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## They're not just for out-of-towners anymore

In hubs like Washington, D.C., and Manhattan, it's part of the culture: Townies treat their cities' hotels as they would stand-alone cafés.

They swirl wine glasses in the lounges and grab salads during lunch breaks. Glance around the next time you visit — it's not just travelers filling the tables and barstools. There, it's common knowledge that these culinary/social amenities aren't solely open to tourists. Yet here in Sarasota, the concept is often lost on locals.

We assume these sleek hotels with their world-class chefs don't cater to the public. The reality is that, just like their independent restaurant competitors, they crave the community's patronage, especially now. We're welcome, indeed.

Yes, there are exceptions to the public rule, like bed-and-breakfast inns that reserve their fare for guests. Other hotels don't boast in-house eateries at all. But I did some hopping at the reasonably priced ones that do, and I ended up with three flight-ticket-free vacations.

## DROP IN AND STAY A WHILE

Here are some of the local hotel dining options that are open to the public:

H2O Bistro at Hotel Indigo, 1223 Boulevard of the Arts, Sarasota. 487-3800;  
[www.srqhotel.com](http://www.srqhotel.com).

Sporting News Grill at the Holiday Inn, 8009 15th St. E., Sarasota. 355-9000;  
[www.hisrq.com](http://www.hisrq.com).

Currents Restaurant at the Hyatt Regency Sarasota, 1000 Boulevard of the Arts, Sarasota.  
953-1234; [www.sarasota.hyatt.com](http://www.sarasota.hyatt.com).

Jewel's Diner at Days Inn, 4900 N. Tamiami Trail, Sarasota. 355-9721;  
[www.daysinnsarasotaairport.com](http://www.daysinnsarasotaairport.com).

Lido Beach Grille at Lido Beach Resort, 700 Ben Franklin Drive, Sarasota. 388-2161;  
[www.lidobeachresort.com](http://www.lidobeachresort.com).

Vernona at the Ritz-Carlton Sarasota, 1111 Ritz-Carlton Drive, Sarasota. 309-2000;  
[www.ritzcarlton.com/sarasota](http://www.ritzcarlton.com/sarasota).

Alamo Steakhouse and Grill at the Holiday Inn Lakewood Ranch, 6231 Lake Osprey Drive,  
Lakewood Ranch. 782-4400; [www.hilr.com](http://www.hilr.com).

### H2O Bistro

Like a little Nantucket in downtown's Rosemary District, Hotel Indigo gleams with "wondrous blue" walls and punches of navy, lime green and sparkling white.

The food at the locale's H2O Bistro (known as Phi Café until six months ago) is as crisp and refreshing as the seaside-inspired décor. Chef Aldo Bagnara whips up a Hummus Trio with olive tapenade, spicy red pepper and herb flavors (\$8.50) as I inhale the ambiance.

"As a boutique hotel, we're unique, more intimate. We have that go-to-the-beach feel," said general manager Leslie Power, adding that the building opened in 2006. "We have guests from all over the world that prefer this type of atmosphere, and we'd love to see more locals take advantage of it."

From 4 to 7 p.m. daily is the hotel's happy hour, with discounted beverages and hors d'oeuvres. At the bar, cobalt blue descending lights glimmer as a mounted flat-screen TV entertains cocktail-sippers. In the lobby, oversized white

Adirondack chairs beckon incomers to linger with a crossword puzzle. Overhead, curved soffits resembling ocean waves blend in with printed wall murals of the Venice Pier.

It's not just the color pops that enliven H2O Bistro's space — it's also Bagnara's vision. Born in Chile and raised in an Italian family, Bagnara has spent 32 years in the cuisine industry as a restaurateur and revered cook.

“If we can get the ingredients, we make any dish for you,” Bagnara said through his thick South American accent. “I love to cater to what people want.”

The No. 1 requested item has to be the Margarita flat bread, Bagnara says, with its fresh-sliced tomatoes, mozzarella cheese, basil and tomato sauce (\$10.50). Others include the Seafood Salad with lump crabmeat, shrimp, mixed greens and hearts of palm in an extra virgin olive oil and lemon juice dressing (\$13) and the “Inspiration” Soup (which, on the day I dine, is a fall-perfect, creamy butternut squash with a sprinkling of pecans for \$5).

