

# TROPICAL LIFE E

Miami Herald SATURDAY, AUGUST 23, 2014 | EDITOR: EVAN S. BENN ebenn@miamiherald.com 305-376-4624



**ALWAYS AN ADVENTURE:** Alabama Jack's on Card Sound Road is the go-to spot for people-watching and fried grouper sandwiches.

DAY TRIP TO THE

FROM MIAMI TO ISLAMORADA AND BACK IN 12 HOURS — PLUS AN OVERNIGHT OPTION, IF YOU'RE SO INCLINED.

BY SHAYNE BENOWITZ  
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**A**s Jimmy Buffett extols, "Changes in latitudes, changes in attitudes."

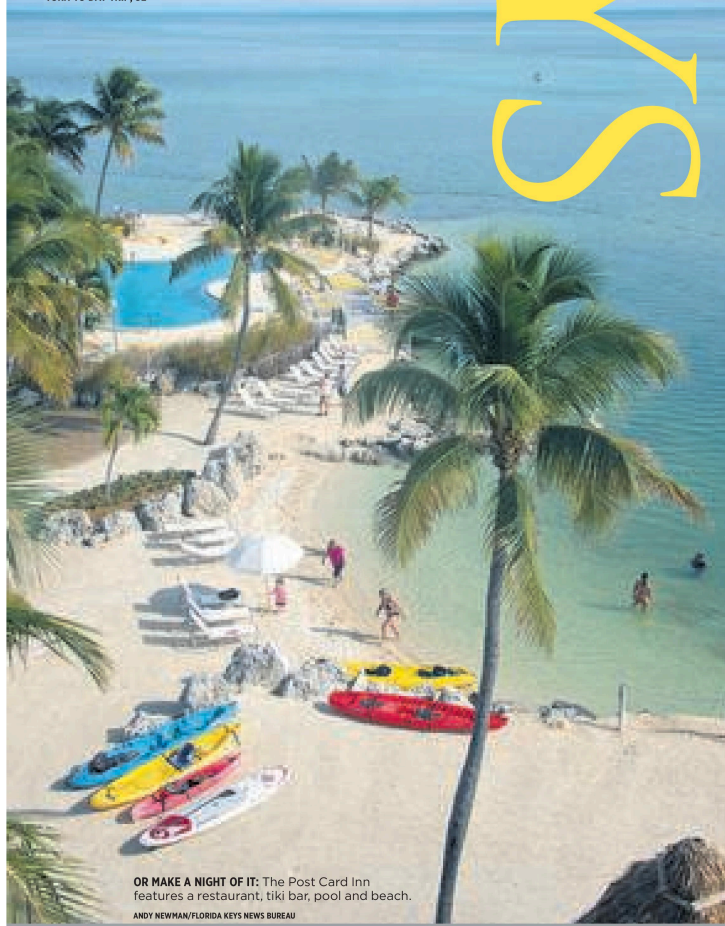
With summer on its last, warm breaths, now is the time to hop in the car and head south, for a day trip to the Keys.

Go as far south as Islamorada (any farther is best served with an overnight stay) and find your Keys state of mind: salt air, conch fritters, margaritas and all.

Punch these points into your GPS, and let your worries melt away as downtown Miami's highrises shrink out of sight in your rearview mirror.

• TURN TO DAY TRIP, 5E

# KEYS



**OR MAKE A NIGHT OF IT:** The Post Card Inn features a restaurant, tiki bar, pool and beach.

ANDY NEWMAN/FLORIDA KEYS NEWS BUREAU



Linda Bladholm  
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A FORK ON THE ROAD

*These burgers will have you saying, 'Gimme'*

**T**here is nothing plain about the burgers at Gimme A Burger.

They come on whole wheat or challah buns. Their Certified Angus Beef is ground and infused with herbs and dried red pepper, black pepper and cumin for spicy burgers that pop with flavor. There are also vegetarian options, wings, hot dogs, fries and shakes.

Owner Serhad Oktay is Turkish-American and grew up in Syracuse, New York, where his father was a doctor. He studied finance at Syracuse University and got his MBA at Pace University in Manhattan. He worked for the export department of Oneida tableware, traveling to Africa and the Middle East, stopping in Istanbul when he could to visit his childhood



THE OKTAYS

• TURN TO GIMME, 4E

MIAMI REVIEW

**NIU Kitchen puts modern accent on Spanish tapas**

BY JODI MAILANDER FARRELL  
Special to the Miami Herald

**I**f the all-glass entryway of NIU Kitchen allows a peek into the future of downtown Miami, then we're in for an inventive time filled with superb flavors and a modern Spanish accent.

