

May 24, 2018

## Once word gets out, food lovers will flock to Catch of the Pelican



Well-crafted drinks are served at the stylish lobby bar Mantra. Pictured are Mai Tai on the left, Asian Sensation on the right.

There are some great things going on at Naples Grande these days and, if you haven't been there in a while, I suggest you visit The Catch of the Pelican soon.

Both the management and chef changed this winter, and the changes are definitely for the better.

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Let's start with the complimentary valet parking, which was especially nice on a rainy night such as Saturday when we visited.

Our first stop was Mantra, the stylish lobby bar, where a friendly bartender whipped up two tasty cocktails — an Asian Sensation (\$13), a delicious blend of Hendricks gin, mango tea, sake and fresh kumquats, and a

Mai Tai (\$14), made with Wicked Dolphin rums, fresh lime, curacao and amaretto.

The bar menu boasted a tempting array of tidbits, including sushi, dumplings, shrimp tempura, banh mi, Korean barbecue beef tacos and a yakitori platter. Knowing we were headed for a large meal, we split one Naples Blue sushi roll (\$16), a stellar blend of sushi rice, blue crab, cucumber, avocado and sesame seed. Real crab in a sushi roll is a rare treat and it adds both flavor and texture that surimi can't.

It was but a short walk to the restaurant, where the management changes became clearer still. Marcus Thompson — formerly of The Turtle Club — is the food and beverage manager. It was he who greeted us at the door and showed us to our table.

Andy Philips, who studied at the Art Institute of San Diego and specializes in New American, Asian fusion and farm-to-table cuisine, is the executive chef.

It was evident early on that they know and enjoy what they are doing. The front of the house staff was also uniformly professional, welcoming and seemed to be enjoying themselves as well.



The nightly fish special was pan-seared Florida grouper over seasonal succotash. KAREN FELDMAN / FLORIDA WEEKLY

We arrived a bit early, so Mr. Thompson had time to talk with us. Upon learning that my companion ate only seafood, he headed to the kitchen to ask the chef for something to start off our meal. (No, he didn't know I was reviewing the dinner. He was just being nice.)



Fried chicken with collards and a buttermilk biscuit is a classic southern treat.

He returned with the Key West shrimp cocktail (\$16), three plump, perfectly cooked shrimp served atop cocktail sauce that had a bit of coconut milk mixed in to give it a richer, less astringent flavor. They were topped with mango relish and tangles of crunchy wakame.

A little loaf of fresh warm bread had three segments, one each of pumpernickel, whole wheat and white. Served with butter topped with a bit of salt, it was difficult to limit ourselves to a small portion.

A crab cake galette (\$17) looked as if it had two floors or had been consuming copious amounts of steroids. The thing was gigantic and was as delicious as it was large. The crab had just enough

filler to hold it together and there were flecks of red pepper and perhaps celery that gave it a slightly crunchy consistency. Wilted spinach beneath added a soft texture, microgreens on top more crunch and a grain mustard emulsion added a pleasant sharp finish.

A bowl of steamed mussels (\$15) contained more than two dozen shellfish bathed in a rich Philipino adobo broth with crisp garlic chips served with toast points for soaking up the sauce. They, too, were excellent.

Appetizer portions were so generous we could have stopped here and been satisfied. Nonetheless, we soldiered on, heading into entrees of the Florida catch – pan-seared black grouper (\$37) – and Southern fried chicken (\$26).

Not every kitchen can handle grouper, but this one can. It was thick, moist and flaky, seated on a fried green tomato and succotash, topped with a lemon verjus butter. The dish was plated beautifully and tasted as good as it looked.

The chicken consisted of two large pieces fried in bread crumbs and served with collard greens and a buttermilk biscuit. The chicken was crisp but still moist within, and the biscuit was everything it should be – tender, flaky, buttery. Only the collards disappointed – too salty perhaps, because the copious amount of pork they were cooked with might have been saltier than usual.



The crab cake galette is so large it could be a meal unto itself.



A Key lime tart is made in-house and is topped with whipped cream, fresh berries and chocolate shaped into a delicate leaf.

We wrapped things up with a well-composed Key lime tart that began with a graham crust that held a creamy filling that was neither too tart nor too sweet, topped with fresh berries, a leaf fashioned from dark chocolate, whipped cream and dollops of raspberry sauce. Despite the fact that we were full, we managed to finish every last bite.

Let me not forget to mention our very able staff, particularly our server, Curtis, who was charming, personable, well-informed about the menu and who made sure our wine and water glasses never ran dry, dishes came and went on time and our meal was pleasurable from start to finish. He was assisted by at least two other servers who were also smiling and nurturing.

Now that the winter rush is over, I urge you to try this one out. With Sizzle SWFL Restaurant Week running May 31 through June 13, the restaurant has put together a three-course, \$36 menu that is a real bargain (check it out at [swflrestaurantweek.com](http://swflrestaurantweek.com)). You can also take advantage of 50 percent off selected bottles of wine during that time.

This one's a catch indeed – and not just for pelicans. !