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SOUTH WEST FLORIDA'S ENTERTAINMENT MAGAZINE

Critics Choice: Jean Le Boeuf picks the best places to dine



As if fabulous beaches and a deliciously balmy climate weren't enough, Southwest Florida boasts a bounty of excellent restaurants.

The Mobil Travel Guide people apparently don't think so; they failed to bestow a single five-star ranking on any of Florida's restaurants in their recent list. The rival American Automobile Association awarded five diamonds, its highest ranking, to The Dining Room at the Ritz-Carlton, Naples – the only Southwest Florida restaurant so honored.

These pronouncements and their attendant publicity prompted some soul-searching: Are we not worthy?

So, after dining at hundreds of area restaurants over the past several years, I've cooked up my first Top 10 lists. These restaurants – listed alphabetically – comprise the creme de la creme of dining, so perhaps it's not so surprising that French cuisine dominates. It is, after all, generally considered the culinary apex.

Bon appetit!

Bha! Bha! A Persian Bistro
847 Vanderbilt Beach Road,
North Naples; (239) 594-5557; \$\$

Step onto the magic Persian carpet and savor the Middle Eastern flavors of Bha! Bha! – which means “yum, yum,” the staff says. A fitting exclamation for the restaurant's delectable mixture of traditional and innovative Iranian fare.

Blue Pepper Gourmet Foods & Bakery
7091 College Parkway, Fort Myers;
(239) 939-4700; \$\$-\$\$\$

Whether dining in or taking out, Blue Pepper can supply all the makings of first class meal, from rare imported cheeses to unusual wines, fresh-baked breads, prepared dishes and almost illegal desserts.

India Palace
11605 Cleveland Ave., Fort Myers;
(239) 939-2323; \$\$

Oh, it was a happy day in December 2000 when Fort Myers finally had an Indian restaurant again. India Palace serves all the familiar dishes expertly prepared in a setting that's distinctively evocative of the home country.

La Brasserie Restaurant, Bar & Grill
15660 San Carlos Blvd., Fort Myers;
(239) 415-4375; \$\$\$

The buzz surrounding this brand-new bistro – we haven't even published the review yet – is well-earned; terrific, reasonably priced French fare in a casual but classy environment. *Mon dieu!*

Origami
Cypress Trace Shopping Center U.S.
41 and Cypress Lake Drive,
Fort Myers; (239) 482-2126

The name's Japanese but Origami is double threat, creating fine Japanese and Korean fare. From sushi to tempura to bool gogi; it's all delicious, served fresh in a smoke-free dining room.

Provence
Cay West Plaza, 1708 Cape Coral
Parkway; Cape Coral; 542-7889; \$\$

For fine French fair minus the attitude, heavy cream sauces and prices to match, Provence is tres magnifique. Service is attentive, adding to the intimate ambience of this little French gem.

Ristorante Farfalla
Corkscrew Village,
21301 Tamiami Trail S.,
Estero; (239) 495-9912; \$\$\$

One of the few fine dining spots around Estero, Farfalla consistently produces superb homemade pasta, expertly rendered sauces and entrees that rise above the average Italian restaurant.

Siam Hut
4521 Del Prado Blvd., Cape Coral;
(239) 945-4247; \$

Lot of Americans are still timid around Thai food, but Siam Hut proves the flavor comes before the fire. After countless visits, we've rarely met a Siam Hut dish we didn't like.

Tarpon Lodge Restaurant
13771 Waterfront Drive, Pineland;
(239) 283-2517; \$\$\$

Tarpon Lodge re-creates old Florida charm without beating patrons over the head with outdoorsy kitsch. Surprisingly, the menu doesn't obsess over seafood, but instead offers a broad selection of American cuisine.

University Grill
7790 Cypress Lake Drive,
Fort Myers; (239) 437-4377; \$\$

The only one of Matt Asen's several successful restaurants to make the list, University Grill is a reliable recommendation for its clubby but comfortable feel, its well-conceived it not wildly creative food and its reasonable prices.



PRICE RANGES:

\$ - Entrees average less than \$10
\$\$ - Entrees average \$10-\$15
\$\$\$ - Entrees average \$15-\$20

—Jean Le Boeuf is a nom de plume of a local food lover who dines at The News-Press expense. Send comments to Le Boeuf in care of Lifestyles, P.O. Box 10, Fort Myers, FL 33902, or fax them to (239) 334-0708. Send e-mail to jleboeuf@news-press.com