

## CUISINE

# An Ode to Fine Service

Professional servers are the keys to the dining experience



Donielle Torresgrossa, Thistle Lodge



John Lawler, Sanibel Steakhouse



Lu Ann Martin, The Mucky Duck

PHOTOS BY KATHLEEN BLASE

Food service is a craft dedicated purely to the fulfillment of others. It's a job that is equal parts psychology and sales, theater and gymnastics; one requiring confidence, humility, timing, patience, and, above all else, an ability to correctly balance a small round tray while attempting to not spill beverages on the very people who will decide your financial fate that day. I present to you what is possibly the most under-appreciated job in the world: the professional food server.

The restaurant industry has long been filled with respected and honored careers. There's **the chef**, with the bright white coat, impossibly tall hat, and famously short fuse; **the sommelier**, whose appeal lies entirely in the fact that only seven people in the world actually pronounce the job title correctly; and, of course, **the maître d'**, with a "twenty-dollar" right hand and the "We may be able to fit you in this one time" sneer.

But those who know, those who care, understand that the server, above all others,

defines the dining experience. It is the server who sets the atmosphere, leads you to the perfect dish on the menu, pairs divergent plates with an appropriate wine, and subtly sets extra forks just before the dessert arrives, "just in case." Servers sense your needs, anticipate your desires, and gauge your spending habits with striking clarity. At least, good ones do. The rest—well, they bring you the food.

This, however, is not about the bad ones—the nineteen-year-olds with gum in the mouth and eye on the clock at restaurants where "everything's good" is the standard reply. They don't qualify for this club. This is a club reserved for those who realize that restaurants are about providing an important cultural experience with every meal. Restaurants are our theaters and the server is the lead character, the one who makes or breaks the show.

Donielle Torresgrossa has been in the club for some time now. Like most, she was drawn to the industry by the flexible hours that allowed for college and the fact that every day is payday. She soon realized that, in a fine-dining restaurant, class is in session every day. "It

is a continual process of learning," says Torresgrossa. "Fine dining is an art form. To learn about food and wine and then pass that on to customers, it can be quite rewarding."

Now in her fifth year at Thistle Lodge on Sanibel, Torresgrossa has mastered the two most important skills a professional server needs: to read people and to multitask. "You're dealing with stress that the customers are typically unaware of and you have to function every night," she says. "But you do that without thinking about it and focus on reading people."

"Some want to be led, while others are adamant that they are in charge," she continues. "If they ask questions, then they are interested in what you have to say. Now you can teach people about different products. That's when it becomes rewarding."

A number of servers on Sanibel and Captiva belong in the club of distinguished professionals. Such as John Lawler, who's been serving on the islands for twenty-one years. For the past five years or so, he has been a member of the exemplary staff at Sanibel

By David Grant

Steakhouse's island location.

"In a place where the food is good, it just makes the job so much easier, and when people are happy, when they're having good food, good service, it makes it enjoyable," he says.

Lawler knows that dinner is more than a full water glass, a chilled salad plate, and extra butter for the bread. Dinner is a ball game where both teams win, a two-hour checkout from work, the kids, and the mortgage that you missed refinancing.

"Atmosphere, food, and service—they're all important," Lawler says, but making sure customers are happy is the key. "It just makes you feel good that they had a great time, it was well worth the money spent, and that they're going to return."

This club of professionals, though elite, is not elitist. It is not a membership open only to those who perform their duties amid white linen, valet parking, and high-dollar checks. The club welcomes any who can pass the test.

LuAnn Martin not only passed the test, she helped rewrite some of the chapters. As one of the chief servers/performers/antagonists for almost twenty years at The Mucky Duck on Captiva, Martin has helped coordinate the mayhem and fun that has made the restaurant famous. She is testament to the fact that a great server creates an experience for customers that is memorable. "We all joke around. We squirt people with fake ketchup and fake mustard," she says. And if customers don't take it in the right spirit, "that just makes you pick on them more," she adds, laughing.

"You have to make it fun," she explains. "You usually can pick out somebody who's maybe a little grumpy and you can just pick on them and make them have a good time, then everybody has fun."

And that is what it is all about—something special, a treat that has you thinking about how soon you can come back, all thanks to your server. He talked you out of the day's troubles and into the best filet you've ever had. She brought out two hunks of pizza dough that had your kids playing (quietly!) so you could actually enjoy a meal. He took two minutes of profanity-laden abuse from the chef just so you could have that sauce you liked last time you were in. And you didn't even know it.

