



DINING AND CRUISING IN FLORIDA AND THE CARIBBEAN ...

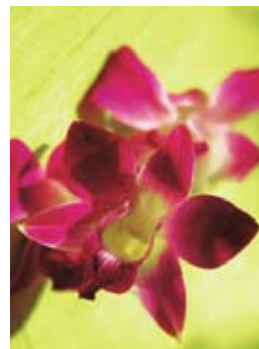
By Meeghan Truelove

You can not live by cruising alone, you need great food. So while cruising the southern waterways or even the Caribbean this winter we have found some incredible restaurants that are a must to check out. From mama's meatballs to pan seared crayfish all of our finds offer incredible food with a unique atmosphere. So enjoy!

FLORIDA

Cafe Martorano

Fort Lauderdale



In the mood for some bada-bing? Look no further. This hopping establishment is the brainchild of Steve Martorano, a Sinatra-obsessed chef who insists on doing things his way, which is good news for the rest of us. The authentic red-sauce fare and thumping party scene (Martorano DJs) draw A-listers

from up and down the coast. Chances are you'll find yourself doing a double take— Was that Dan Marino? Isn't that James Gandolfini?—while tucking into your pasta and veal. The restaurant doesn't accept reservations, so be prepared to wait, which won't be a problem as more than likely you'll be doing so cocktail in hand, bouncing along to the dance beat. There are no menus—Martorano just prepares the dishes he's in the mood for that day—but relax, you're in good hands. And do not miss the meatballs, which are always available—Mama's recipe! (954/561-2554; 3343 E. Oakland Park Blvd.; www.cafemartorano.com; Dockage: Ft. Lauderdale – Bahia Mar Yachting Center (10-15 minute taxi)

Louie's Backyard

Key West



At this restored Greek Revival building (a former sea captain's home) in the heart of funky Key West, guests eat on a palm- and vine-shrouded outdoor deck, and the effect is a bit

Swiss Family Robinson—which feels completely normal in this offbeat, storybook-like town. Louie's first opened as a restaurant more than 25 years ago, and has since grown from a 12-seat eatery to one of the island's most popular upscale restaurants, fostering lots of great talent along the way (Norman Van Aken, of Norman's in Miami and Orlando, got his start here). Of course, "upscale" in Key West is still pretty laid-back, and to that end the food is fresh and well executed without being fussy—sautéed local shrimp with bacon and stone-ground grits, roast chicken with preserved lemon, and enough conch—conch fritters, conch chowder, conch ceviche with chiles—to satisfy even the most die-hard Conch Republic devotee. After dinner, head to the lower deck to channel your inner Hemingway—looking out at the ocean, mojito in hand, contemplating Cuba just 90 miles away. (305/294-1061; 700 Waddell Avenue; www.louiesbackyard.com; Dockage: Conch Harbor Marina (5 minute taxi or 10-15 minute bicycle ride)

Thistle Lodge

Sanibel Island



A slice of old Florida, Thistle Lodge is a genteel 19th-century clapboard structure that once functioned as an inn and welcomed the likes of Thomas Edison and Harry Ford. Today it's the restaurant of the posh but relaxed Casa Ybel Resort, a 23-acre estate that sits on the ocean and feels worlds away from Sanibel's hustle and bustle. Try to book a table in one of Thistle Lodge's two gazebo-shaped wings—both have wraparound windows for knockout panoramic views of the ocean and well-kept gardens. The restaurant ages its own steaks and buys all its seafood whole, so careful attention is being paid to the ingredients before they even hit the pan. The chef—a committed globetrotter—blends local flavors, French technique, and Asian influences to create such dishes as calamari with Key lime-and-onion aioli, and fried whole snapper with cilantro and roasted garlic sauce. (239/472-9200; 2255 West Gulf Drive; www.casaybelresort.com; Dockage: Sanibel Marina (about 3-4 miles from the resort – easy bike ride or short taxi)

CARIBBEAN

Le Gaiac

St. Bart's

This establishment, named for a rare and flowering local tree, is the perfect example of French je ne sais quoi—how do they get so many details of the good life so right, gosh darn it, even when transplanted to a tiny tropical island thousands of miles away?

Tucked into the Hotel Le Toiny, a Relais & Chateaux retreat of 15 villas, the restaurant has an elegant but casual dining room with one fully open-air wall, and an outdoor patio with more tables. The view from both is of a perfect little infinity-edge pool that cascades down to the tranquil sea. The French chef turns out sophisticated food that marries haute cuisine traditions with Caribbean style-- foie gras terrine with crystallized local squash, pan-seared crayfish in an osetra caviar sauce, grilled lamb chops with mango-clove jelly—and the wine list boasts more than 300 bottles. Don't miss trying one of the fabulous desserts, such as coconut cheesecake with licorice sauce, and crepes Suzette prepared tableside, mais oui. (590-590/ 297-750; Anse de Toiny; www.hotelletoiny.com; Dockage: Port de Gustavia – 20 minute taxi ride.

La Samanna

St. Martin



Before hitting the discos and casinos of glitzy St. Martin, mosey over to La Samanna on the island's French side for a feast on the resort's chic verandah, which looks out over the sea. The grounds themselves are worth a visit—whitewashed buildings set in beautifully manicured gardens—but the food seals the deal: top-notch Gallic fare with Asian and Caribbean twists, such as seared sea scallops with mushroom risotto and kaffir-lime green curry sauce, and five-spice duck with chow mein vegetables in a sour orange reduction. (590-590/876-400; Baie Longue; www.lasamanna.com; Dockage: Simpson Bay Marina – 20 minute taxi ride.)