The beef-stuffed Tortellaci pasta in a porcini mushroom cream sauce (\$14) followed by a warm apple tart with vanilla bean ice cream (\$6.50) is bliss on a brisk afternoon. Of course, an Indigo chai tea (\$4) or a wildberry smoothie (\$5) may be all you need after booking a massage at the new spa and salon.

Cape Cod is calling. Are you ready to brave the five-minute drive?

### Sporting News Grill

Since chef Darrell Mizell was 6, he was apprenticing in the kitchen with his mother, concocting chili, ribs and pies. For the past year, he has made his base at the Holiday Inn's Sporting News Grill next to Sarasota-Bradenton International Airport, putting a gourmet spin on down-home, American favorites.

As we sit in the casual dining hall — with its nine flat-screen TVs, leatherback beige chairs, wooden tables and outside fire pit with wraparound booths — a patron taps Mizell on the shoulder, asking him how long his mako shark dish will be available (he's famed for his rotating daily and weekly specials).

“I'll bring it back for you,” he says with a grin. “Try the mango pie, too.”

Salivating, I scour the menu, which has everything a sports bar or pub should — burgers, wings, steaks and “sweet victories” (decadent desserts). However, here, Mizell says, “It's a cut above,” meaning many of the items are organic and almost all are cherry-picked from Sarasota-Bradenton vendors.

As general manager Mohammad Gharavi says, “It’s not just a Philly cheese steak you’re getting here. It’s the best Philly cheese steak, the best nachos, the best pizza.”

I begin with Mizell’s Massive Nachos with red and black tortilla chips, chili, Monterey jack cheese, fresh jalapeños and guacamole (\$9.95). Then it’s onto the 12-inch supreme pizza with garlic-infused extra virgin olive oil, marinara sauce, a blend of cheeses, pepperoni, onions and green and red peppers (\$14.95). There’s also the Philly Cheese Steak (\$9.95), a Reuben on marble rye with a cut of brisket Mizell seasons himself, a new Ahi tuna and rice dish with wasabi aioli, and finally, the legendary mango pie (think key lime with a less tart finish, and hope it’s in stock when you drop by).

Meander through the swank lobby of this fully green hotel, tune into a football game and order a glass of the hotel’s sweet sangria. You may get too caught up in the sports-themed revelry not to book a stay.

## Currents

Every third Friday of the month, the Hyatt reels in clientele for its \$20 wine and tapas tasting at Currents — the hotel’s upscale restaurant. That’s when chef Aaron Chavarria is at his creative peak. Patrons never know what he’ll roll out for the evening, from a spread of block cheeses to Thai mango chicken. No menus, just improvisation.

It’s obvious from Chavarria’s ear-to-ear smile that his soul is in his work, and it has been since he was a boy in Nicaragua. At the 84-seater Currents, Chavarria’s influences — Spanish, Caribbean, Peruvian and Asian — appear on the six-week-old menu. His grouper reuben, an old mainstay, will be re-introduced within the month, and as he says, “A lot of the guests that have been coming here for years still remember it.”

For Ross Virando, the Hyatt’s food and beverage director, the outbound objective is to bring Sarasota’s residents to the Hyatt as a casual gathering space.

“We love to see young professionals have their meetings in here, and have people who work downtown come in,” Virando said. “We want them to know we’re here and what a great menu we have.”

Since the major remodel three years ago that transformed the hotel from traditional to chic, Lilly Pulitzer-inspired modern, much of the public has yet to bask in the shocking pink, green and ivory interior.

Virando walks me through a little nook beyond the lobby that is known as “the library” — here, cubbyholes full of coffee table books are stacked above backless

booths with vibrant throw pillows. It's a quiet spot for a discussion group — and a bonus, it's free to the public upon spontaneous reservation.

Sometimes, Virando and Chavarria recognize, people just want a quick getaway from the cubicle. That's when a cup of Chavarria's Conch and Clam Chowder (\$5) and a glass of Raspberry Mint Lemonade (\$4) act as ideal quenchers. A couple of Beef Short Rib Sliders with mushrooms, blue cheese and onion straws (\$10) before a Warm Maple Waffle dessert with orange-maple syrup and vanilla ice cream (\$6) is another filling combo. Perhaps the biggest draw is Chavarria's Seared Scallops with mushroom risotto, leeks, garlic and chive oil (\$25) that is rich enough to be split for two.

So, when was the last time you went to your neighborhood hotel for a bite? Maybe it's time to do as the city folk do. In the era of the "staycation," a passport is just passé.