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Harry's: something for everyone

By JACK D. WINNER Correspondent

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Harry's Continental Kitchens has come a long way since it first opened on Longboat Key in the late 1970s. At first it offered strictly take-out, but over the years the operation expanded to the point where it now includes catering and a restaurant that is open for breakfast, lunch and dinner.

The restaurant has a cheerful appeal that plays variations on a beach theme. Peach napkins grace the white-topped tables, and pastels abound in the prints -- most with a tropical motif -- that line the walls. Sliding glass doors allow light to flood the main dining room; the same doors look out on a small garden that seems to consist of mostly native plants. The smiling and attentive staff further contributes to the congenial setting.

On the culinary side, there's an emphasis on seafood -- naturally -- with familiar touches of fusion. A conservative inclination -- perhaps because of a mostly older clientele -- lurks behind the presentation, as does a tendency to add one more flourish than might be necessary. On the other hand, the restaurant was packed, so Harry's may simply speak to its audience.

That audience will find a number of old friends among the appetizers: Baked Escargots (\$12), Harry's Famous Crab Cakes with a Spicy Remoulade (\$14), Ahi Tuna Stack (\$14). The Pâté Maison (\$13) favors not a rough country style but a creamy version, flecked with truffles. This was smooth and satisfying, easy to spread on the toast points that came with it. But I was puzzled by the chopped onion and sliced boiled egg, as I was by the not very continental sweet gherkins



PBR beer battered soft shell crab over cashew-ginger slaw with garlic-key lime aioli at Harry's Continental Kitchens, located at 525 St. Judes Drive, Longboat Key. STAFF PHOTO / THOMAS BENDER

rather than traditional cornichons.

Fusion shows up in Roast Duck Wontons (\$14), which are served over coleslaw and come with a sweet chili sauce. These were done well, the wonton skins were crisp, and the chopped duck tasty with a hint of aromatic spice. The crunchy slaw added more texture, too.

Among the main courses, a Seafood Cobb (\$29) made with poached shrimp, scallops, crabmeat and smoked salmon sounded refreshing, but the weather was a little cool for it. The Crab Cakes (\$28) and Soft Shell Crab (\$28) from the appetizers also show up in an expanded version.

Garlic Infused Key West Shrimp (\$31) came with bacon, red onion and a garlic barbecued sauce, but this was executed with considerable restraint. The garlic simply didn't assert itself much, and the sauce had a sweetish quality that belied the description.

A special for that evening was Pompano (\$38), which came grilled. Pompano is one of the best-tasting fish around to my mind, rich and naturally buttery, and works best with a simple preparation. The kitchen did a good job grilling the fish, and a lemon butter sauce with capers added a tartness that played off the richness of the pompano, but the crabmeat dressing created an unnecessary distraction.

Those having a hankering for meat can satisfy themselves with offerings like a Center-Cut Filet Mignon (\$38) or Center-Cut Tournedos (\$38). Braised Short Ribs (\$29) might also appeal while the weather stays cool.

Harry's is also currently featuring a four-course prix-fixe menu for \$35, well worth considering.

For desserts, Harry's joins other local establishments in a trend toward nostalgic desserts that invoke childhood memories, such as Harry's Ultimate Ice Cream Sundae (\$9), sundaes being popular here, Banana Cream Pie (\$7), and Peanut Butter Pie (\$7). The servings are substantial, as we found with both Harry's Warm Brownie (\$7) and Mango Melba (\$8), the latter adding fruit to a large slice of rum cake, along with vanilla ice cream and whipped cream.

Harry's has a wine list that is reasonably stocked and priced, with a few surprises. Service was friendly and attentive.

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