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FLORIDA'S LOVELY LOBSTERS

Restaurants meet demand for spiny critter

Florida lobster is in season through March 31.

By M.M. Cloutier
Special to the Daily News

When recreational divers scoured our coastal waters during Florida's annual two-day "bug-hunting" season in the summer, it got Palm Beach chef Jason Van Bommel thinking.

Why not reinvent the venerable Maine lobster roll with a heaping helping of local inspiration — as in using those "bugs" divers were hunting?

Enter Van Bommel's roll with, among other locally inspired ingredients, Florida's spiny lobster — which isn't actually a true lobster but is rather a leggy and clawless creepy-looking cousin with the nickname "bug."

Van Bommel's Florida lobster roll now is king among the patrons at the Four Seasons' Graze restaurant.

"We talked in the kitchen one day about running it (as a special) and customers loved it," Van Bommel said. "One day turned into two and then a week. ... It has become one of the best-selling dishes on the menu."

These days on the island, that's the story with Florida lobster menu items.

Florida lobster, known for its sweet and nutty tail meat, is in season through March 31, and then it won't be again until late July's annual two-day recreational hunting season.

More dining-out enthusiasts likely are ordering it thanks to today's eat-locally-sourced-food culture.

But don't compare



Chesterfield's Leopard Lounge serves a lobster and shrimp cocktail. CONTRIBUTED BY THE CHESTERFIELD

Florida lobster to cold-water lobster, such as Maine lobster, a perennial Palm Beach favorite.

"The spiny Florida lobster isn't actually a true lobster, but its flavor and texture often are compared to one," Van Bommel said. "No one ever asks, 'Which is better, an apple or a pear?' because they're not the same thing. The same is true of spiny lobsters and their claw-bearing cousins."

Van Bommel's Florida lobster roll features tempura-finished tail meat with mango-jicama slaw and spicy blood-orange aioli.

Graze special

Just as it has been a hit at the Four Seasons'

Graze, a Florida lobster-and-shrimp cocktail at The Chesterfield is a top seller there.

"It's now one of our signature dishes," said Executive Chef Gerard Coughlin of The Chesterfield's Leopard Lounge and Restaurant, where Florida lobster-tail chunks are blended with shrimp and a tangy sauce.

Bite-sized treats

Michael R. McCarty's serves, with an aioli dipping sauce, lobster "popcorn," with bite-sized Florida lobster nuggets dusted with a low-sodium spice rub and fried after a light roll in corn meal and flour.

"Florida lobster holds up well to this kind of



Eau Palm Beach features butter poached Florida lobster with a soft-poached egg and caviar (squid-ink pearl pasta). FILE PHOTO BY MADELINE GRAY

dish," said McCarty's Executive Chef Adam Carpenito. "The tail meat is firm and its buttery lobster taste stands up to the spices."

Among other restaurants in town serving Florida lobster: Cucina dell'Arte, home to butter-poached Florida lobster tail with wild-mushroom ravioli, and PB Catch, with a periodic daily special of broiled tail with citrus-butter.

Having a ball

Meanwhile at Eau Palm Beach Resort, Chef de Cuisine Manlee Siu is having a ball with the ingredient.

After all, for Siu, who joined the Manalapan resort last spring from an upscale New England restaurant, warm-water spiny lobster is still a relative novelty.

"When I came down here, everyone said, 'The spiny lobster is so Florida,' I didn't know about it and didn't know it didn't have claws. I couldn't wait



The Four Seasons' Graze serves a crunchy lobster roll.

CONTRIBUTED BY JASON NUTTLE

to work with it."

At Eau's flagship Angle restaurant, Siu, whose dishes are plated artfully, features butter-poached Florida lobster tail with a soft-poached egg and "caviar" made with squid-

ink pearl pasta.

"Florida spiny lobster is such a wonderful local product," Siu said.

"It's really unique. I love it."

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