

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

TOTI: What local products are you including in your food?

Visco: Sapodilla fruit, which actually grows—I won't say where—on a couple of trees on the island. It's a round fruit that looks like a large kiwi with a sweet pink flesh. Tastes similar to a papaw, kind of a cross between a banana and an apple. Really, though, I use anything local I can find.

Riedener: To be honest with you, Florida doesn't offer too much in the way of vegetables. [The other chefs nod in concurrence.] It's hard to get produce here. If you want to use local, you have to look at fish and those kinds of ingredients.

O'Brien: Honestly, I've been avoiding the Florida culture, because I think there is so much of it already out there. We all source from the same places, and something that has been making me a little bit crazy is, I bring in product and on the box it says, "Florida grown," yet we can't get it direct here.

Visco: That's so true. I get something a week later and it says, "Grown in Florida," but I don't get it from Florida.

O'Brien: So I'm going mad because I'm paying fifty or sixty dollars a pound for popcorn shoots and I know they are right around the corner.

Visco: Local farmers, help us! Please, come visit us.

TOTI: Where would you like to see your place two years from now?

Visco: I'd like to see the King's Crown with a four-diamond, triple-A rating. That would be great. I'd like to make the menu a little bit more complicated, to use more exotic products that I can present in a way that is comfortable to the customer.

Riedener: Since this is my place, I would just love to keep the standard, to keep my clients. You know, this week we are booked every day and that's what I want.

TOTI: So a full house is your measure of success?

Riedener: Absolutely. If people dine here and they are delighted and happy, that's all I want. That's it. A good, busy-running place where everyone is happy; then, I'm happy.

O'Brien: Ultimately, I would like to steer the Old Captiva House, after we go through the renovations, to present a lodge-style cuisine. That's what I see there. There are so many things you can do with it. It's about comfort. You can take very unusual ingredients and still give it a rustic touch. I guess if I want to be noted for anything on this island, it's the fact that I'm bringing a new experience.

— D.G.

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. 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. 2226 First Street, Ft. Myers, 239/226-4200.*

BEACHVIEW STEAKHOUSE: *CaddyChef.* 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.*

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. 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/



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Chef's Profile: Gerard Pinault



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NAME: Gerard Pinault
TITLE: Executive Chef, La Brasserie
WEARING THE BIG HAT SINCE: 1973.
BACKGROUND: A native of La Rochelle on the west coast of France. Had restaurants in Alexandria, Virginia (La Bergerie), and Newport Beach, California (La Rochelle), before settling in Southwest Florida, where he has donned the toque since 1988.
WHAT'S YOUR HEALTH SECRET? Probably the wine. We have an old saying: "The shoemaker always wears the worst shoes." So a chef's diet is never that good. I have to watch what I eat. Not so with wine.
WHY PUT THE RESTAURANT IN THE IONA AREA? We looked at the communities nearby (Gulf Harbour, Kelly Greens) and see people coming down from Chicago, New York, and big cities. They already are

more sophisticated about food. They know what we are presenting on our menu.

WHAT'S THE FOCUS OF LA BRASSERIE? Our goal is to provide French food in a modern way at affordable prices and I believe we've done that. People still come in for the fancy items, such as foie gras, but also the hearty French fare that we prepare as daily specials.

WHO IS YOUR FAVORITE CUSTOMER? We like people who like to eat, people who really enjoy food and wine together, because food is a way of life.

WHAT FUN ITEMS ARE SELLING ON THE MENU? Frog legs and sweetbreads; customers are going back to this kind of food. Generally, I avoid having that on the menu, but make it for daily specials. A lot of good customers will call days before and ask for sweetbreads, so I make sure it is [available] when they arrive.

FOOD ITEM FATALITY: We've seen lots of chain restaurants become popular and they have their own recipes. People have developed a taste for Caesar salads that are made at these restaurants and that is not an actual Caesar salad. It's disappointing. Caesars should be fresh and flavorful.

LATEST INNOVATION: We have a large communal table that seats eighteen and we cook dinner in front of the guests. People get a kick out of it. They are interested to see how it is done and understand why it tastes like it does.

