

MIAMI



FOOD & DRINK

review



CATCH OF THE DAY

The charming and rustic Stiltsville Fish Bar makes the most of our seafood bounty as it nods to old Florida fishing culture.

By Jen Karetnick // Photography by Mitchell Pisarri

From left: Katalfi-wrapped local shrimp with roasted coconut and Key lime; chef and co-owner Jeff McInnis inspecting the fresh fish on display by Stiltsville's bar area.



Nothing attracts a crowd like a crowd." Test the merits of this old Soul Asylum lyric for yourself at Stiltsville Fish Bar, the Grove Bay Hospitality concept that features renowned partner-chefs Jeff McInnis and Janine Booth. The kitchen's sources, which include local, long-line fishermen, sometimes drop off their catches at the back door after they dock at night. That's when an enterprising sous chef hooks a thumb through the gills of a particularly large specimen—say, a 20-pound amberjack—strides as casually through the dining room with it as if it were a plate of the restaurant's irresistible green deviled eggs crowned with a crisp curl of ham, and hangs it from the scale at the front of the eatery.

Thus ensues fish-poseur madness, which halts those strolling by on a path from the parking lot to Purdy Lounge in their Prada sneakers. One second diners on the Stiltsville patio are peacefully noshing on signature Buffalo fish wings—a basket of surprisingly meaty pectoral fins glazed with an addictive, lip-stinging chile-lime sauce—the next, they're in an ever-increasing flash mob of iPhone photographers. After the rubbernecking eases, the fish is slipped into one of two ice-filled, old-fashioned claw-footed bathtubs in front of the bar.

Whether intentional or not, this gonzo-style street marketing is pretty savvy. Stiltsville, which debuted in Sunset Harbour shortly after Hurricane Irma made landfall, is the only full-service restaurant on this bay-facing slice of its block. Its relative isolation from other, more populated segments of this neighborhood is a reminder of what its name represents: CONTINUED...



...CONTINUED the collection of hand-built, painted wooden houses, of which only seven now remain in a nonprofit trust, perched on the sandy flats of northern Biscayne National Park.

The quirky past of Stiltsville is referenced throughout the restaurant's rum-heavy cocktail menu. Eddie Walker's Hideout (Bacardi 8, chocolate bitters, Hellfire bitters and demerara syrup) is named after Captain Eddie "Crawfish" Walker, the first to build a commercial shack selling bait and beer in the 1930s. The Bikini Club (Don Q Añejo, Peychaud bitters, Velvet Falernum, passion fruit purée and lime juice) honors the 150-foot yacht *JEFF* that was grounded on the flats and turned into a nude sunbathing club by enterprising owner Harry Churchville. Hurricane Betsy (Don Q Cristal, Lemon Hart, vanilla-pear purée, ginger syrup and ginger beer) nods to the 1965 storm with 120-mile-per-hour winds and 11-foot storm surge that left various parts of Florida devastated.

These are the kinds of neatly balanced cocktails you wish to imbibe precisely when the sun drops its yolk into the bay, and contrast with a tray of thyme-flecked and butter-toasted

From left: Fish dip made with cherrywood-smoked local catch with house pickles, thyme and butter-toasted saltines; cobia tiradito in *aji amarillo* sauce; chef and co-owner Janine Booth with a crispy whole snapper for two with lemon-basil salsa verde.

saltines, spread with cherrywood-smoked fish dip, the inherent fattiness of which is arrested by the tang of pickles.

The property, formerly PB Steak and before that Joe Allen, has been wisely redesigned with glass-paned garage doors that open from the bottom up, so that it becomes an inside-outside space precisely formatted for making the most of its views. The color spectrum is an oceanic rainbow, much like Stiltsville itself, decorated with fanciful shell chandeliers, purple barnacle planters and brass purse hooks shaped like Poseidon. Neo-rustic Stiltsville is the pescatarian hangout South Beach has been missing since... well, always.

It's also probably the place McInnis should have been running since the start of his Miami career, given his upbringing in the Panhandle and his long experience with fishing and cooking his catch. While he has brought over a couple of notable dishes from his and Booth's other restaurants, the kitchen shows off with some exemplary seafood and fish treatments. The highlight of these includes a cobia tiradito, which is a visual barrage of geometric textures: the sleek ovals of fish, rectangles of just-ripe avocado, shaved semi-circles of red onion, rounds of crisp hominy and polygons of popcorn. A bright *aji amarillo* sauce with cilantro and lime serves as the backdrop for all these elements.

If you're tired of this requisite raw fish dish, try the outstanding coconut shrimp, a recipe that has been bastardized in every

sports bar in America. Here, no shreds of actual coconut, which always burn or turn rancid when fried, are included in the delicate *kataifi* wrap. Instead, the use of roasted Miami coconuts is a mere essence, along with Key lime and a side of aioli, allowing the Key West-sourced crustaceans to shine.

A daily list of specials is provided depending on what's been snagged overnight (wahoo, grouper, an assortment of snapper), and the preparation ranges from grilled to seared in a cast iron pan with a changing array of spice blends, fresh herbs and light, non-obscuring sauces. It's impossible not to have a terrific piece of fish off this menu. Over the course of several visits, we sampled cobia, red fish, snapper and grouper, and each was cooked flawlessly—some skin on, some skin off—according to its flake.

Stiltsville is no performative fish tale. The chefs are dedicated to growing, catching, sourcing and cooking with local ingredients, and pay homage to this ideal even with desserts, which include a creative gooey chocolate cobbler with passion fruit ice cream, an inviting flourless Meyer lemon cake sweetened with strawberries and whipped cream, and a perfectly tart-sweet Key lime pie that melds coconut to its graham cracker crust.

As dedicated diners, it's our duty to not let Stiltsville get away. ■

Crowd Control

Unlike your typical South Beach scene, the diners here range in age. It's a multi-generational landing that's refreshing to see—and reminiscent of the old Joe Allen days.

Market Value

The area in front of the bar where the daily catch is kept on ice serves as a de facto fish market, complete with shelves of house-jarred pickles, hot sauces and other goods for purchase.

More to Come

An upstairs—as in rooftop—deck will open later on this year. Think hammock chairs and rum cocktails, but (thankfully) no Hemingway look-alike contests.

STILTSVILLE FISH BAR

1787 Purdy Ave., Miami Beach, 786.353.0477, stiltsvillefishbar.com

Dinner: Sun.-Thu., 5-11PM; Fri.-Sat., 5PM-midnight
Brunch: Fri.-Sun., 11AM-3PM

Snacks, \$7-\$14; salads, \$10-\$15; small plates, \$8-\$28; large plates, \$22-\$38; sides, \$7; desserts, \$9; cocktails, \$12-\$14; wines by the glass, \$9-\$24; wines by the bottle, \$33-\$220