

RESTAURANT REVIEW

Crazy for Crabs

Veteran Restaurant Draws Crowd

BY CHARLES MARCANETTI

Leave it to me to “discover” a 56-year-old restaurant, owned, uninterrupted, by the same family and operated at the same location since 1955. It seats 600 people and fills the house night after night, week in and week out. It’s my discovery and ALL future business is because of this rave review.

It has nothing to do with an international reputation of serving the best crab legs and seafood in all of Florida. It has nothing to do with the fact that Zagat’s has given the restaurant its highest awards dozens and dozens of times. And, of course, it has ALL to do with the fact that I say it is a truly amazing eatery. Hey, I’m a child of the sixties; leave me to my own delusions.

The Rustic Inn Crab House and Seafood Restaurant located at 4331 Anglers Ave. (Ravenwood Road) in Fort Lauderdale (telephone: 954-584-1637, web site: www.rusticinn.com, and nationwide shipping by FedEx at 800-274-CRAB) is the worst place in the world if you are looking for a quiet, romantic evening sitting at linen tablecloth-covered tables where you can wear your finest clothes and still feel under-dressed. If you are looking to whisper

sweet nothings to your guest, hope that he or she can read lips because the din of the wooden mallets cracking crab legs and people banging them on the paper-covered wooden tables, while sitting on plastic seats, makes all other sound unintelligible.

However, and infinitely more important, if you are looking for the “funnest” place you’ll EVER go, where the food is astoundingly good, the servings are huge and the prices are more than reasonable, where it is “come-as-you-are,” especially if it’s jeans or khakis for men and pants or (very) casual wear for ladies, then (and, I may be the last person on earth to say this), this is the ONLY place to exercise your gastronomical curiosity and indulge your gluttonous fantasies about everything seafood, especially crabs.

The Rustic Inn even invented a crab dish that is trademarked – world-famous garlic crabs. You owe it to yourself to try them. Also, and not on the menu but pretty much always available, is the giant king crab cake. It’s about eight inches across and three-quarters of an inch thick: a meal unto itself. The conch fritters should be illegal; they are addictive.



I had the privilege of interviewing Henry Oreal, the legendary restaurateur who founded this landmark in 1955. While his years on this planet may be many, his energy, enthusiasm for life and his outlook belie his age.

This review doesn’t allow me to print the stories he has about his celebrity customers, but I did ask him to tell me the one story that stays most clearly in his mind that reflects the success of the restaurant. It wasn’t about Frank Sinatra or Tony Bennett or Rocky Marciano of times past. Nor was it about the current celebrities who frequent this eatery, like *American Idol* winner Ruben Studdard, who is not shy about eating and whose voice is as powerful as his appetite.

The story he chose to share, he says, planted in his mind that he truly was a success and that the quality of his product is unbeatable. It goes like this: one night while Oreal was working the floor, as owner/managers do, two gentlemen called him over to their table. Henry didn’t recognize them but they said they came to the Rustic Inn often because the food was astounding and they couldn’t get the same flavors anywhere else.

Oreal had heard these compliments many times before, but

they never grew old, and so he smiled and began to discuss the dishes that they were eating that evening. Finally, Henry asked where they were from and they said that they were from New Jersey. Thinking they were snowbirds, Henry asked where they were from in Florida. They said he didn’t understand.

They flew down from New Jersey and arrived for dinner at the Rustic Inn. They said they’d then check in to some nearby hotel, hang out at the beach the next morning and then have lunch at the Rustic Inn and catch their return flight to go home to their wives, who knew they weren’t crazy for flying to Florida just to have seafood and crabs at the restaurant, but did think they were a little extreme in their passion.

It was and remains a truly great reflection on a truly great restaurant. Seafood lovers (this writer included) will go to great lengths to have the best of the best. We locals don’t have to travel so far and we can have the quintessential seafood meal. We can indulge our desires for crab and oysters and clams and, oh, yes, exquisite pastas with seafood sauces. The Rustic Inn ain’t quiet but it’s not supposed to be. Join the party. ○