

by Michael E. Swann



Michael Swann shares his insight into dining out.

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Finding the Perfect Restaurant

When in search of the perfect restaurant, whether it's a place you visit for a special occasion, a monthly outing, or just an opportunity to relax and enjoy the energy of an exceptional dining experience, where do you go and what do you look for?

Following are some of the things I consider when selecting a restaurant; I

hope it will enhance your dining-out experiences by gaining some insight into what a chef looks for.

I don't generally go to the most popular or newest establishment. I prefer a restaurant that has been open for at least six months, enough time to work out the kinks and give it a fair chance to show me how it really operates. I also listen to friends' and

colleagues' opinions. The most successful restaurants have strong word-of-mouth advertising.

First impressions start with the reservation, if one is necessary. Does the individual taking the reservation show respect? This is likely to tell you a lot about the experience you will have. If the reservationist takes your name and phone number

so your reservation can be confirmed, you know the restaurant is in demand and the dining room will not be overbooked, which can create problems in the kitchen. In my opinion, overbooking is the reason most popular restaurants fail.

Most important is the first impression of the restaurant, which can set the stage for the entire evening. Was valet parking easy? Was there a wait to be seated, and if so, were you treated well? To me, waiting isn't a bad thing. I like to be seated in the lounge so I have ample time to feel the energy of the room, the dynamics that make this restaurant what it is and how it ties in with the cuisine. A brief wait gives me time to scope out whether the stations at the bar are clean, how the lighting is, and

Norman's attracts South Beach celebrities and clientele such as Sylvester Stallone, Madonna, and, on the evening I was there, members of the Rolling Stones.

Once seated, a server should approach the table within fifteen to thirty seconds and ask for a beverage order. Menus should be placed before the drink order is taken. So should the bread.

Bread service is extremely important as a first impression of the meal, so it had better be good. Bread must be fresh, tasty, and there must be some variety, such as two types of bread, or one type with two choices of butter. My favorite is one large lavosh-style flat bread and one or two others—French or Italian crusty bread, specialty sourdough, or calamata-olive.

ten one. A large menu creates challenges with maintaining fresh inventory.

Presentation is another very important point. I don't think architecture is necessary on a plate, so heights do not impress me: a serving is generally difficult to eat and overgarnished when it's too tall. I look at color, freshness, and shapes. I don't consider sauce a component, but a complementary garnish. Fresh herbs used to be popular for garnish, but they should not be used unless they can be consumed with the dish.

Flavor profile is the final frontier. If the chef buys quality ingredients, the natural flavor will not be covered up with too many herbs and spices. Temperature is something else I pay close attention to. If I order soup, I want it to practically burn my

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other points. The cleanliness of the restrooms, for example, gives you a sense of how clean the back of the house is. Do the servers have neat, crisp uniforms and a good attitude? You can learn a lot about the attitude in a restaurant when sitting at the bar where the servers order drinks for their tables, because they tend to speak their minds.

One example would be Norman's in Coral Gables, Florida. When walking into that restaurant, you know the meal will be delicious. The restaurant's energy is reflected in its ambience. There is a wood-burning stove, the aromatic smell of garlic and rosemary roasting, and even ducks hanging on the wall. The bar is small enough to be a neighborhood bar, but has a nice mix of professionals and vacationers. The bartender is majestic and practically guesses the drink you are going to order before you give him your request. The dining room is immaculate, the tables are draped with crisp, white linen, and the flatware and glassware are in perfect dimensions on the tabletops, complemented by orchids in bud vases. There is a reason

Once the bread is served and the beverages are delivered, the server should take the time to review menu items or specials of the day. I always ask what the server recommends, and if he tells me the three most expensive items, I realize I do not have a sincere server, just one who wants a big tip.

The server must be knowledgeable about the menu and explain the specials properly. I always choose a dish highly recommended by a great server or sometimes tell the server to have the chef prepare what he thinks is best. The server should be viewed as a partner with the chef in delivering the best possible experience. A good server is one who has concrete understanding of the menu, the ingredients, and the cooking style, which shows management has invested time to train the staff properly and has a commitment to quality food and service.

