

Latitude 26 has better food than ambience hints



We've been to many dining spots with elegant ambience and impeccable service that served disappointing food. The new Hyatt House on the Gordon River in Naples has it all turned around: The food was delicious; trying to enjoy an evening there took more work than I really want to do again for a \$29 fish entree.

The first problem is finding the restaurant. Latitude 26 seems to have been created after the fact, and, unfortunately, the hotel treats it as though it doesn't expect people to eat there. When we got off the elevator from the parking garage on what was the ground floor, we couldn't even find a sign to the lobby, let alone Latitude 26. It's cleverly disguised as the "concourse," and is down the long hallway to the left.

We walked right by Latitude 26, thinking it was the bar and that dining must be close by. The airy room is totally high-top tables and an impressive U-shaped glass bar with more stools, brightly lighted, with a school of sculptured marlin swimming along one wall and three 62-inch TVs fixing their glass gaze on the space (but with the sound blessedly off). If we were going to dine inside, it would be at a high-top, from which my feet dangle uncomfortably. They're the bane of a 5-foot-2 diner's existence.

The only indoor alternatives were the bar, which had a step against it to use as a foot rest, or the several sofa seat tables, all just large enough to hold drinks and one plate of appetizers.

The outside would be a wonderful spot on a moderate evening, with its array of tables under roof or umbrellas, but the wind was gusting so heartily it was chilly; and under the roof, the fans were whirring as though it was 101 degrees in the shade. So back we went to the bar, not a perfect alternative, either, because it opens out on a stretch of two windows that carried the zephyrs in intermittently. Frustrated employees told me they couldn't honor my request to close one of them because it was a Hyatt policy that windows remain open whenever the bar was — "And you should be here at 11 a.m. on a July day when those windows are open," one told me.

On the other side of the ledger, we were told the menu had just been revamped three weeks ago, and even our bartender was excited about it. He was quick to point out favorites, like the miso-glazed sea bass with coconut jasmine rice, baked purple carrots, orange cream and veal demi at \$31; or, for the lighter appetite, the mahi-mahi reuben on marbled rye, which came with chips, slaw or fries (\$17).

If you don't want veal in your sauce, the black grouper, my choice, is a mouth-watering, inhale-to-the-last spoonful choice (\$29). The large-flake, tender fish came atop a bed of creamy English pea risotto, topped by a brace of triple-mushroom ragout and surrounded by a piping of citrus buerre blanc. It said in no uncertain terms that Hyatt has not skimped on its food service; that grouper could easily become a new favorite, with its ever-so-slight anise touch to the risotto and its perfectly done, moist fish.



Black grouper with English pea risotto, mushroom ragout and citrus buerre blanc at Latitude 26 (Photo: Harriet Howard Heithaus)

My dining partner was equally effusive about his small plate dinner: a crunchy-crust, generously sized crabcake, perched on chorizo-and-smoked Gouda polenta and topped with shreds of lettuce frisee and

bacon crunches (\$18). What he liked especially were the three extra coronets of chipotle aoli that the diner could see as decorative or use to ramp up the crabcake heat.

Our bartender also suggested the GoChuDang chicken bites — which, for reasons unknown, has no price on the menu — with a Thai aoli, cilantro, lime, jalapenos and toasted sesame; it is marked as hot, and sounds like a spicy adventure I'd be happy to take. For those who crave grouper but without the risotto, there are grouper bites, with southern slaw, at \$18 as well. The vegetarian might look to the Margherita flatbread (\$14) or the chicken gnocchi — hold the chicken, please — with its appealing blend of roasted red peppers, red onion, cherry tomatoes and English peas in a Parmesan sauce for \$25.

Another appeal of Latitude 26 is that the kitchen is open until 10, a godsend for late diners south of the Gordon River used to seeing kitchen doors slammed by 8:30. If you want to call first, your food can be ready for you by the time you arrive after a concert. There's a full bar, and a decent wine list, although once you stray from the \$8 house chardonnay you're looking at \$11 to \$14 a glass. Craft beers are \$7. If you're looking for a dessert, Latitude 26 has an extensive list of bar drinks, including frozen, creamy ones, to answer that call.

We were just tucking into a snack of the restaurant's hefty housemade chips, which really should be on the menu with that aoli dip, when a couple waltzed in for a drink. They proceeded to watch a noisy — but just short of intelligible — five-minute skit cranked up on their tablet, laughing and enjoying it to the annoyance of everyone in the bar. What kind of rude people think this is acceptable? We would hope the Hyatt develops some sort of policy for those who are under the illusion an entire public space is their approving audience, and puts it into practice.

And that they get a lot more forgiving about closing those windows.

LATITUDE 26

Where: Hyatt House Naples, 1345 Fifth Avenue S., Naples

When: Lunch, 11 a.m.-4 p.m.; happy hour daily specials, 4-7 p.m.; and dinner, 5-10 p.m.

Prices: Soups and salads, including clam chowder and a full-meal salad with chicken and avocado, \$8-\$18; flatbreads, \$14-\$16; small plates, \$14-\$18; sandwiches, wraps and tacos, including a half-pound char-grilled black Angus cheeseburger, \$16-\$18 including fries, chips or slaw; and entrees, \$25-\$34; there's a lunch menu as well

Forks: 2 1/2 for the substandard ambience; 4 1/2 for the food



The interior of Latitude 26, from outside. It has large windows that open onto its patio. (Photo: Harriet Howard Heithaus)

Something else: Full bar; reservations for groups a good idea

And something more: We got stuck at the gate leaving the parking garage, even though we had dutifully had our ticket stamped. The machine wanted \$8 from us — after it had swallowed the ticket that proved we should be allowed free exit. Eventually, the gate reset itself to \$0.00 but still required a credit card be run through it before the gate would open. This is not Hyatt's best look.