

Azur

By ROSALIND BRACKENBURY

Eating in Key West restaurants can be like time travel, or finding oneself in parallel universes. Azur, on the corner of Grinnell and Fleming streets, is a reincarnation of several other restaurants that have made their appearance in the same building.

There was Café Med, a hard act to follow, as it was many people's favorite restaurant in Key West. There was Caribe Soul, run by a couple of superb chefs who were somehow less good at book-keeping. If your memory goes back far enough, there was the original gas station. I've spent many balmy evenings sitting out in the side yard shielded from traffic by palm fronds and the soothing trickle of running water, eating my way through eclectic menus, with different groups of friends.

The recent night I went to Azur, it was not quite warm enough for a Key Wester to want to sit outside, but I and my two colleagues were made comfortable at a corner table indoors. From two wines suggested from the specials list, we chose a 2004 Crianza from Penedes in southern

Spain called Clos Torribas, delicious after it had breathed for a few minutes.

Good olives, cheese and good bread appeared and we ordered the onion soup, to warm us up, as well as carpaccio with arugula and a cake of onion, fennel and grated potato with salmon and crème fraîche and some red caviar on top. The osso buco I ordered next was succulent, tender and flowing from the bone, with gnocchi in a juice made from veal stock with thinly sliced leeks. My colleagues enjoyed their respective pork chop with black olive and tomato sauce, and seafood with risotto (fresh juicy mussels, clams and shrimp, and flavorful risotto.)

The most spectacular part of the evening consisted of dessert. It makes sense to eat what you can't cook yourself, when eating out. I have no idea how you make espresso panna cotta with its attendant slices of lemon confits and sauce of rum caramel, satisfyingly bitter alongside the sweetness of the panna cotta that shivered like a jellyfish in the middle of its plate; or, for that matter, the cardamom ice cream on an apple and ground almond tart with short sweet crust that we ate greedily among us. Two of us confessed to a passion for cardamom, and to have it in ice cream is just a shock of delight. Dessert, if you never make it and seldom eat it, is like a vision, a dream. These two were visionary.

Azur is unusual in Key West restaurants in serving breakfast and lunch as well as dinner, from Monday to Friday. I've been there for Sunday brunch, my oat and blueberry pancakes accompanied by excellent coffee. One of these days I'm going for lunch, to try the flatbread pizzas with their unusual toppings of salmon with crème fraîche and harissa with lamb, or a ciabatta sandwich, or maybe even the charred octopus. The menu is full, adventurous and descriptive, and is based in Mediterranean cuisine.

When I saw Azur opening in my neighborhood this fall just where a good restaurant definitely ought to be, I was both excited and relieved, especially as its chefs are Michael Mosi, formerly of Antonia's, and Drew Wenzel. I believe Azur is going to be the kind of restaurant where locals will meet up regularly for feasts and celebrations – and where visitors will be charmed and surprised and long to taste those elusive flavors again.

Azur
425 Grinnell St.,
Key West
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azurkeywest.com



Fresh seafood and shellfish with a sweet pea and saffron infused risotto.

Crisp fried potato, fennel and onion cake topped with house-cured salmon, crème fraîche, chives, capers and robiko caviar.

