND GRILL:** *Modern Rustic Italian.* This place understands that great Italian cooking comes from the heart. With virtually everything made from scratch or shipped directly from Italy, you'd be hard pressed to find a place this Italian in Italy. An open, expressive kitchen and light, uplifting room help convey the festive atmosphere. The waiters act as extensions of the chefs, making the menu merely a starting point. Anything from the wood-fired oven is a worthy selection.

The scallopini dishes are otherworldly. Pastas, breads, and sauces are made daily, and the staff will gladly recommend pairings from the diverse wine cellar. *1625 Periwinkle Way, Sanibel, 239/472-5453.*

**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. For those who prefer their oysters on the roasted side, The Pot is a couple of dozen oysters or clams steamed in beer and flavored with special spices. 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. Sports fans are drawn here nightly. *6520 C Pine Ave., Sanibel, 239/472-5353; 1036 Periwinkle Way, Sanibel, 239/472-6939; 3522 Del Prado Blvd., Cape Coral, 239/945-0110; Waterfront at 16501-B String-fellow Rd., 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 bet-

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ter. Not that chef Dale Tonell needs any help. 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. But the clincher, as always, is the water and that western view. With more than a dozen tables outside and a view of the water for all behind the windows, this stylish setting more than lives up to the food and vice versa. 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 highly 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. Imaginative wine list to match the fare. 6460 Sanibel-Captiva Road at Blind Pass, Sanibel, 239/472-0033.

**MCT'S SHRIMP HOUSE AND TAVERN:** *Casual Seafood.* A line of locals waiting for the unlocking of the doors is typically a strong indication that you've stumbled onto something good. In case you missed the raw bar next to the host stand, 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. Home of the Mother of all Early Bird Specials—hence the line to get in—McT's features upside-down trees draped in lights, video games for the kids, and a great bar. Hard to make a bad dinner selection; the Sanibel Steamer has gained a cult-like following. Save room for the Famous Sanibel Mud Pie, a tower of chocolatey 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. If you ever wanted to take your family to a South American rain forest for dinner, then here's the spot for you. Lots of eye appeal for the kids and a huge menu for Mom and Dad with interesting choices such as Matambre, an stuffed tenderloin of Argentinean heritage, or a Brazilian snapper rolled in romaine with crab meat and butter, grilled and topped with a mushroom béarnaise sauce. Save room for Tropical Forest Pie. 1231 Middle Gulf Drive, Sanibel, 239/472-4100.

**NOOPIE'S JAPANESE SEAFOOD AND STEAKHOUSE:** *Japanese Teppanaki.* There is something disturbingly fun about watching a man chopping things up. Rapidly. On a hot grill.