Next time you visit, be sure to thank them. And after they have delivered yet another virtuoso performance that has left you grateful for the existence of this restaurant, tip them well.

They gave you the best part of your day. The chef just helped them out. 🍴

*David Grant is the cuisine editor of Times of the Islands.*

# Treat Your Taste Buds

*Here is a sampling of what Southwest Florida is serving up. An expanded bill of fare is available under Epicurious, page 70.*



PHOTOS BY RHONDA MANDEL

**BLUSUSHI:** *CobaltCool*. Hip. Trendy. Ft. Myers fashion-magnet. Does it really matter that this place serves the absolute best sushi in the area? Once you gaze into the beautiful and all-apparently-available crowd, while holding your exquisitely chilled Martini du Jour in an ultra-fashionable, blue-stemmed glass, fish is the last thing on your mind. But then you would be missing out on some seriously creative food. Start with, well...start with whatever the chefs decide to send you. In fact, set down the menu and tell the chefs to just bring it. In their hands, you cannot possibly go wrong. Next, order a nice bottle of chilled sake (think dry white wine), kick back, and enjoy the show. Between the sushi slicing and the power flirting, you might never want to leave. 13451 McGregor Blvd., Ft. Myers, 239/489-1500.



## PARROT KEY CARIBBEAN GRILL:

*Tropical Marinaville.*

Everything tastes better when it's served with boats, sunshine, and a little local color, and this waterside haven delivers plenty of all. A breezy, colorful setting begs for fruity cocktails and food with a tropical touch. The Mussels Martinique presents an interesting palate contrast with coconut milk, chipotle, and ancho chiles finding common ground around those succulent sea morsels. A full selection of fresh seafood with Caribbean touches highlights a diverse menu. But those not in the fish mood should be more than pleased with the interesting straw-

berry-kiwi-mango barbecued baby-back ribs, or a filet mignon presented *au poivre* rubbed in chipotle peppers and finished in a brandy-mango demiglace. All in all, a festive tropical feet-on-the-dock getaway. 2500 Main Street, Ft. Myers Beach, 239/463-3257



## Profile: Rich Hermansen, Proprietor, Sanibel Produce



PHOTO BY KATHLEEN BLASE

**Times of the Islands:** A produce market on Sanibel. How did that happen?

**Rich Hermansen:** I was cooking dinner for some friends one night and had gone to Ft. Myers Beach for seafood, Publix for dry goods, and got back on the island and realized I had forgotten to stop for produce. I thought, Why can't I find some good produce on this island? Hey, wait a minute!

**TOTI:** And now you are the produce man?

**RH:** It's fast-paced, lots of action, like a restaurant. It can get exciting. The verbal

response has been that this was much needed for years. We give them the convenience of having a quality product on Periwinkle [Way], rather than leaving the island.

**TOTI:** How do you compete with the grocery chains?

**RH:** We don't have to buy mass quantities of everything regardless of the quality. I can open up a box and say yes or no. Hand-selecting product is like going into the field. Like a chef runs specials, I run specials when I see something truly special.

**TOTI:** What should we be on the lookout for now?

**RH:** Citrus season begins in October. We pile it high and let it fly. You can certainly find something you want.

**TOTI:** What veggies get no respect?

**RH:** Eggplant, locally grown green beans, and Florida avocados. It is a complete myth that the California Haas avocados are better. Once you enjoy the homegrown avocados, you'll never go back. They are half the fat with all of the flavor.

**TOTI:** How often should people shop for produce?

**RH:** Shopping on a one- or two-day sched-

ule is a good idea because it keeps you healthier. It is a Continental style of diet. You can hand-select and plan meals that day. Everything you eat will be fresh and perfect.

**TOTI:** What is the bottom line on produce?

**RH:** The quality is everything. A tomato should taste like a tomato; if it doesn't, then the recipe cannot taste the way it is supposed to. You could be the best chef in the world, but poor tomatoes will change that perception in a hurry.

**TOTI:** And your tomatoes?

**RH:** Mine are the best. Right now, we are getting them from South Carolina. But the key is, always, how do they taste. Sometimes finding them is scarce and I have to turn away some of my wholesale customers just so the people who walk through the front door can have them.

**TOTI:** Sounds like work.

**RH:** Wheeling and dealing on wholesale can be something. When you go to a warehouse and come back with something spectacular, that's where the satisfaction is. When something looks so good on the shelves that you can't keep it in stock, that's satisfying.

— David Grant

**GRAND OPENING**

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