

Palmetto Grill combines Everglades, Africa

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The Palmetto Grill offers an unusual dining experience: Out of Africa meets the Florida Everglades.

"I always felt like there were a lot of interesting similarities between Florida and Africa," said Gene Marra, the restaurant's owner and executive chef.

The restaurant, on Placida Road in Cape Haze, serves up some interesting dishes in addition to its exotic ambience. The restaurant, which opened March 11, offers all the luxuries of a fine dining experience.

Marra took his ideas and ran with them in the interior design.

The front area projects a sophisticated submersion of dark mahogany and sapele woods. The bar area, which offers a variety of liquor, overlooks a more casual family dining atmosphere with high table tops.

A large water buffalo head hangs above the bar, and giant fish heads are on opposing walls. African animal prints are everywhere, from the zebra prints on the table lamps at the front to ostrich skin-covered chairs.

The back of the room offers a more formal dining feel, dimly lit with decorative chandeliers. Three circular booths are surrounded by tables; raised booths are at the back of the room. A beige, tent-like covering drapes from the ceiling, resembling a canopy.

Marra graduated from the Culinary Institute of America and opened his first restaurant, Marra's Seafood Grill in Atlanta, in 1981. Since then, he has opened 13 independently owned restaurants. The Palmetto Grill is No. 14.

Joining Marra is general manager Fred Monzeglio, who has worked at South Beach Bar and Grill in Boca Grande for seven years. Christopher Cornelius serves as assistant manager.

The menu's exotic dishes compliment the decor. The Palmetto Grill is described by Marra as a "contemporary grill with fusion undertones," with the addition of a live fire for a more flavorful alternative.

"Live fire grill is the engine that drives," he said. "Nothing can compare to it."

Signature dishes include the Tomahawk beef chop, described as a 32-ounce hunk of meat on the end of a rib bone shaped like a tomahawk. Other entrees include Argentinian Gaucho Steak, Tequila Lime Marinated Chicken Breast, Thai mussels, filet mignon and Grilled Swordfish Steak.

For desserts, savor the Tres Cocos Locos, known as the three crazy coconuts. The trio is made with a scoop of homemade coconut ice cream, coconut flan and dark chocolate roasted almond joy. Other desserts include creme brulee, cheesecake and key lime pie.

Soups, breads, salad dressings and desserts are made on the premises. "It's not all coming on a Sysco truck," said Cornelius.

Because of its unique decor, live fire grilling and upper-scale dining, Marra said that he believes people will travel and make the Palmetto Grill a dining destination.

"I'm trying to take people away from thinking that the only option is Sarasota," he said.