*Life in the Raw*

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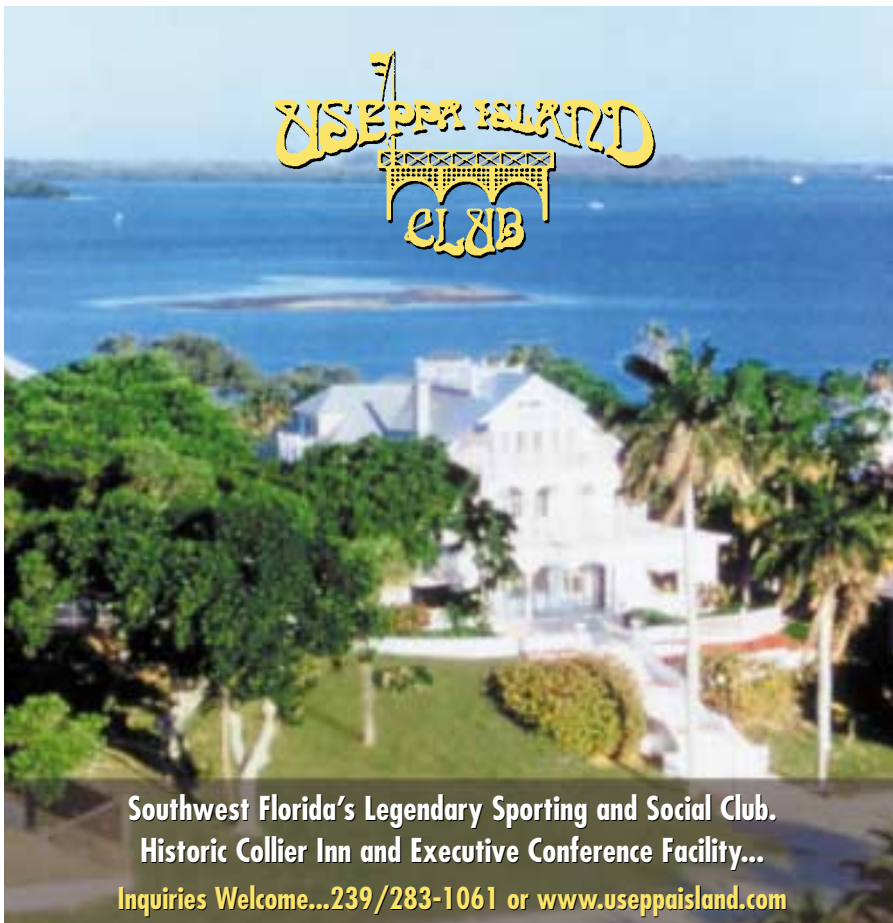
Three feet from your face. Therein lies the appeal of a Japanese steak house. This small gem tucked in a corner of the Sundial Beach Resort with three cooking tables is an island treat. For cocktails have a Noopie's Punch or a Purple Haze, a blend of sake and Chambord. Accomplished Teppanaki masters mesmerize you with flying salt shakers, sizzling shrimp, and onion volcanoes. The food is good, but the show's better. 1451 Middle Gulf, Samibel, 239/395-6014.

**ORIGAMI:** *Sushi/Korean.* Good sushi is about the subtle things. Fresh, clean smells. Soft and crunchy textures. That quick eyewash only a good wasabi can provide. The focus here is on rolls with an ever-increasing list of about thirty. Try the No. 13, better known as the Eeligan by those in the know, similar to a California roll with strips of eel and avocado on the outside. The Korean side of the menu has some interesting items. Katsu, Kimchee, and a popular short rib called Galbi are three of eleven choices. But when you're in the best sushi spot in town, it is your duty to saddle up to the bar for some communal raw-fish eating. And like any true sushi bar worth its weight, the chefs know your name by the third visit. *Cypress Trace Shopping Center, Ft. Myers, 239/482-2126.*

**OSTERIA DEL FARO:** *Ethereal Italian.* This elegant little place would be a treat anywhere, but the fact that it is in Bonita Springs is especially noteworthy. Schooled in the principles of true Italian cooking, Vito Mariano is turning out culinary exotica for those fortunate enough to find this romantic hideaway. Lavish, intricate dishes abound. The smart turn is to set aside the menu and ask the chef what you'll be having. It will be a creative, sumptuous affair. The perfectly turned spinach crepes filled with fresh ricotta cheese and paired with both a fresh béchamel and marinara is one of the best dishes in recent memory. Simple, yet exquisite. 4271 Bonita Beach Road, Bonita Springs, 239/404-5618.

**RC OTTERS:** *Otterly Beach American.* The menu may be daunting, with over 115 choices not counting breakfast, but look at it this way: It's got something for just about everyone. Open from early morning 'til late evening and there's music outside more often than not. The menu doubles as the island's Sunday comic section. Micro-brewed beer on tap includes a nicely malted Island Tan. Interesting twists on a Caesar salad with house-cured salmon, blackened scallops, etc. 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.

**RIVIERA:** *Northern Meditalian.* This has all the trappings of a great romantic restaurant—twinkling lights, Old World warmth, and contently suave owner/maitre d'. Mix in the sensual notes coming from the piano and you may feel tempted to skip dinner and head back to the



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15660 San Carlos Blvd., Ft. Myers, FL 33908

room. But then you'd have missed out on an array of interesting Mediterranean/Italian specialties. Langoustine, sea scallops, and shrimp poached and drizzled with truffle oil; ravioli plump with artichoke; hazelnut-crusted yellowfin tuna with asparagus, artichoke, citrus filets, and polenta; venison filets roasted with braised pears, chestnut puree, honey porto jus, and juniper berries. 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. Vibrant room with an open kitchen that seems to operate with the mute button on. 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 the 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.

