

DINING

Caribbean influences Bahama Breeze menu

BY JOANNE MALISZEWSKI
SPECIAL WRITER

For just a moment, let go. Imagine the light splash of salted waves against a Caribbean sundown.

Sip on the finest rum while reggae music rekindles your spirit. Then let the aromas of the richest spices and fruits take you back to a simpler time.

"It's a memorable two-hour island vacation. It's just like when you're down on the islands, but you don't have to go far," said Eric Drescher.

For this general manager of Bahama Breeze, perfection is the guiding force for the restaurant that has almost all the realities of a Caribbean sugarcane plantation. It is his expectation that each of his guests – about 7,000 weekly – soak in the sights, sounds and tropical tastes of the islands.

"We want to make sure every guest has a memorable experience here," said Drescher, the son of a Florida restaurateur. "Bahama Breeze stands for great dinners, great music, a beautiful building."

Owned by Darden, which owns Olive Garden and Red Lobster, Bahama Breeze is all about the culture and cuisine of the Caribbean islands. The same local spices – all-spice, hot peppers, nutmeg, cinnamon, clove, tamarind and thyme – used long ago by islanders are found in the Bahama Breeze signature entrees, salads, samplers and sandwiches.

Try something new

Conch. Ever thought of eating it? Not the pretty pink shell that we all put up to our ears on the beach. But the meat. Conch is by far the most popular seafood in the Caribbean. Pounded with a mallet to tenderize it, the prized seafood is found in the restaurant's chowders and fritters.

While Americans may see some of the menu items as "gourmetish," the ingredients

are basic. Beans and rice are staples, as are root vegetables, such as yuca, yams, sweet potatoes and eddoes. The same goes for fruits – bananas, plantains, pineapples, mangoes and guava.

Mix the basics with Caribbean spices, fruits and vegetables and you have a delightful – and filling – meal that includes seafood, lamb, beef, pork, as well as stews of chicken, sausage, shrimp or clams.

Also notable at Bahama Breeze is Paella, a traditional island casserole of shrimp, fish, chicken and chorizo sausage. Or there's ropa vieja, which means old clothes in Spanish, but is actually a spicy dish of shredded beef.

"These are hearty meals," Drescher said. "But it is all food people can relate to."

Lunch is not a possibility at Bahama Breeze. The culinary staff, led by executive chef Charlie Reeves, spends the day cooking. "Nothing is made in advance. Vine ripened tomatoes are picked everyday. The basil you are eating now was cut a half-hour ago," Drescher said.

The desserts also stand alone. Everything is made from scratch on site. The key lime pie is the most popular with guests. But there is no turning away from the bananas supreme – a taste-boggling dish of sliced bananas, vanilla ice cream on warm banana bread with hot homemade buttercream brandy sauce.

The drinks – alcoholic and non-alcoholic – are exactly what you would expect in the Caribbean with emphasis on rum, spices and fruits. You cannot leave the restaurant without someone at the table ordering a lemon breeze – topped off with a real piece of sugar cane. The alcoholic version, mojito cubano – served as icy as it can get – combines crushed spearmint, fresh lime, sugar cane juice and of course, rum.



Island experience: Charlie Reeves, chef and Eric Drescher, owner at Bahama Breeze.

Bahama Breeze

Where: 19600 Haggerty, Livonia, (734) 542-0893

Menu: Specializes in Caribbean food, particularly seafood and island fruits, vegetables and seasonings. Salads \$3.75-\$12.95. Samplers \$3.95-\$8.95. Sandwiches \$7.95. Entrees \$8.95-\$22.95.

Atmosphere: Sugarcane plantation, with colorful interior decor.

Open: 4-11:30 p.m. Sunday-Tuesday restaurant; 4 p.m. to 12:30 a.m. bar; 4 p.m. to 12:30 a.m. Wednesday-Saturday restaurant, 4 p.m. to 1:30 a.m. bar.



every person. In the restaurant industry, ideas get diluted. You can't be everything for everyone. We are going to do this and we are going to do it well."

Joanne Maliszewski is a Farmington resident and writes about dining for the Observer & Eccentric Newspapers.

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