

DINING & SPIRITS

A Modernized Menu at Old Gasparilla Inn

by Chris Sherman

After almost 100 years, the Gasparilla Inn on Boca Grande has not lost its gentility. Its colors are daffodil yellow and crisp white trimmed with forest green, a prim village of summer/winter cottages surrounding a clapboard Greek Revival temple of dining, golf and sport fishing.



In the social season, gentlemen switch from Bermudas and crewnecks to jackets for dinner, and the halls are lined with botanical prints, floral couches, orchids and portraits of water birds.

The menu can still be familiar fare — roast beef, dinner rolls and shrimp cocktail — for those who still dine in a New Yorker cartoon; the braver will bite for hog snapper.

For even here, where old Florida (and old Kennebunkport and old Mackinac) are preserved, tastes of the discreetly rich and famous are changing — and dare we say it, modernizing. Contemporary chefs can remake a menu daily, but at old-line restaurants, they have to move gingerly and slowly to replace maitre d'-driven dining with cooking that uses local ingredients, global flavor and bright presentation. After all, the rich and famous know what carpaccio is (and the new guard has come to love foie gras).



Blue crab cake with mustard butter sauce and a celery leaf tomato salad with capers



Gasparilla Inn chef James Dyer

So one chilly fall night the inn's soup was fresh peas, with applewood bacon and spiked with a foam of piney rosemary; grilled salmon sat on a thoroughly modern succotash of fresh green fava beans, corn and haricots vert; big diver scallops went beyond scampi to luxuriate in truffled pasta and trumpet mushrooms. Next to baked Alaska, a deconstructed pina colada was more intriguing; lively coconut sorbet made in house with rummy raisins and crackling macaroons.

Indulgent and largely traditional, yet fresher produce and smarter plates thanks to the first new culinary team the inn has seen in a quarter of a century. Chef James Dyer came from the Williamsburg Inn and his colleagues hail from the Greenbriar, landmarks that have moved far forward from their fustier days.

(continued)

DINING & SPIRITS

A Modernized Menu at Old Gasparilla Inn

(continued)



'The Pink' at the Gasparilla Inn

Other subtle changes at the inn: The library room with Social Registers and old John Grisham and Ursula K. Le Guin novels now has a computer terminal and wi-fi; more stunning, the inn now accepts credit cards (how 20th century). The dining room is refitted with rattan wing chairs and palms, and service often has a friendly Jamaican lilt. This month, the new guard will host its third foodie festival.

The island has ample modern flavor and a catch of clever chefs and local fish to feed one of the nation's wealthiest ZIP codes. On that menu is the inn's second restaurant, the pubby, clubby Pink Elephant.

Known sassily as the Pink, it serves up the likes of edamame and coriander noodles; the black grouper is crusted in crunchy pumpkin seeds, and littleneck clams are tossed with bok choy, ginger and hearty winter squash and garlic.