

Herald-Tribune

ENTERTAINMENT

Restaurant review: Best things to eat in Sarasota-Manatee: July 28-Aug. 3

t items at Ringling Grillroom, Dry Dock Waterfront Grill, 1592 Wood Fired Kitchen ' Old Salty Dog on City Island.

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Summer has always been the slowest time for restaurants in Southwest Florida. But not this year. After spending far too many months anxious and cooped up, folks are vaccinated and dining out, with restaurants and bars buzzing across Sarasota and Bradenton.

And I love it. Love seeing life returning to normal. Even if that new normal occasionally means waiting for a table at lunch – even in July or August.

For the second installment of my recently launched "Best Things to Eat" column, I visited a couple of Sarasota restaurant icons that opened in the 1980s, as well as a pair of places that began welcoming guests during the past year or so, which could not have been easy during the height of the pandemic and lockdown.

Let's begin with one of the biggest restaurant openings of last year.

Restaurant review: Best things to eat in Sarasota-Manatee: June 24-30

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Ringling Grillroom for grilled snapper, crispy chicken and tiramisu

Opened last October, The Ringling Grillroom occupies a chic, sun-washed space with additional covered outdoor seating in the John M. McKay Visitors Pavilion. Overlooking

the gorgeous Ringling Museum grounds, it's a great location. It's the kind of place that could probably do just fine serving tourists some very mediocre cuisine. Fortunately, that's not at all what they're doing at The Ringling Grillroom. During a visit earlier this month the restaurant specializing in the ubiquitous "Modern American fare" impressed from start to finish, beginning with a couple of expertly prepared cocktails.

Sipping on a Grapefruit Rickey made with the smooth pairing of American Harvest Vodka and St. Germain instead of the typical gin (\$11), and a Manhattan featuring just the right mix of High West Double Rye, vermouth and bitters topped by the always welcome Luxardo cherry (\$12), my wife and I started with an outstanding opening salvo of daily specials: flatbread covered by the timeless pairing of arugula and prosciutto with balsamic reduction, and a bowl of creamy chicken enchilada soup with tender meat, a nice kick to the broth and topped with tasty house-made tortilla chips (\$12.95). I also recommend the side Caesar salad (\$6) featuring a smart, relatively lean dressing and chopped eggs, as well as the side G-Room salad (\$6) that contains a healthy helping of radish, carrot, Granny Smith apple, celery, spiced toasted seeds and feta covered with a sweet, refreshing herb dressing.

The star of the show, though, was the seared Florida snapper (\$32). A nicely cooked piece of fish, each bite teemed with flavor thanks to the accompanying couscous dressed with a spot-on mix of baby kale, dried cherry, toasted almond, and a terrifically tangy and savory red wine reduction. In fact, I found myself also dipping a few of our fresh asparagus spears (we ordered the daily veggie special, too) into that reduction and perhaps secretly wishing I also had fries to dip. Truth be told, every single time I come across a really good reduction, glaze, aioli, beurre blanc, or, you, know, *whatever-you-wish-to-christen-your-fancy-dipping-sauce*, my mind almost instantly starts looking around the table for fries.

Also, consider JR'S Crispy Chicken (\$18). The tender and, yes, crispy thigh and leg are served with whipped mashed potatoes for a classic comfort food combo. One that comes with blistered grape tomatoes, fresh green beans and a creamy lemon-thyme glaze. And yes, that glaze was indeed dip worthy. In fact, if you get down to it, sauces and salad dressings and such really make or break a restaurant – richly enhancing a perfectly prepared piece of meat and perhaps even salvaging an overcooked blunder. Ringling Grillroom makes top-shelf sauces.

Dessert? Sure. We had a slice of tiramisu (\$8) that offered six layers of ladyfingers, coffee, sugar, airy-soft cream cheese and cocoa-flavored goodness that capped a marathon evening of rewarding cuisine.

The Ringling Grillroom is in the Ringling Museum at 5401 Bay Shore Road, Sarasota. For more information, call 941-360-7390 or visit theringlinggrillroom.com

Dry Dock for blackened grouper, citrus grouper entree and bacon scallops

I first declared my love for Dry Dock's grouper sandwich, publicly at least, with a column in 2015. "The grouper sandwich, which we had blackened, did not disappoint," I wrote. "In fact, Dry Dock might just serve the best grouper sandwich in Southwest Florida. Seriously, think about that the next time you are entertaining out-of-towners."

So, yeah, about eight months after my review ran, Dry Dock was sold. Gecko's Hospitality Group bought the waterfront gem on Longboat Key, which overlooks Sarasota Bay, from longtime owners Eric and Cindy Hammersand. Luckily, new owners Mike Quillen and Mike Gowan have done very little to change the local landmark that opened in 1989.

