

Date Night Dining: Bay House on the bayou

Pamela Fisher



Tucked away on a bayou off 41, Bay House has charmed diners for three decades with its cozy bonfire blazing in a twinkle-lit garden grove and waterfront decks over the Cocohatchee River.

We came on a Saturday night in the wake of an earsplitting storm that took out a power line up the road and left the restaurant powerless hours before opening. We were advised things might be running slow in the kitchen and decided to order the house specialty, which required no cooking — a fresh seafood tower at \$95 for two. A quarto of nicely mineral Oregon Williamette Valley Acrobat pino gris (\$15) arrived swiftly with my husband's draft Stella (\$7), accompanied by a tiny, citrusy celery soup, compliments of the chef, and yeast rolls sprinkled with sea salt and a well-chilled butter pat.

Remodeled last year, the dining room reads luxe waterfront lodge done in soft waterscape shades. It opens onto a wall of windows, and a polished wood dory hangs from the ceiling. A broad deck strewn with sunbrellas lines the waterfront. Convivial couples gathered around white linen tables in elegant grey leather chairs. At least two tables around us were celebrating wedding anniversaries and the atmosphere was peppered with celebratory laughter. There are so many things to like in this locally-owned spot — the friendly efficient servers, windows on the water and briny, fresh seafood.

Fresh from the sea lobster, crab, oysters

The seafood tower knocked us over when it arrived with a chilled lobster, crab claws, palm-sized peel and eat shrimp, blue point oysters, butter pickles, and a scrumptious seafood salad in a mason jar of lobster, crab and shrimp with a hint of tarragon served with artisan flatbread crackers. A full complement of smoky cocktail and remoulade sauce, sweet spicy mustard, lemon wedges and horseradish accompanied it. The lobster was sweet and cold, the blue point oysters were fresh and mild, not too salty, and the palate cleared by the spicy-sweet thick butter pickle chips. It made for messy eating, cracking claws and shells and sucking out the crab meat -- definitely not a white linen or good tie kind of cuisine.



Garden fireside dining at Bay House. *(Photo: Contributed)*

Nicole, our server, apprised us that the seafood is mostly local, straight from the Pine Island docks, while the coldwater lobster is fresh from New Bedford, Massachusetts.

On nights when the kitchen is up to full speed, consider the \$28, three-course special featuring appetizers of crab bisque, cheese grits, salads; a second course of tavern steak, chicken and waffles, shrimp and grits and a dessert course of gooey brown butter cake, chocolate pudding tart, a sundae or berries and ice cream. The full menu includes a range of fresh seafood to choose from, from grouper, to snapper (\$30-32), steak and lobster (market price), Nashville chicken with spaetzle (\$28) and intriguing appetizers like crispy fried oysters with bayou remoulade (\$14), lobster and lump crab potholes (\$15) or blue crab bisque with aged sherry \$10).

We finished the meal with cinnamon sugared beignets with pots of warm, dark European chocolate and brandy caramel sauce for drizzling — spectacular at \$10 and every bit as warm, doughy and yeasty as you'd hope.

Don't miss this coastal cottage on a winding, wooded lane; you'll find yourself a world away from Naples, down on the bayou.



The seafood tower. (Photo: Contributed)



The dining room on the water was newly redone in 2015 in muted, elegant colors of the waterscape and features a hand-crafted dory and other watercraft suspended from the ceiling. (Photo: Contributed)



The Bay House Restaurant in Naples.

Reservations: 9239) 591-3837

Address: 799 Walkerbilt Rd, Naples