**THE SANIBEL CAFÉ: Home-style Cooking.** Ken Boyce is a stickler for consistency, and for the better part of seventeen years, he's kept things the same. With family recipes from generations gone by, they turn out good old-fashioned breakfast, lunch, and dinner fare. Celebrity sandwiches include The Snooty Fox and The Rusty Pelican. All the beef is Certified Angus. Eggs Benedict and tasty waffles are available anytime. And Ken will probably be manning the grill. 2007 Periwinkle Way, Sanibel, 239/472-5323.

**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 every athlete, celebrity, and star our country has to offer. This makes for an interesting bend on the old sports-bar-as-worship-hall theme we so often see. Much-better-than-typical pub fare, seasoned bartenders, and the often-sought, seldom-found neighborhood-bar feel explain the popularity of this spot. The baby-back ribs and Crunchy Grouper are worthwhile before, during, or after the game. 703 Tarpon Bay Road, Sanibel, 239/472-HIKE.

**THE SANIBEL STEAKHOUSE: Steak House.** A true beef connoisseur knows there is more to life than the filet mignon. Here, the porterhouse or 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. The food at the three Sanibel Steakhouses is true to course, but each restaurant has its own ambience. On the island it's intimate, cozy, and charming. In Ft. Myers, the feel is the men's club charm of the



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traditional steak house. In Bonita, you're surrounded by architectural splendor, truly one of the most beautiful rooms around. 1473 Periwinkle Way, Sanibel, 239/472-5700; 13401 Summerlin Blvd., Ft. Myers, 239/437-8325; 24041 S. Tamiami Trail, Bonita Springs, 239/390-0400.

**THE SEAFOOD FACTORY:** *Fish Foundry.* Given the name, you can guarantee 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. The Crab Soup is a staple that deserves consideration as you make your way through the extensive menu. The Lowcountry Supper also pays homage to the Carolinas. 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.

**SIAM HUT:** *Top Shelf Thai.* Who would figure you had to travel to Cape Coral of all places for top-flight Thai food? This charming spot, nestled into a quite forgettable strip mall, serves as a haven for fans of curries, lemongrass, and iced coffees. Kick off the meal with either the Glew Za, pan-fried dumplings filled with ground pork, ginger, and scallions; or the Naem Sode, a traditional salad of ground chicken, lime juice, peanuts, onions, and chili peppers. The curry offerings are all splendid, with the Panang a particular standout. Excellent fish, shrimp, and frog-leg selections, plus the obligatory Pad Thai. 4521 Del Prado Blvd., Cape Coral, 239/945-4247.

**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.*

**TRADER'S CAFÉ:** *Boutique Bistro.* For those who've longed to be able to order an armoire with your appetizer, an end table with your entrée, and door knocker with dessert, your prayers have been answered. Equal parts global-home-furnishing store and eclectic bistro, creative selections abound, be it furniture or food. The island menu, with its West-Indies-plantation-house atmosphere, draws influence from a variety of cuisines. The Asian BBQ Lollipop Chop with Shiitake Garlic Potatoes, and the Blue Crab Stuffed Shrimp over Rock Shrimp Risotto are two such examples. The Bonita location leans heavily on inspiration from the wood-fired oven. 1551 Periwinkle Way, Sanibel, 239/472-7242; 26501 South Tamiami Trail, Bonita Springs, 239/949-0202. —D.G.

# McT's Shrimp House & Tavern

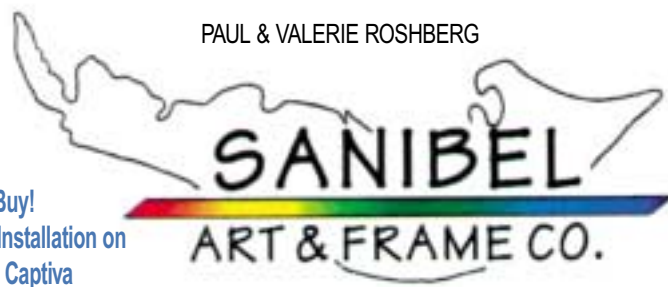
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