

Dining review: Naples Coastal Kitchen brings seafood specialist to North Naples



Naples Coastal Kitchen kept the sylvan patio of Daniela's, the restaurant that preceded it on the North Trail. Everything else has been changed. In fact, you might call it a sea change.

The interior has cooled down from harvest walls and mahogany-toned furnishings to cool blue walls and spare black accoutrements. The TV surveying its cozy corner bar seems to have grown. Most important, however: The cuisine has morphed from Eastern European to American seafood.

The fragrances emanating from the kitchen now are more likely to be of garlic and butter, best friends of the mussel dishes it offers in appetizers and pasta. Don't try to resist; it's futile — and, further, a bad idea in a restaurant that does seafood so well.

Our trio tried the range of ocean fare, from the conch fritters (\$9) to its Gulf shrimp-shore dinner (\$25) and sea bass (\$35), and loved nearly every bite of everything. The restaurant's chef, Hector Hidalgo, is known for his seafood tacos, but we didn't have room to sample those and get to all the other temptations on the menu.



Sea bass miso at Naples Coastal Kitchen *(Photo: E. Raymond Heithaus/Special to the Daily News)*

First the gridlock: Should I get a personal favorite, Gulf shrimp and grits (\$23), that whirled andouille sausage, mushrooms, caramelized onions and scallions into the blend with the two named items? Or the captain's platter (\$32), more of a seafood binge with its combination of jumbo Gulf shrimp, sea scallops and a 5-ounce grouper fillet?

Opting for the latter offered side choices such as cheesy grits and green beans. Many of the dinners come with two sides, which give you a chance to ease into comfort food (garlic smashed potatoes or french fries, veg medley, potato salad and more) or get urbane with cheese grits or mushroom risotto.

We preceded the dinner with conch fritters, here done with a crust firm and crunchy enough to be popped into the mouth without benefit of fork. Naples Seafood Kitchen spices up the batter with what may be sriracha, which makes its creamy sauce side more of a cooling touch. There's the unmistakable texture of conch inside, with a light filling that approaches bread pudding in texture. For three of us, five fritters disappeared in no time.

Before we even ordered, our server was there with a basket of fresh multigrain bread slices that beg for some of the generous helping of butter. It's easy to oversample, but save room for the appetizers, which include calamari, ahi tuna, jumbo lump crab cake or quesadilla (choose shrimp, scallops or steak), all \$11.



Captain's platter at Naples Coastal Kitchen (Photo: Harriet Howard Heithaus/Staff)

For the seafood-challenged, there are the flat-out sinful Coastal Kitchen Tater Kegs (\$8.50), jumbo tater tots stuffed with bacon, Wisconsin cheddar cheese and chives; there's seasoned sour cream on the side.

We couldn't risk not having room for dishes like shrimp-shore one of my dining partners chose: six jumbo Gulf shrimp, smoked andouille sausage, fresh sweet corn, red bell peppers, garlic, nuggets of red potatoes. The steamed concoction comes out in a foil wrap, which makes it the most plain-looking of the entrees, but once it's opened, that disadvantage disappears. The whole rainbow concoction is in a Creole-seasoned au jus that makes it a spice lover's treat.

My other companion had the sea bass, which he pronounced perfectly done, just to that critical moment of being flaky and juicy, before it was drizzled with a zig-sag of balsamic sauce and perched between two sides. I couldn't say the same for the grouper component of my captain's platter, which had been grilled to the point of being just bit tough, rather than just firm. It was still flavorful, and the juicy shrimp-topped scallops on the side were melt-in-your-mouth good: tender and light.



Conch fritters at Naples Coastal Kitchen *(Photo: Harriet Howard Heithaus/Staff)*

The dish options include blackened or fried as well. And good news for those who want the fish but are fixated on the jumbo-lump crab cakes (\$28); you can order one as an appetizer.

And a good word for the sides: A sign of the care in food here is that the green beans and red peppers are roasted or grilled to a tender-crunchy texture, neither raw nor mushy, and not oil-laden, as we've suffered through in some grilled dishes. A vegan who decides to go for sides could be happy here. And bring on those carrots, too.

Meat lovers have a choice among organic chicken marsala, New York strip and filet (\$18 to \$20).

We added two desserts to our dinners — in academic interests, of course — and quickly realized two desserts will serve four people nicely. The key lime pie (\$6), came with a graham crust so tightly packed we mistook it for a dough crust at first. It is as silky as a creme brulee; my dining partners wished it had had a little less sweetness and a little more key lime in the flavor, however.



Key lime pie (Photo: Harriet Howard Heithaus/Staff)

The chocolate molten lava cake (\$12) was an instant classic, however. It's a chocolate so dark as to be nearly black, and its bundt mound beneath a generous scoop of Häagen-Dazs vanilla ice cream crumbled into messy, but oh-so-chocolaty, little segments. It wasn't cloyingly sweet, and came artfully arranged with piped fruit sauce and berry garnishes and a dollop of true whipped cream.

The obligatory coffee — if somewhat pricey at \$3 — was fresh, hot and assertive enough that it didn't need flavor doctors of cream and sugar. And service was disciplined and friendly, with helpful offers of what customers often come in for and vigilant water refills.

Our evening at Naples Coastal Kitchen was one of the most rewarding seafood meals we've had in Naples in years. Lucky Neapolitans on the north side are within minutes of it, and even luckier, it serves lighter salads and sandwiches for the casual diner. More treats to have on your radar: Hector's famous tacos (\$14 to \$17) or the \$16 Coastal Kitchen watermelon salad, with mixed greens, blueberries, candied pecans, fresh watermelon and lightly breaded goat cheese.



Coastal Kitchen interior (Photo: Harriet Howard Heithaus/Staff)

Naples Coastal Kitchen

Where: 13500 U.S 41 N., North Naples

When: 3- 9 pm. Sundays-Thursdays; 3-10 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays

What: Appetizers, \$8-\$12; salads and sandwiches, \$4 (for a cup of soup) to \$18 for ahi tuna; entrees, \$19-\$35 (market price for lobster tails); desserts, \$6-\$12; the restaurant has a \$6-\$9 children's menu; there is a wine list and full bar service, including signature smoothie drinks such as its watermelon mojito and the Ghirardelli Chocolate Cherry Surprise, with dark cherries and Ghirardelli chocolate sauce blended with Kahlua and vodka

Information: 239-514-4414 or coastalkitchennaples.com;

Something else: The restaurant does not take reservations, but if you arrive by 6 p.m., seating options look good

Forks: 4 out of 5