Menu size is not as important to me as one that reflects seasonality and variety of dishes, hot or cold, mirroring the concept of the restaurant. A menu with five to seven appetizers, two soups, three salads, and twelve entrées makes for a well-writ-

mouth. If I order sushi or carpaccio, I want it to be very cold; same for salads and other cold foods. This is particularly important from a food-safety standpoint and because optimum flavor is obtained at thirty-six degrees.

Delivery of espresso, cappuccino, or other coffees should be offered immediately after the dishes have been cleared, then presentation of the dessert menu. I like to see the following variety on a dessert menu: one cheese, one fruit, one to two chocolate, one custard, and one with nuts. Ice cream or sorbet is always great. After-dinner cordials are also a nice touch and might be a good alternative to dessert. Many restaurants now offer another touch, a *friandise*, such as a truffle or fruit dipped in chocolate.

Hopefully my experience and suggestions will give you an idea of what a chef looks for when dining out and help in your search for the perfect dining experience.

Bon appétit! 🍴

Michael E. Swann is resort executive chef for South Seas Resort on Captiva.

Dly the waters of Southwest Florida and you're bound to hear a good fish story. How about the one where eating fish, or fish-oil capsules, will reduce your risk of heart disease? Or your chances of Alzheimer's disease? Or ease your arthritis?

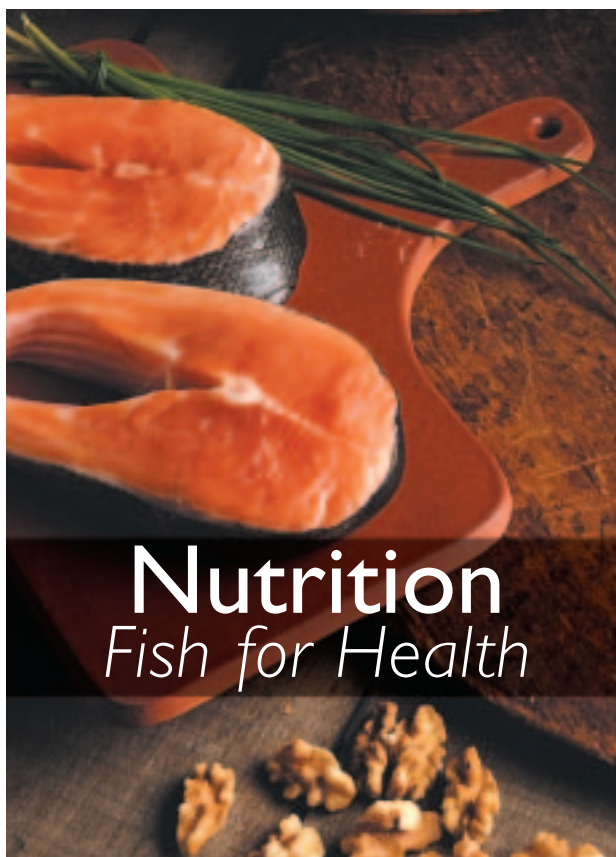
The fish stories started in the 1970s, when a study of Greenland Eskimos, whose diets are rich in fish, revealed they had a decreased incidence of atherosclerosis, coronary artery disease, and heart attacks.

Other studies followed, with the beneficial effects appearing to result from omega-3 fatty acids, the polyunsaturated oils found in fish. The fatty acid all-stars are eicosapentanoic acid (EPA) and docosahexanoic acid (DHA).

Studies have examined the relationship between fish oil and a number of medical conditions. Positive results have been shown in the effects on heart disease by lowering high triglycerides, decreasing the buildup of plaques in arteries (which leads to artery narrowing and heart attack), making blood less likely to clot (decreasing risk of heart attack and stroke), and lowering blood pressure. DHA has also been found as crucial to fetal and infant brain development, especially during the third trimester.

EPA and DHA can decrease the painful inflammation of rheumatoid arthritis and other inflammatory diseases such as ulcerative colitis and psoriasis. More recent studies show promise in preventing or lessening the severity of depression and dementia, including Alzheimer's disease, and there may be a relationship between a high intake of omega-3s and a decreased risk of breast, prostate, and colon cancers.

