

# St. Petersburg Times

## More than just a side trip

[STATE Edition]

St. Petersburg Times - St. Petersburg, Fla.  
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Date: Jun 22, 2006  
Start Page: 18.W  
Section: WEEKEND  
Text Word Count: 824

### Document Text

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This may cost me my food critic badge, but I'll let you in on a guild secret: We're suckers for sides.

I expect appetizers and desserts to be clever and cute, whether sugar or spice. Entree meats (beef or chicken, ma'am?) and fish vary in generosity, freshness and taste of fire but are rarely special. Sauces show style, but sides of vegetables, noodles and rice demonstrate imagination, effort and authenticity, and attention to detail. Sides determine what I order and, often, how much I like a place.

Hence my dilemma at Jorge's Seafood Grille, where Peggy and Jorge Leon, formerly of Costa Rica, have revamped and reinvigorated the rambling space that was once the Palace. It was one of several "family restaurants" that served Italian and Greek in these snowbird feeding grounds for years.

The Leons, who met in a John's Pass restaurant, wanted their own place and made seafood the new specialty.

Now there are smart entrees on the menu, red grouper nutty with pistachio or cashews, aiolis flavored with lemon grass and more.

Yet it was the caramelized basil onions I had to have and they garnished . . . a New York strip. Could I pass up all the fish for onions?

No problem for the server. Some chefs might forbid tinkering with their menu and specials, not here. I got sea bass stuffed with crab over fresh spinach gilded with lobster cream, garlic mash and a plume of rosemary. With a side of sweet sauteed onions, tender and punchy with basil's pepper, just for me.

A lovely pudding of proofs that my server was as accommodating as in blue plate days and that Jorge Leon was up to date with modern ways. Sea bass was fresh and perfectly done, spinach was as fresh as it should be, the lobster cream wickedly deep and smooth, potatoes country good and presentation city slick.

You or someone in your party (there's always one) may wish to pursue the steak question; I kept on with seafood. Dinner offers the usual run with the addition of our local amberjack and panko- crusted crab, fried, seared and blackened in various combinations.

Much less luck at lunch.

Jorge's lowers its aim and shoots for what the traditional market on Clearwater-Largo Road wants: familiar, affordable fare, much of it fried, low on spice and price.

There are bright spots among the appetizers, like a thick spread of house-smoked amberjack, bowls of mussels or clams, each of which are a happy, ample lunch.

With crisper frying, the calamari would be too: It gets the best of Leon's sauces, aioli/mayo spiked with lemon grass and sweet chili.

From-scratch chowders are reliable bets, too: corn and crawfish, and meaty garbanzo and conch are imaginative and hearty. I'm encouraged to find originality at \$2 a cup (\$3 for the bowl).

Heftier lunch sandwiches, wraps and salads were attractive but average at best. Crab cake and shrimp needed much crisper frying, while salmon, blackened or grilled, suffered the more common and opposite problem: cooked too long, it loses its juice.

Fish gets mixed and mixed up in sandwiches and salads with olives, nuts, cucumbers and too many cheeses. There were ripe tomatoes, but I'd add better greens, better breads and simpler combinations. I'd be happy with plain grilled fish, saffron rice and black beans.

That would make a better showcase of Leon's way with mayo and aiolis; lime, Potosi pepper, orange pesto, balsamic basil and other flavors got lost in many dishes.

Skip the key lime pie. If the green chiffon pudding isn't enough warning, neon green jellied syrup zigs and zags across the plate. Wrong color and far too sweet.

I found a better treat in the novel-tinis, synthetic temptations I usually condemn. But I'd never seen a Butter Rum Life Saver cocktail, the bestest flavor in the candy box of my childhood.

The ancient hard candy came to slickery life when the bartender mixed Mount Gay rum, butterscotch schnapps and pineapple juice. Warm buzzies.

Perhaps this balancing act in a glass was appropriate for Jorge's. After a year, the Leons have built a following, some of the old crowd and some new; booths remain but decor is brighter, and the menu ranges from neighborhood favorites to modern staples of spinach and shiitakes.

Getting both noodles and fettuccine right is not easy. Jorge's has a good start, and needs only more fire under the grill and in the salsa.

Chris Sherman dines anonymously and unannounced. The St. Petersburg Times pays for all expenses. A restaurant's advertising has nothing to do with selection for a review or the assessment of its quality. Sherman can be reached at (727) 893-8585 or sherman@sptimes.com.

Jorge's Seafood Grille

800 Clearwater-Largo Road

Largo

(727) 584-7800

Hours: 11 a.m. to 9 p.m. Sunday through Thursday; 11 a.m. to 10 p.m. Friday and Saturday

Prices: Lunch, \$6-\$16; dinner, \$10-\$20

Features: Credit cards, no smoking, full bar.

#### **[Illustration]**

Photo: PHOTO, SCOTT KEELER

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#### **Abstract** (Document Summary)

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