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In Seaside, Fla., Goodbye Stuffed Flounder, Hello Foie Gras

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WHEN I was growing up, we spent a few weeks every summer in Destin, Fla., in the heart of what is alternately known as the Emerald Coast and the Redneck Riviera. The state's tourism bureau prefers the first moniker to promote the powdery white sands and the clear blue-green waters of the Gulf of Mexico between Pensacola and Panama City. On the other hand, the Redneck Riviera (which also encompasses the Gulf Coast of Alabama) is the title of a country song by Tom T. Hall that includes the lyric "Nobody cares if grandma's got a tattoo."

My childhood was firmly rooted in the latter. We stayed in a motel called the Frangista Beach by an R.V. park whose denizens caught rays atop their Winnebagos and made hatbands out of Budweiser pop tops, which were in ample supply. When we weren't eating peanut butter and jelly or the crabs we caught ourselves at night, we dined in such "nice" restaurants as Captain Anderson's and the Sandflea, where the specialties were deep-fried shellfish and stuffed flounder. My parents bought whiskey at the Green Knight, which featured a giant green knight out front, and took us, on rainy days, to the Gulfarium in Fort Walton Beach.



Phil Sears for The New York Times

Phillip McDonald, chef at Onano Neighborhood Cafe in Rosemary Beach, with his fennel and black-pepper-crusted sashimi-grade tuna.



Phil Sears for The New York Times

Fish Out of Water at the WaterColor Inn offers great views and sophisticated cooking.

These days the Gulfarium is almost all that's left of the original landscape. Pretty much everything else has been plowed under to make way for high-rise condos and designer discount malls, and my own family has long since decamped 20 miles east to Seaside, the nearly 25-year-old town on Highway 30A that has been hailed as a model for the New Urbanism and served as the set for "The Truman Show." Most recently it has served as home

to well-heeled Katrina evacuees from New Orleans and the Mississippi Gulf Coast who had the good sense to head east, and who are also spread out among the many copycat developments, spawned by the success of Seaside, that cover almost the length of 30A.

Sprawl in the form of supermarkets and even a cineplex has crept in here, too, of course, and with the temporary new residents, there is more traffic than usual. But height restrictions, a state park that includes a pristine stretch of beach, and the taste level set by Seaside's architects keep the area comparatively civilized.

The local culture isn't extinct yet, but a lot of people have traded in their R.V.'s for Lexuses and mill about at wine festivals and outdoor concerts with the likes of Lance Armstrong, who came to charming Grayton Beach (one of the oldest beach communities in the Southeast) with Sheryl Crow just after winning the Tour de France, and Karl Rove, who owns a house in the 10-year-old Rosemary Beach development. Sundog Books in Seaside is excellent, and the Modica Market carries excellent Spanish and Italian olive oils, Cowgirl Creamery cheeses, and wines never seen at the Green Knight - where the best seller, as I recall, was Boone's Farm Strawberry Hill.

This is hardly an atmosphere ripe for country music lyrics (though at least one successful Nashville songwriter is a Seaside homeowner), and sometimes I miss the simplicity of our days at the Frangista. But the nostalgia invariably dissipates by lunchtime when my old P.B.&J. is replaced by a dozen Appalachicola oysters on the half shell and a grilled amberjack taco at the Hurricane Oyster Bar in Seaside or a pound of steamed sweet gulf shrimp and a slab of fresh ahi perfect for carpaccio from Goatfeathers Seafood Market in Seagrove. For dinner, I get Charles Modica to cut me one of his marvelous thick rib steaks to throw on the grill, or I venture out to one of 30A's many "nice" restaurants, where for the life of me I cannot find a single stuffed flounder.

Fish Out of Water

The most sophisticated restaurant on the road is Fish out of Water in the beachfront WaterColor Inn, part of the vast WaterColor resort that all but surrounds Seaside. On the hotel's second floor, the restaurant has great views of the gulf, and the décor features lots of blown glass and chic taupe banquettes, but the sense of dislocation is almost too much to bear when I spy Kobe beef short ribs with black truffle grits and seared foie gras with roasted pineapple and mango vanilla gastrique among the appetizers. Am I on the Gulf Coast of Florida or in the Time Warner Center? Who cares when both offerings taste as good as they do. Southerners who think grits need only butter owe it to themselves to try them with black truffles and Kobe beef jus, and the foie gras, dusted with five-spice powder, is sublime.

Captain Anderson he ain't, but the chef, Philip Krajek, is smart enough to make the most of local fare. The menu changes almost daily, though I've noticed that the foie gras is rarely absent. Other superb appetizers have included fricassee of grouper cheeks with sweet corn risotto, and tempura-battered squash blossom stuffed with jumbo lump crab in a tomato broth. One night, just as I was bemoaning the demise of my favorite produce stand, he

created a salad with the very things I would have bought there: heirloom tomatoes with field peas, sweet corn, fried okra and applewood-smoked bacon.

For the main course, I tend to stick with the fish from the waters just outside the window, be it grilled gulf pompano in a saffron vinaigrette, or black grouper in basil broth with artichokes and local potatoes. But the 13-year-old in my group was crazy about the classic filet mignon with béarnaise, and I've been tempted by the pork loin with grilled peaches, roasted fennel and aged balsamic offered frequently.