What are the best sources of omega-3 fatty acids? The fatty fishes—salmon, mackerel, herring, and tuna, for example—though most fish, and even shrimp, contain these beneficial fatty acids to some degree. The intake of environmental contaminants found



in fish, such as mercury, can be reduced by removing fat or skin before cooking. One gram of fish oil, the amount usually found in approximately three ounces of salmon, is generally recommended per day.

There is a catch to getting omega-3s from fish. It is important to avoid commercially prepared fish that is frozen or fried, as these are low in omega-3s and high in trans fatty acids. Trans fatty acids, from any source in the diet, tend to increase inflammation and negate the beneficial effects of the omega-3s. Instead, choose fish that is fresh and has been grilled, broiled, poached, or sautéed.

Supplementing with fish-oil capsules has become very popular, but how much is safe? Depending on the brand of fish oil, it may be necessary to take up to three one-gram capsules daily in order to get the recommended one gram per day of beneficial EPA and DHA. Up to three grams per day is generally recognized as safe by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration. Mercury contamination is practically eliminated in the refined and concentrated omega-3 fatty acids found in supplements.

The most common side effect of fish-oil supplements is burping or an unpleasant aftertaste, and is more noticeable to some than others. There are flavored supplements available, such as lemon and strawberry, that can make the aftertaste more tolerable, and taking the supplements with meals can reduce the effect. Omega-3 fatty acids also "thin the blood," increasing one's tendency to bleed. It is very important to notify your physician that you are using them, particularly if you already are taking a blood-thinner or planning to have surgery.

Flaxseed and walnut oil also supply an abundance of omega-3s from alpha-linoleic acid, and are usually preferred by strict vegetarians. The efficiency of the metabolic conversion of alpha-linoleic acid to EPA and DHA may not be as beneficial, though, as the direct intake of fish oils.

For more information on flax oil, visit the Flax Council of Canada Web site at www.flaxcouncil.ca. For questions or concerns about fish nutrition or safe seafood handling, go to the FDA site, www.cfsan.fda.gov. This Web site also offers information on the mercury content of fish and on how to choose fish that is fresh.

Consult your physician or registered dietitian if you are considering supplementing with fish oils or flaxseed, and be sure to inform them if it's something that you are already doing. Because it's always good to get your nutrients from food first, increase the amount of fish that you eat to three times a week, taking advantage of the local bounty and fabulous restaurants. 🐟

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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 86.



PHOTO BY REN GONCALVES

At Ellington's, chef Amy Visco delivers such compositions as coconut grouper with carrots and string beans, accompanied by a ginger-mango chutney and sweet mashed potatoes.

ELLINGTON'S. *Jazzalicious.* The atmosphere is dark and cool and relatively hip at this Sanibel jazz bar/top-flight food find. The menu, under the supervision of dynamo chef Amy Visco, is inventive and melodious with unique twists on old standards such as chilled shrimp and crab cakes made with lobster and a delicious rum-vanilla sauce. The rest of the menu incorporates lots of sea fare with a wide range of flavor notes from any- and everywhere. Live jazz is performed nightly and the setting, which is presided over by the stage, is excellent for enjoying great music over an expertly prepared meal. 937 East Gulf Drive, Sanibel, 239/472-0494

TP HOOLIHAN'S: *Gaelic Gastronomic Delight.* In general, North Ft. Myers does not rate high on any list of dining destinations, but should your cravings run green (Irish, that is) then head north to this Marinatown pub. The atmosphere rings of Ireland—cozy, wooden setting, more-than-friendly crowd, and a broad palette of fast-flowing beers, which probably helps to explain the crowd. The food is good enough for you to consider giving “Irish” its own cuisine category. The portions are abundant and generally hearty, so take an appetite. A Guinness Beef Crostini drizzled with a Bleu Cheese Sauce makes for a good starter while you decide between a tasty, fall-off-the-bone lamb shank, the uniquely presented lobster dubbed the “Dublin Lawyer,” or any of the various stews and potpies that the Celts are known for. The menu is surprisingly broad, well executed, and well complemented by a diverse selection of ales and lagers, as would be expected. All in all, a festive and fine pub. 3448-B Marinatown Lane, North Ft. Myers, 239/997-1515