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Dining review: Mantra, the new Naples Grande eatery, pretty as it is tasty



(Photo: Dorothy Edwards/Naples Daily News)

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What's better than an expertly crafted sushi roll?

One that gets more 100 "likes" on Instagram.

Mantra, the pan-Asian restaurant and bar that opened in December inside the Naples Grande Beach Resort, is just as pretty as it is tasty.

Its trendy craft cocktails and creative plating techniques are worthy of an emoji-laden Instagram post with a clever caption — #foodporn.

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Water damage from Hurricane Irma [shuttered the Naples Grande for three months](#), and [it reopened in December](#) with a re-imagined, dinner-only restaurant and lounge with contemporary chandeliers and cozy nooks of seating ideal for sipping from a glass of wine or an exotic cocktail.

You'll find the new eatery past the lobby and past the escalators to the mezzanine. There are no signs yet pointing diners in the right direction; we had to ask a staff member where to find Mantra — turns out we were already standing in it.

It's a seat-yourself kind of place, and the menus are already on the table. I expected a long wait for service. I found instead an attentive waiter with a Jamaican accent who appeared in just a few minutes to take drink orders. Impressive.

Mantra's Asian-inspired menu features edamame, chicken dumplings, banh mi sandwiches, sushi, ramen and more. It's Korean, Vietnamese, Chinese and Japanese. And all of it looks good.



The white dragon cocktail (\$14), left, and the samurai cocktail (\$15) at Mantra. (Photo: Shelby Reynolds/Naples Daily News)

Let's start with the cocktails. A sexy smooth white dragon (\$14) is a concoction of Belvedere grapefruit vodka, triple sec, simple syrup, fresh lime and sake with five fresh cranberries bobbing on top and pinkish-red sugar rimming half the glass.

The Samurai (\$15) is a looker, too, with its hazy orange layers of Suntory Whisky Toki, ginger root, simple syrup, melon bitters, fresh lime and Dragonwell Lung Ching tea. There's a speared clove of raw garlic here, too, to serve as garnish (or as a rich treat for the freakishly brave).

The Yakatori platter (\$19) ordered as an appetizer is sure to garner a few oohs and aahs, too. The skewers of soy ginger chicken, grilled shitake mushrooms and Kushi-yaki beef poked out the top of a steaming clay pot, just begging to be recorded in a Snapchat video. And the steak, wow, the steak — the cubes were deliciously tender and juicy and peppered with sesame seeds. The chicken and mushrooms were good, too, but wow, the steak.

An order of the chicken lemongrass dumplings (\$13), meanwhile, came in a traditional bamboo steamer with a side of chile sesame sauce. The dumplings, bulging with its hearty stuffing, had a snappy bite and charred edges, and I popped them into my mouth one after another.

Other dishes at Mantra were plated on a charcoal black slate, like the Bánh Mì sandwich, which we ordered with glazed salmon (other offerings include chicken-katsu, pork belly, crisp sweet potato or the "kim ch-ese burger"). A spread of sriracha aioli on the toasted baguette provided a nice spice, and a stack of Thai slaw provided a nice crunch. The fries, sprinkled with Shichimi Togarashi (a spicy Japanese seasoning blend), were creatively served in a ceramic Chinese takeout box.



A Bánh Mì sandwich with glazed salmon (\$19) at Mantra. (Photo: Greg Stanley/Naples Daily News)

The dagwood roll — with its splashy red and yellow sauces and a pile of fresh ginger shavings — was texture perfection. The crunchy tempura bits, cucumber and fresh sliced avocado, and the shrimp tempura and blackened tuna paired well. A spicy kick from the honey sriracha and chipotle mayo stays long after you're done eating, and my dining companion said she could have easily eaten another roll, if they weren't \$18 apiece.

Perhaps the prettiest of them all — the porniest of the food porn — was the build-your-own bowl, which I ordered with miso ramen noodles and soy ginger chicken (\$19). It sure did look pretty, with a roasted half-tomato, slices of pickled lemon and spicy-sweet pickled red onion slivers bobbing along there at the top. There was even a purple orchid, which everyone tells me is edible but I'm too stubborn to believe it, resting on one side of the bowl.