We are tightly packed into this slip of a space, but nobody seems to mind. Reclaimed wood slats on one wall and Edison bulbs hanging from the ceiling feather a reassuring nest as diners at eight tables crane their necks to examine every tantalizing tapas plate proffered by a small, efficient open kitchen.

There isn't a trendy brussels sprout or shred of kale in sight. Instead, Barcelona-born chef/co-owner Deme Lomas (Barceloneta) creates traditional Catalan food with an updated twist. Yes, there are potatoes and eggs and chorizo, but these combinations challenge old assumptions with Dalí-like eccentricity.

The simple-sounding *ous* (egg) occupies a small crock comprised of two perfectly poached eggs, airy potato foam, slices of jamon Iberico and musky gratings of summer black truffle. The runny, hot yolks turn the dish into a creamy, salty dream.

• TURN TO NIU KITCHEN, 5E



PATRICK FARRELL/MIAMI HERALD STAFF  
**NEW 'OUS':** Poached eggs, potato foam, black truffle and Iberico ham form a standout dish at NIU Kitchen in downtown Miami.



## DO THIS TODAY

## DINE

Go on a feeding frenzy at the Kitchen Hop, a twist on the bar crawl with chef specials and beverage pairings at eight spots. Details: 2 p.m. at various locations in Coral Gables. thekitchenhop.com/505

## LEARN

In his new book, Richard Sexton explores the similarities among New Orleans, Latin America and the Caribbean. Details: 7 p.m. at Books & Books, 205 Angou Ave., Coral Gables; 305-445-4466; free.

## EXPERIENCE

Pimpinela, the Argentine brother-and-sister duo of Joaquín and Lucía Galán. Details: 8 p.m. at the Fillmore Miami Beach at Jackie Gleason Theater, 1700 Washington Ave., Miami Beach; LiveNation.com; \$43.50-\$98.50.

## DRINK

Casual-chic watering hole Pong Road celebrates its first anniversary with free well drinks until midnight. Details: 10 p.m.-2 a.m. at 100 Meridian Ave., Miami Beach (entrance via Lincoln Lane alley); 305-93-8847.

## BENEFIT

Miami jam bands Suenalo and the Span Allstars perform a benefit for Guitars Over Guns. Details: 7:30 p.m. at the Gleason Room Backstage at the Fillmore Miami Beach at Jackie Gleason Theater, 1700 Washington Ave., Miami Beach; Ticketmaster; \$63.50.

## THINGS TO DO

## A day trip to the Keys

## • DAY TRIP, FROM 1E

## STOP ONE: 10 A.M.

## Schnebly Redlands Winery &amp; Miami Brewing Co.

Pay a visit to Miami's tropical countryside, where tomato fields and mango groves provide the heart of South Florida's farm-to-table culinary movement. An hour's drive from downtown, you'll find long, one-lane roads surrounded by acres of farmland and sturdy palms.

Here is also where you'll find Schnebly Redlands Winery, an only-in-Miami novelty that produces 22 varieties of wine from tropical produce like mango, lychee, passion fruit, guava, starfruit, coconut and even avocado.

"It's an escape from normal life — cell phones, traffic, noise pollution, cement," says founder Peter Schnebly, a farmer and packager turned winemaker.

In 2012, after eight years producing tropical wines, Schnebly added the Miami Brewing Co. to his portfolio. The craft brewery creates beers with a sense of place, like like Big Red Coconut Ale and Shark Bait Mango Wheat Ale.

Tours and tastings available. 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Monday-Thursday, 10 a.m.-11 p.m. Friday-Saturday, noon-5 p.m. Sunday, 31205 SW 217th Ave., Homestead; 305-542-1234; schneblywinery.com

of gear rental) at John Pennekamp Coral Reef State Park.

The park extends three miles into the Atlantic and runs the length of the shore, approximately 25 miles. You'll learn about the delicate marine ecosystem and swim amid a variety of coral formations, purple sea fans, yellowtail snapper and rainbow parrotfish. Keep your fingers crossed in hopes of spotting an endangered loggerhead sea turtle, a stingray gliding along the sandy bottom or a pod of Atlantic bottlenose dolphins playing in the wake of your boat.

Trips depart six times daily and reservations are strongly recommended. Snorkel and glass bottom boat excursions are also available, at an additional rental and launch costs. 10500 Overseas Hwy., Key Largo; 305-451-6300; pennekampcoral.com



GASTON DE CARDENAS/EL NUEVO HERALD

**ELEVATED CUISINE:** Corn bisque with crab from the Green Turtle Inn in Islamorada.

## STOP FOUR: 6:30 P.M.

## Sid &amp; Roxie's Green Turtle Inn

Take the scenic Overseas Highway another 20 miles south to Islamorada, and watch as the green trees of Key Largo's hardwood hammocks give way to unobstructed views of pale blue salt marshes. The aquamarine water of the Keys all but surrounds you.

