



Blown Away by The Hurricane Grille

“With a book chock-full of recipes, all of our original artwork, a fantastic new manuscript, years of management experience, and a longing to live on something besides a limestone rock in the middle of nowhere, we decided that the time was right to move back to Panama City Beach, where we first met, and open what is now the Hurricane Grille.” ~ Sparky Thorne and Donna Seltzer, Owners of the Hurricane Grille

Upon passing through **The Hurricane Grille**’s doors, upbeat island jazz hits you and a colorful space filled with artistic décor and original artwork beckons you in. Donna Seltzer and Sparky Thorne have created a tropical enclave...every painting...every collectible has a story, from the surfboard and musical instruments that adorn the walls to the dive gear, voodoo dolls, lifesaver, washboard and the “Hippies Use Backdoor – No Exceptions” sign in the bar. Sparky’s One-Man Band is on stage nightly performing cool jazz like Dave Koz and the Rippingtons as well as original tunes from his CD, *Living on Island Time*. And it seems that cooking is just another creative medium for the couple who sell their artwork, books and music at the restaurant (available for viewing and listening at www.sparkythorne.com).

Upon my first arrival of the Hurricane Grille, over a year ago, Sparky greeted us at the door asking, “Hey folks, have you ever dined with us before?” To which we replied no, we hadn’t. “Well, we’re not your ordinary Panama City Beach restaurant,” he continued. Great...how so? “We have incredible food, but we don’t have a child’s menu, we don’t use factory food and we don’t fry anything.”

What they have done is to bring their nine years of experience living on Bonaire, a small island tucked in the Caribbean, to Panama City Beach and now serve some of the best food in all of Florida. Its menu contains distinctively Caribbean dishes with light, clean flavors. We started with a glass of wine and a couple of appetizers. (A note here: The Hurricane is one of the few places you can sample Bonterra, a smooth California chardonnay made from organically grown grapes. If you are a wine enthusiast and want to try something new, check this out!) The Bonterra beautifully accompanied our appetizers: Caribbean Chile, a rustic, savory blending of ground rib-eye and black beans with the sweet undertones of roasted red peppers — with ripe mango chunks folded in. I’ve never actually written the word ‘satiating,’ but it belongs here. And the Seafood Spread served with crackers was out of this world: a creamy concoction packed with fresh shrimp and crabmeat laden with herbs and spices.

My Grilled Grouper was devoid of the usual butter, oil or heavy emulsions. Instead, a light creamy sauce loaded with fresh tarragon accompanied the thick, juicy steak. My dining companion ordered the Blue Cheese Rib Eye, an extra-tender steak crowned with melted blue cheese served with their own steak sauce; a blend of raisins, mango, with just a touch heat from African scotch bonnet peppers. This “Caribbean Steak Sauce” is

incidentally also an excellent dipping sauce for the steamed baby carrots, a treat almost too chic for the beach. Garlic mashed potatoes completed our meals.

On a prior visit I indulged in the Stuffed Pork Loin loaded with spinach, mango, pecans and feta, drizzled with an mango demiglaze and served with mashed sweet potatoes. Talk about taste and textural sensations! The Shrimp & Scallops are divine, especially if you're in a pasta mood...sweet seafood artfully sautéed with garlic, herbs and wine atop angel hair pasta and sprinkled with aged cheeses. And I'm very partial to the blackened Tuna Steak (also served grilled), an eight ounce slab of sushi-grade Yellow fin blackened in a cast-iron skillet and served with that gorgeous tarragon sauce on a bed of tender basmati rice (what delicious rice this is—as a carb-conscious consumer I advise, “put your consciousness on hold for this meal!”).

Dinners also accompany a house salad, a simple mixture of lettuce, tomatoes, cucumbers and crisp slivered carrots, and the dressings are sumptuous and all homemade: Zesty Mediterranean, Mango Vinaigrette and Sweet Vidalia Onion. The Blue-Cheese Pecan salad is incredible...fresh romaine lettuce, butter-roasted pecans and pungent blue cheese crumbles, hand-tossed and served warm. All salads are served with fresh-baked, warm mini Italian loaves and honey butter. Desserts include the Key Lime Tart topped with whipped cream and toasted coconut, the decadent Brownie Sundae featuring chocolate three ways, and the warm Better Than Sex Cake with melting vanilla ice cream.

The Hurricane Grille recently remodeled their lounge which serves cocktails, beer, wine and after dinner liqueurs. Happy Hour is nightly from 5:00 to 7:00pm. Situated at 8100 Thomas Drive in Panama City Beach, the restaurant is open year round Tuesday thru Thursday from 5:00 to 9:00pm, and Friday & Saturday from 5:00 to 10:00pm. If a fun and festive experience is your goal for the evening, The Hurricane Grill is certainly your answer. Call 235-1938 for reservations.

October 2005

Marta Rose – *Panama City Beach Chamber of Commerce*

www.pcbeach.org