The soy ginger chicken was skewered and garnished with a smattering of sesame seeds. And the crème de la crème — the sous vide egg with an ooey-goey yolk center and a sprinkle of seasonings. I love them so much I ordered two for \$3 extra.



A build-your-own-bowl at Mantra, featuring miso ramen noodles with soy ginger chicken (\$19). (Photo: Shelby Reynolds/Naples Daily News)

But think of this ramen bowl as the stereotypical model — beautiful on the outside, empty on the inside.

If you had poured a can of lackluster Campbell's soup into the bowl I wouldn't have been able to tell the difference. Even the ginger soy chicken, which was so flavorful and so juicy on the Yakatori platter, was bland and tasteless in the ramen. I kept eating, though, wanting so badly to find some hidden surprise in those noodles that slurped and dripped. But there were none, and I was left dotting soy sauce into the bowl instead.

Dam you, stereotypes.

Price was an issue with many of the dishes at Mantra — \$13 for dumplings? \$19 for a sandwich? But the Korean barbecue beef tacos were the worst offenders at \$16 for three little measly ones.

Don't get me wrong, they were delicious, and maybe even my favorite thing I ordered at Mantra. The house kimchi and chipotle mayo oozed out the sides, and the barbecue beef was buttery smooth. But the three little flour tacos were gone in two minutes flat — my taste buds left feeling cheated by the price.



The Mt. Fuji Sundae (\$14) includes green tea ice cream and mango sorbet garnished with a waffle fortune cookie, boba pearls, whipped cream and candied pecans. (Photo: Shelby Reynolds/Naples Daily News)

And finally, the most Instagram-worthy dessert I've ever set my eyes on — the Mt. Fuji sundae (\$14). This mountain of green tea ice cream and mango sorbet came in the same ceramic Chinese take-out box as the fries, with a giant waffle fortune cookie, boba pearls, whipped cream and candied pecans as garnish.

And by the time my dinner party picked away at it, it looked like Mt. Fuji had been blasted, and all that was left was a decimated canyon of green and orange.

Dining at Mantra is just as much an experience as it is about sitting down for a meal or a drink. And steep prices are to be expected at a hotel of Naples Grande's stature, so really there's not much to bicker about here — service was excellent, the cocktails were creative and the food a creative expression.

But man, if only that ramen was as good as it looked.

Mantra

- **Where:** Naples Grande Beach Resort, 475 Seagate Drive
- **Hours:** 4 to 11 p.m. daily
- **Prices:** Cocktails \$13-\$15; beer and sake \$6-\$13; wine by the glass \$11-\$28; wine by the bottle \$47-\$259; green tea \$8; starters \$8-\$19; sandwiches \$16-\$19; build-your-own bowls \$17; sushi rolls \$16-\$18; sashimi \$19-\$22; dessert \$13-\$14
- **More information:** naplesgrande.com/dining/lobby-lounge
- **Forks:** 4 out of 5



Mantra's pan-Asian menu at Naples Grande Beach Resort

The Naples Grande reopens on Friday, Dec. 15, after repairs from Hurricane Irma damage was completed. Parts of the hotel are still under construction from water damage. Dorothy Edwards/Naples Daily News



Mantra's pan-Asian menu at Naples Grande Beach Resort

Chicken lemongrass dumplings (\$13) include a chile sesame sauce at Mantra. Luke Franke/Naples Daily News



Mantra's pan-Asian menu at Naples Grande Beach Resort

Mantra launched in 2017 at the Naples Grande Beach Resort in Naples. Naples Grande Beach Resort



Mantra's pan-Asian menu at Naples Grande Beach Resort

The dagwood roll (\$18) at Mantra includes shrimp tempura and blackened tuna. Nicole Raucheisen/Naples Daily News



Mantra's pan-Asian menu at Naples Grande Beach Resort

Korean barbecue beef tacos (\$16) at Mantra.
Luke Franke/Naples Daily News



Mantra's pan-Asian menu at Naples Grande Beach Resort

The Yakatori platter includes skewers of soy ginger chicken, grilled shitake mushrooms and Kushi-yaki beef over a clay pot. Shelby Reynolds/Naples Daily News