



Grand Case

St. Martin, West Indies

By Louise Wollman

I'm here for you. It was a tough tour of duty. Two months in St. Martin, that graveyard of all diet intentions, running expensive culinary sorties for you, saving you Atkins and South Beach faithful from calorie infestations...cholesterol incursions...wallet remonstrations.

Frankly, I took it in the gut for you.

I cased Grand Case, an adorable seaside village that is to St. Martin gastronomy roughly what Newport is to sailing. You can almost re-rig your boat for what the average dinner costs.

Multitudinous, elaborately charming restaurants squashed shoulder-to-shoulder along the main drag; street-side menu boards advising what tempting preparations “zee chef propose” tonight.

Awash in recommendations, we tried Le Pressoir, which topped almost everyone's list.

Not ours.

Crusty scallop chips in mango-butter sauce; creamy lobster ravioli with a clever pepper and lime kick; moist rack of lamb in a delicate

shallot/Madeira reduction...Yum.

But then came my Veal Chop in (Most Bland) Foie-Gras Sauce. Possibly the 20-Euro enhancement—shaved black truffle smidgeons—would have pepped it up. But it was tough and—despite billing to the contrary—feebly proportioned.

I was so crushed by this veal fiasco I ordered the first-course Soup Tasting for dessert. (Another small

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sacrifice for you.)

As for the check: we will not be ordering new dock lines. (Note: there's not one ATM amid these boutique eateries. Many offered a one-euro-to-one dollar ratio for payment in cash—a powerful incentive to bus to Marigot.)

If Le Pressoir came close, L'Auberge Gourmand merely struck the right poses. Haute Disappointment. Notwithstanding the crowded tables.

Someone forgot the sesame-

oil splash on the Sea Scallops in Sesame/Soy Glaze. So I got Scallops Kikkoman. The “crunchy rice cake accompaniment” must have wilted in a late afternoon rainstorm.

Oversized dinner plates? Bad idea. Entrées were identically surrounded—school-cafeteria style—by overdone broccoli sprigs, wee lumps of turnip, potato and carrot mush, Barbie-sized fans of zucchini slices and an unimaginative alfalfa sprout garnish. We did not sail forth into dessert.

Nor will we be painting our bottom this year.

SPIGA

Want my opinion? In Grand Case you get mostly gourmet contenders, gussied up with charger plates, fine stemware and ramekins of icy butter. The soft napkins and creamy tablecloths are merely expensive Emperor's New Clothes.

I found one Worth-it Splurge—tiny 10-table Spiga. There, I valiantly ordered two main-dish pastas for you. First papardelle—wide, homemade noodles, chunks of pork, pancetta in a Porcini mushroom sauce. Next “Lara's Pumpkin-

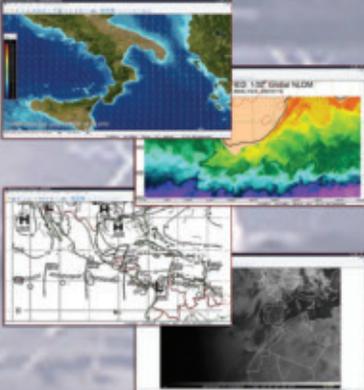
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Stuffed Ravioli”—miniature clouds of tissue-thin dough sprinkled with pine nuts, floating in butter-sage sauce and garnished with a crystallized mystery ingredient. Lara Bergamasco, who invented the dish, admits it’s crushed Amaretti cookies. Clever...and drop-dead delectable.

Lara, of a venerable St. Martin restaurant family, says her husband, *Ciro*, comes by his chef’s skills naturally—via a Sicilian momma who still whips up a pizza from scratch in seconds. *Ciro*’s beef-ragù ravioli came blanketed in a tomato sauce the likes of which you find only in a New York “fuggeddaboutit-ya-can’t-get-in” restaurant like *Rao*’s.

Spiga opened five years ago to excruciatingly slow success, due to its round-the-corner location. Full most nights now, the 1914

former Creole home, its dark wood burnished by time and refurbishing, glows with welcome in an otherwise gloomy street.

Still...cheap it’s not.

THE “LOLOS”

But, despair not: amid Grand Case’s culinary hoopla, I give you the “lolos.” Six bustling street barbecues planted in the village’s hurly-burly central square.

Fronting each is a huge, black drum grill, crowded with chicken quarters and racks of pork ribs. Each grill is manned (or womanned) by an anonymous, interchangeable, flipper-brusher-squitter-spearer, who is made further faceless by frequent bursts of enveloping barbecue smoke.

Behind each grill, rows of clear-topped warming trays, filled with



A worth-it splurge in Grand Case—Spiga, above, has a delectable pumpkin ravioli, opposite bottom left. The unimpressive meal at L'Auberge Gourmand, opposite bottom right. On a budget? There is delicious barbecue galore in St. Martin, opposite top

rice'n'beans, curry rice, white rice, mac'n'cheese, potato salad, green salad, corn cobs, cole slaw, fried plantains, steamed vegetables, even spaghetti. Fishcakes, stuffed crab backs, Creole sausage, fried fish, conch stew, even lobsters are available, but the main attraction is the knock-em-dead ribs, crisp and, for the most part, unsoftened by sauces.

The waitresses double as hawkers, wheedling to reel in customers—"Honey, can I get you a table? Ready for lunch, guys?"

The lolos are cheap...tasty...lively...fun. A plate of ribs will set you back four bucks...with a side, maybe \$6. Add a soda and you're talking not more than \$8.

See, bistro bottom line doesn't always trump cruiser bottom-fisher.

Variouly called Talk of the Town, Tropical Groove, Favored Spot, Au Coin des Amis, The Rib Shack and Sky's the Limit, the lolos offer simple, unvarying, identical menus. Choosing is a matter of mere sampling.

But I did that for you.

Talk of the Town is most frequently touted—too bad virtually nobody's talking there, at least not to customers. Laminated menus are grimy, sauce bottles sticky and leaky. The Rib Shack's ribs are a bit over the top, slathered with a chopped garlic glaze.

My vote goes to Sky's the Limit, because their sky includes clean white Formica tables, drip-less bottles of dressings and sauces, newsy placemats that don't feel re-used. The cheeriest wait staff, most honest smiles, most genuine "Hi guys, can I get you a table?"

Sky's ribs are crusty and well seasoned, moist where others are dried out; fries are crispy, with that essential-but-elusive mushy interior. At Sky's you're more likely to get 12 ribs instead of nine.

Hey, don't knock gluttony in a town where the average filet will barely fill the glint in your eye. ~

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