If you thought you escaped Art Deco kitsch in South Beach, think again as the neon glowing sign of Sid & Roxie's Green Turtle Inn lures you in from the road for dinner. It was established in 1947 when the first motorists began making their way down to the Keys.

Today, while it's no longer an inn to spend the night, the café is still open and imbued with Old Florida charm. While the fare and the vibe are casual, the dinner menu offers sophisticated dishes, like fresh-caught fish "a la Royale" with jumbo lump crab, tomato, onion and beurre blanc, or "a la Sid" with Florida spiny lobster, orange ginger, vanilla and butter sauce. This is also your chance to end the day with a sweet and tart slice of Key lime pie with a mandarin nut crust.

7 a.m.-10 p.m. Tuesday-Sunday, 81219 Overseas Hwy., Islamorada; 305-664-5066; greenturtleinn.com

## STOP FIVE: OVERNIGHT

## Post Card Inn Beach Resort &amp; Marina at Holiday Isle

You could turn around after Sid & Roxie's. But if you're not in the mood for a two-hour drive back to Miami, check in at the Post Card Inn in Islamorada, a few miles from the Green Turtle.

The sprawling property features a restaurant, tiki bar, pool, beach and marina, and the rooms and common spaces are surprisingly hip and updated with an eclectic beach house aesthetic. You could easily (and happily) spend the next morning there with a margarita in hand, gazing at the Atlantic with whatever Buffett song happens to pop in your head.

Rooms start at \$188 a night for Florida residents. 8400 Overseas Hwy., Islamorada; 305-664-3322; holidayisle.com



ALLISON DIAZ/MIAMI HERALD STAFF

**WINERY AND BREWERY:** Peter Schnebly owns Schnebly Redlands Winery and Miami Brewing Co., both located in Homestead and Stop One on our itinerary to the Keys.

## STOP TWO: NOON

## Alabama Jack's

As you depart the mainland, opt for the road less traveled — Card Sound Road, an alternate route to Key Largo.

You'll soon come across Alabama Jack's, a roadside, waterfront fish shack where boats tie up and locals while away the afternoon with fried grouper sandwiches and cold lagers.

The atmosphere is a little bit country and a lot of Keys color with license plates nailed to the walls, lobster traps and dive buoys strung from the ceiling, and the requisite blue marlin mounted above the bar. Stop here for lunch with live music and a boisterous crowd, and don't skip the conch fritters and smoked fish dip.

11 a.m.-7 p.m. daily, 5800 Card Sound Road, Key Largo; 305-248-8943

## STOP THREE: 3 P.M.

## John Pennekamp Coral Reef State Park

No trip to the Keys is complete without an offshore excursion. Discover some of the most unspoiled sections of the Florida Straits (the third largest barrier reef in the world) with a two-and-a-half-hour snorkel trip (\$30 adults, \$25 children, not inclusive

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GREG SCHNEIDER/FORK &amp; BALLS

## BROWARD REVIEW

## Meatballs are the name of the game at Fork and Balls

## BY JOHN TANASYCHUK

SouthFlorida.com

**T**im Pettrillo, Peter Bouloukos and Alan Hooper are masters of a particular style of boozy hospitality. At S3, YOLO, Tarpou Rend — and now Fork and Balls — the bar is the heart of each restaurant.

The Restaurant People, as the three co-founders call their company, understand that Fort Lauderdale isn't affectionately known as "Fort Liguordale" for nothing.

At the 2-month-old Fork and Balls, the rough-hewn, vintage-style bar is wonderfully stocked with 10 kinds of draft beer and 10 wines on tap, sold by the glass, carafe or bottle. If you come for dinner on weekends, you'll need sharp elbows to find a spot at the bar because the no-reservations policy has diners waiting up to an hour.

Order some nibbles at the bar, as we did on a crowded night, since most of the menu is meant for sharing. Yes, that menu is centered on meatballs — beef, chicken, veggie, house blend, spicy pork and a daily special — but some of the salads and sides are just as good if not better.

Brussels sprouts, for instance, are served crispy with a bit of bacon, but the addition of toasted garlic-tomato sauce turns them ov-

## If you go

**Place:** Fork and Balls

**Address:** 1301 E. Las Olas Blvd., Fort Lauderdale

**Rating:** ★★ (Very Good)

**Contact:** 954-771-2257; forkandballs.com

**Hours:** Lunch and dinner daily

**FYI:** No reservations; full bar; metered parking and \$5 valet; all major credit cards

er the top. White beans and kale combines creamy cannellini with just the right amount of garlic and greens. To good-old mac and cheese, the chef adds peas, one of my favorite and least appreciated vegetables.

Even salads are excellent. The Traditional combines tomatoes, onions, chick peas, olives and a simple vinaigrette. Add blue cheese for \$1.50 and you've got a version of the salad I make at my house at least once a month.

