

CLEARWATER REVIVAL

Margaret Swaine Mar 28, 2016

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28 MAR 2016: Florida's **Clearwater** Beach has always had a great rep for its pearly white silky sand beaches and the shimmering blue Gulf of Mexico surf, but now it's upped the ante with deluxe hotels and fine dining. It started with the gorgeous \$30 million beach promenade completed in 2008. Then the Hyatt Regency opened in 2010 with its luxurious gulf view rooms complete with kitchens and large balconies. The sleek and modern Opal Sands just opened this year and six more hotels are under construction including a Wyndham coming soon. The restaurant scene is booming.

Caretta on the Gulf at the Sandpearl Resort has been the top spot for a fancy meal with its raw bar, wood burning oven and sunset views. The waters of the Gulf of Mexico and Tampa Bay are abundant with more than 300 varieties of fish. Grouper is a favourite for eating and can be found on many menus in Clearwater including Caretta which serves a hearty dish of black grouper with black barley risotto, root vegetable, broccolini, nebrodini bianco (an oyster mushroom variety) and parmesan foam. A favourite sushi is the Fire & Ice Roll made with snow crab, cucumber, jalapeño, tuna, chili aioli and tobiko (flying fish roe). For meat lovers there are steaks and chops served with Bryson Farms organic vegetables and special sauces.

Giving Caretta serious competition however is the just opened Sea-Guini at sister property, Opal Sands. In my view it's now the best dining in Clearwater Beach with sea-inspired, Italian-influenced dishes, fresh handmade pastas and Neapolitan pizzas.

The linguine vongole and tender pan-seared local hog fish I tried were both delicious and perfectly cooked. Even standards such as the bruschetta and carpaccio raised the taste bar to new heights. The freshly minted hotel has gulf views from every window and an ultra-modern vibe.

For casual seafood meals nothing beats the five Frenchy's eateries, especially Frenchy's Rockaway Grill on the beach (the best views) for a local grouper sandwich or in-season fresh stone crab claws.

Frenchy is the nickname for Quebec born Michael Preston who started his first Frenchy's restaurant in 1981 in Clearwater Beach - just a friendly, laid-back place where people could come for a cold drink and fresh seafood. Frenchy's Original Café, on a tiny side street was an instant success and is still there today.

To ensure a constant source of fresh fish to the Café, Frenchy purchased a fleet of fishing boats and eventually opened Frenchy's Seafood Company. With these resources in place, he opened three more restaurants: Frenchy's Saltwater Café in 1989, Frenchy's Rockaway Grill in 1991 and Frenchy's South Beach Cafe in 2003. He hasn't messed with the formula. To this day, the Frenchy's restaurants are known for fresh-from-the-Gulf seafood at reasonable prices in a fun, casual beach atmosphere.

Frenchy didn't stop there. In 2010, he purchased the former Olympia Motel, located on East Shore Drive and after months of renovations, Frenchy's Oasis Motel opened. This brightly coloured 15 unit waterfront property is designed in retro 60's, with modern accommodations.

Another spot with longevity is the Clearwater Wine Bar and Bistro, opened ten years ago by Kristi Lam. It's a tiny place that's big on wine with over 30 by-the-glass options (with generous six ounce pours) and an extensive, interesting by-the-bottle list. Should you not be able to finish a wine, you can take the rest home or if you find one you really like you can buy more bottles on the spot for your cellar. The menu is simple but tasty with her two Mexican Chefs turning out chipotle shrimp tacos, black bean and potato enchiladas, pastas, salads and



pizzas.

A fun and free activity in Clearwater Beach is the Sunset at Pier 60 daily festival starting two hours before sunset and lasting until two hours after. There are street performers, local artisans selling their wares, musicians and snack and beverage vendors. The star attraction is of course the setting sun over the Gulf of Mexico.

Before my visit here I had thought of Clearwater Beach as a bit of a backwater, with its main draw being it's less expensive than the better known areas of Florida. I'd say today it's a happening place with much more than beautiful beaches. Top notch hotels plus pampering spas in the Opal Sands and Hyatt Regency, many dining options, year round golf, marinas and a proximity to the action of Tampa (40 minutes away) and other metropolis.

Oh - and there are free local taxi rides with floridafreerides.com if one tires of walking the lovely beachside



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