On a recent Saturday, while seated at an outdoor covered table with a fan overhead and a bright, wide view of the beautiful blue water and matching sky – and an adorable grey pelican busy finding his own fresh catch – we sipped on a pint of the delicious Blood Orange Lager collaboration Dry Dock did with local brewery Big Top (\$7). We knew we were going to be ordering grouper but, first, an appetizer. And we went with the most decadent item on the menu: bacon-wrapped scallops (\$18). Totally worth it. The sweet, tender mollusk meat encased in crispy slices of salty pork lay in a pool of maple syrup. Yeah, those little flavor grenades were consumed at such a speed I think we might have startled a nearby couple.

OK. So, you know I gotta order a grouper sandwich because that's what you do when you're sitting waterside at Dry Dock. Our server, David, who was exceptional, recommended getting the grouper sandwich (\$21) blackened with a side of their sweet chili sauce (at no upcharge) that the restaurant serves with their grouper bites (\$17). Expectations sky high, that grouper sandwich was fresh and tasty and perfectly flaky, with a blackening that amplified without overpowering the fish. Oh, and that, sweet chili sauce is sublime, with a couple of bun bites getting a dip as well as, yes, a few fries.

Now that we've established the superiority of Dry Dock's grouper sandwich, what next? Stick with grouper but get the entree. But not just the grilled, blackened or fried options, which I'm sure are all excellent ways to enjoy Florida's most famous fish. No, go with the Citrus Grouper entree (\$33), which I finally experienced for the first time on our recent visit. And,

yeah, what a treat. The fillet is lightly breaded and sauteed, locking in all that juicy grouper goodness, with a citrus cream sauce that lovingly recalls liquified Key lime pie. Served with a side of red potatoes and fresh veggies, it's my new favorite way to enjoy grouper.

Dry Dock Waterfront Grill is at 412 Gulf Of Mexico Drive, Longboat Key. For more information, call 941-383-0102 or visit drydockwaterfrontgrill.com.

1592 Wood Fired Kitchen for Greek salad with grilled octopus, saganaki and salmon gravlax at

When Avli Mess Hall replaced El Greco Cafe about two years ago it came as a bit of a shock to folks since El Greco had been serving Greek classics in the heart of downtown Sarasota since 1989. Then, about a year later, in the middle of the pandemic, Avli Mess Hall had to rebrand as 1592 Wood Fired Kitchen & Cocktails due to a trademark issue.

During a recent weekday evening visit, though, all seemed to be going well as we dined al fresco and under cover while watching cars navigate the roundabout at Main Street and Orange Avenue in a light rain. Still serving traditional Greek dishes but with a decidedly more modern flair, 1592 offers a lengthy list of shareables, which for us is the most enjoyable way to dine.

Standouts include the saganaki staple of flaming fried cheese (\$12) as well as an even more spectacular salmon gravlax (\$11). The cured fish is complemented by the restaurant's splendid Greek yogurt, cucumber, dill and pickled onions with bright red balls of masago on top.

To many people, a "Greek salad" is built upon a bed of lettuce. Not so with traditional horiatiki "Greek salad," which is a centerpiece of the menu at 1592. It's abig ol' bowl of chunky cucumber, tomato, onion and green peppers with kalamata olives and slabs of feta with a subtle oregano dressing (\$14). The fresh veggies and cheese pair well with the wood fire-grilled chicken breast (\$8) and even better with the grilled octopus (\$15), which came out nice and tender, the smokey accents making for one of my more notable molluscs dining experiences of recent memory.

Salty Dog at Old Salty Dog on City Island

Few things are more satisfying than an ice-cold beer and a quality hot dog, regardless if it's at the ballgame, backyard or, well, wherever. My favorite beer and hotdog hangout, though, has got to be Old Salty Dog. Preferably the locally owned chain's City Island location, which puts you right by the docks overlooking the picturesque waters of New Pass.

We stopped by on a recent Saturday afternoon, ordered a couple bottles of cold beer and were promptly met with the restaurant's Salty Dog (\$8.99). It's a quarter-pounder made by Geier's Sausage Kitchen, which like the restaurant that got its start on Siesta Key is a Sarasota institution dating back more than 30 years. Tasty on its own, the signature version is dipped in batter and fried to a golden brown just like a very well-made piece of cod to go in the fish 'n' chips. The Salty Dog is excellent with just some white onions, relish and good ol', yellow mustard, *but* there is another option.

At least once in your life every Sarasotan must try The Fully Loaded Salty Dog (\$13.99), just like the one Adam Richman happily devoured during a great episode of “Man v. Food.” It had been five years since I had attempted to finish the quarter-pound, deep fried hot dog topped with generous slices of bacon, sauerkraut, grilled onion and mushrooms, American, cheddar, pepperjack and Swiss cheese. I didn't come close to finishing that beast – but it sure was fun trying!

Old Salty Dog is at 1601 Ken Thompson Parkway on City Island in Sarasota. For more information, call 941-388-4311 or visit theoldsaltydog.com/city-island.

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