And then there are meatballs.

Where else can you order four meatballs and sauce of your choice for just \$8? Talk about egalitarian.

Traditional tomato, parmesan cream, mushroom, herb pesto and roasted tomato are the sauce choices. For \$13, three meatballs can be served on a salad, vegetable, garlic spinach, pasta or polenta.

I'm particularly fond of the classic beef and the spicy pork meatballs, although at one meal the special was Swedish meatballs with mushroom demi-glace, which needed a bit more salt. Vegetarians will be happy with the veggie meatball, although it tasted a bit too much like Thanksgiving stuffing for my tastes.

The menu also offers five so-called favorites that included The Texan, classic beef balls served with slow-cooked chili, cheddar and strips of corn tortillas. The chili was a bit one-note, that note being cumin. Spicy Italian, however, is a sensational combination of spicy pork balls, creamy polenta, roasted tomato sauce, ricotta, sweet and hot peppers.

My final word on meatballs: If they're going to be your specialty, they've got to be hot from the inside out.

There is no shortage of hot servers, however. Oops! I mean, there is no shortage of young and efficient servers.

For dessert, there's kid-friendly orange-flavored milk with chocolate chip cookies, fried bread pudding and gelato sorbet sundae. Share the bread pudding.

The Restaurant People have another hit on their hands.

## MIAMI REVIEW

## A modern accent on tapas

## • NIU KITCHEN, FROM 1E

**Llamántol** is a luxurious structure of lobster chunks, avocado and trout roe with a mashed soft-boiled egg that transforms into velvet on the tongue.

Instead of cold comfort, a cool tomato sorbet complements equation that blows gazpacho into the 21st century.

The starter arrives as a modern white bowl with a solitary dollop of mustard "ice cream" in the middle. The thin tomato soup, sweetly flavored with manchego-pesto and basil, is poured over the cold, grainy mustard from a white gravy boat. Breaking off bits of the gold dome into the soup adds icy-spicy slivers of sinus-opening flavor to each spoonful.

Be sure to ask for a side of toasted bread seasoned with olive oil and salt to soak up every drop.

Playful chemistry is part of the fun here. The grilled tomato is seared with a New York strip steak — one of only a few entrée-size portions — comes with a vinaigrette that co-owner Karina Iglesias brushes onto the meat with a rosemary twig. The rosemary, lit on fire at the table, is waved around like a shaman's smoking torch.

Along with a thoughtful selection of new Spanish wines, the one-page food menu is deceptively brief, with affordable choices that lean toward the sea: fresh oysters and mussels, grilled scallops in garlic cream with sweet tomato



PATRICK FARRELL/MIAMI HERALD STAFF

**PARTNERS:** Co-owner Karina Iglesias and chef/co-owner Deme Lomas in their restaurant, NIU Kitchen.

## If you go

**Place:** NIU Kitchen

**Address:** 134 NE Second Ave., Miami

**Rating:** ★★ (Very Good)

**Contact:** 786-542-5070; niukitchen.com; dp>.com

**Hours:** Lunch and dinner Monday-Friday, dinner Saturday

**Price:** Soup and small plates \$6.50-\$7; larger plates \$15-\$22; dessert \$6-\$7

**FYI:** Reservations recommended; wine and beer; metered street parking; all major credit cards

jam, a lime-and-cucumber-speckled wahoo tartare. A sprawling chalkboard suggests that each diner order two dishes for sharing.

Even the tiny desserts rise above the norm. A small jar of ricotta-like mató cheese is layered with eggplant jam, honey and caramelized hazelnuts as a surprising finish with just

the right touch of sweetness.

The Argentine-born Iglesias, who worked front-of-house at downtown's Soya e Pomodoro and the now-closed Red Light Little River in Belle Meade, keeps the 3-month-old eatery's groovy party vibe with her unfruffled, laid-back demeanor, supported by tunes that range from Edith Piaf to the Beatles. She keeps her cool even when she's firmly shoeing away the occasional skateboard dude and other characters drawn to NIU's warmth like moths to a flame.

The rough-cut neighborhood just south of Miami Dade College's Wolfson Campus is part of the place's hidden allure.

Tucked into the bottom of a historic 1922 building across from the new Lofts 2 condo tower, NIU is part of a transition still in progress. It seats only about 40 people. Service can be slightly disorganized. The bathroom next to the kitchen feels like an airplane lavatory.

But it's clear that Iglesias, Lomas and their business partner, Adam Hughes, are first-time restaurateurs who are hungry to distinguish themselves and their neighborhood.

"I believe in this side of Miami," Iglesias says.

With NIU on its side, so do we.

Critics dine anonymously at the Miami Herald's expense.