ANY SHOUT OUTS? Thanks to Jacques Pépin and Julia Child. They were the ones to promote French food.

— D.G.

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.*

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 a concept that I've seen in Southwest

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

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.*

FERNANDO'S OF MARTHA'S VINEYARD: *Northern Italian.* Word of mouth is what brings you here. Tucked behind Mid-Island Marina on the southern end of Ft. Myers Beach lies a restaurant whose food is the reason behind the full tables. The focus is on fresh, from-scratch cooking—house-made mozzarella, hand-stuffed raviolis, signature bread born in Boston and baked to order. Look hard toward the Farfalle Fernando, Fusilli Toscana, or any of the veal dishes. Should the Lobster Ravioli grace the special board that evening, consider yourself obligated. *4675 Estero Blvd., Ft. Myers Beach, 239/463-0026.*

THE ISLAND COW: *Bovine Buffet.* 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 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-col-

ored 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 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 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. *975 Rabbit Road, Sanibel Island, 239/472-8311.*

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.*

KATIE'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 inventive menu. Entrées include an adobo-style prime rib, chili rellenos, a sage-crust lollipop chop, and a Caribbean seafood stew. The Legendary Katie Kake is one of a dozen impressive

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KEYLIME BISTRO: *American Parrothead.*

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 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.

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 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. Hey, the place is clever, genuine, and purple. What more could you want? 15185 McGregor Blvd., Ft. Myers. 239/415-1050.



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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 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 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.

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.

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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 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.*

THE OLD CAPTIVA HOUSE: *Time-Honored Resort Fare.* This Old Florida jewel has fed the likes of Charles and Anne Morrow Lindbergh and Teddy Roosevelt and continues to stand the test of time. A casually elegant atmosphere with a satisfying bill of fare, the menu often showcases local gems from the sea. The Grouper in Parchment is classical luxury, the Stone Ground Mustard Glazed Lamb Chops simply opulent. Ask for a seat in the Sunset Room to enjoy the sun's daily trip out of town. *Tween Waters Inn, Captiva Island, 239/472-5161 ext. 421.*

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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 over 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.

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 may 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.

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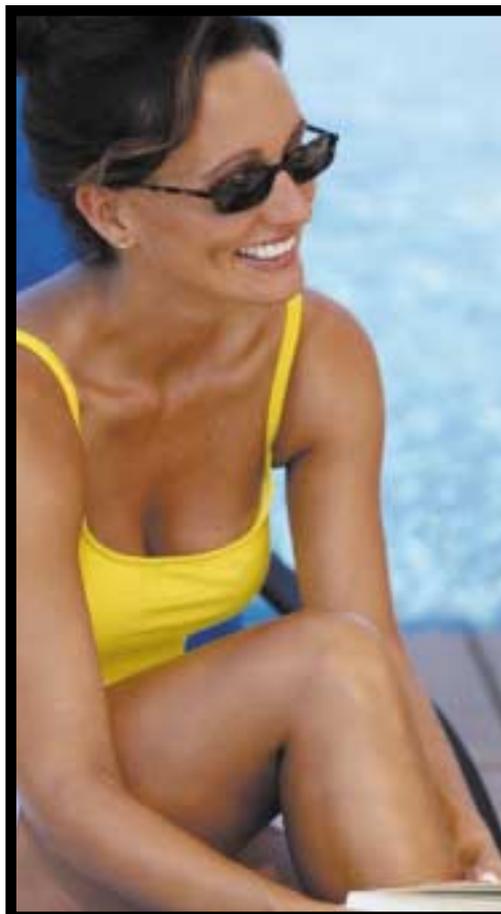


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SANIBEL GRILL: *Local Color.* Matt Asen knows all about marketing and for this venerable sports grill, he chooses to promote...himself. More precisely, over a decade of photo ops with him and just about every athlete, celebrity, and star our country 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. 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 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. Each restaurant has its own ambience. On the island it's intimate, cozy, and charming. 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. 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.

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.