Phil Sears for The New York Times

Basmati's, opened in 1997, was the first sushi place on Route 30A.

There are soufflés cooked to order, but we loved the lavender crème brûlée with Florida orange sorbet, and "new bananas Foster," featuring rum-roasted banana, chocolate coffee streusel and caramel ice cream.

The wine list is staggering in length and scope and includes a 1999 La Tâche, some excellent Brunello di Montalcinos, and a nonvintage Krug, but we managed to keep things relatively down to earth with a white Châteauneuf-du-Pape from Château la Nerth, a Kistler chardonnay from Sonoma and my favorite Domaine Serene pinot noir from Oregon.

Basmati's Asian Cuisine

When Basmati's Asian Cuisine opened its sushi bar in 1997, it was the first one on 30A, and I think it's still the best. Their Florida roll is a California roll with fresh lump crab from the gulf replacing the tasteless "crab" stick, and the Basmati elite roll is a delicious wink at the deep-fried shrimp that were once the staple of Redneck Riviera fine dining: gulf shrimp are rolled with rice in seaweed and then the whole thing is tempura battered and fried.

As good as the sushi is, there's a full menu that shouldn't be missed. Among the best entrees are the firecracker grouper, tempura battered and fried and accompanied by a spicy sweet-and-sour sauce, and the enormous shrimp in red curry sauce with grilled eggplant. The divine rack of lamb is encrusted with hoisin and sesame seeds and finished with an anise lemon-soy glaze, and the Chinese barbecue duck is a classic.

In good weather ask to sit under the ceiling fans on the screened porch and start with the spring roll of the day. The short but well-chosen wine list includes some rieslings and viogniers that pair well with the spicy food and a good Gigondas from Feraud-Brunel. Again, for dessert, bananas are the thing, here in the form of a spiced banana spring roll served with ginger ice cream and topped with vanilla crème anglaise and caramel sauce.

Café Thirty-A

This is where I go when I want a guaranteed good time. The staff is laid-back and friendly but utterly professional, the split-level dining room is open and always buzzing but not too noisy, and the martini menu seems almost as long as the wine list. The chef has an occasional tendency to get overcomplicated, but I am always happy when I keep my choices as simple as my martini, a Bombay Sapphire straight up with an olive.

The grilled Georgia quail with creamy grits and sage fritters, a mainstay on the appetizer menu, is by far the best quail dish I've ever had; a newer revelation is the beef carpaccio with Asiago panna cotta and truffle vinaigrette. My favorite salad is the baby arugula with shaved pecorino and lemon garlic vinaigrette, which is perfect in combination with a classic pizza margherita from the oak-fired oven, or one with chicken and roasted peppers, or with the linguine with shellfish, grouper, toasted tomatoes and chorizo.

The cumin-crusting grouper with black beans, avocado and corn relish could do without the tangle of multicolored fried tortilla strips on top, but the dish is delicious, as is the grilled rack of lamb with wild mushroom risotto and cabernet sauce.

The wine list is especially strong on domestic bottles, including merlots from Etude and Shafer, pinots from Merry Edwards and Cottonwood Canyon, and cabernets from Shafer and Gary Farrell. Yet again, the best dessert is banana based, this time in the form of flaky beignets with homemade macadamia ice cream and a warm caramel sauce.

Onano Neighborhood Café

On the ground floor of a bed-and-breakfast called the Pensione, this Italian outpost is in the vaguely Southwestern Rosemary Beach. Owned by Penny and Mark Dragonette, and named after the Italian town where Mark's grandmother was born, Onano features a Tuscan-inspired menu.

It changes frequently, but among the appetizers, an excellent calamari, lightly fried and accompanied by roasted tomato aioli and a fennel, orange and mint salad, appears to be a mainstay, as does the delicious spinach pappardelle with a Bolognese and wild mushroom sauce. But on warm nights, especially at one of the sidewalk tables, I prefer the tagliatelle with shrimp and tomatoes tossed with olive oil, garlic and the wonderful bite of preserved lemon, or the sea scallops with a saffron fumet and lemon risotto.

The wine list is less Italian than Californian, but Courtyard Wine and Cheese, which has an impressive range of wines, is practically next door, and Onano will let you bring your own bottle for a \$15 corkage fee.

Restaurant Information

Several excellent restaurants are on County Highway 30A, or nearby, all within 15 minutes of Seaside, Fla. Meal prices are for three courses for two people without alcohol and tip.

Basmati's Asian Cuisine, 3295 West Route 30A, Santa Rosa Beach; (850) 267-3028. Closed Sunday. Sushi bar opens at 4 p.m., main dining room at 5:30. About \$75.

Café Thirty-A, 3899 East County Highway 30A, Seagrove Beach; (850) 231-2166, www.cafethirtya.com. Dinner daily from 5:30 p.m. About \$90.

Fish Out of Water, WaterColor Inn, 34 Goldenrod Circle, Seagrove Beach; (850) 534-5050, www.watercolorinn.com/dining.asp. Open daily for dinner. Happy hour at the sushi bar is from 5 to 7 p.m. Dinner from 5:30 p.m. Closed Monday from November to February. About \$90.

Onano Neighborhood Café, 78 Main Street, Rosemary Beach; (850) 231-2436. Closed Sunday and Monday. Dinner from 5:30 p.m. About \$90.