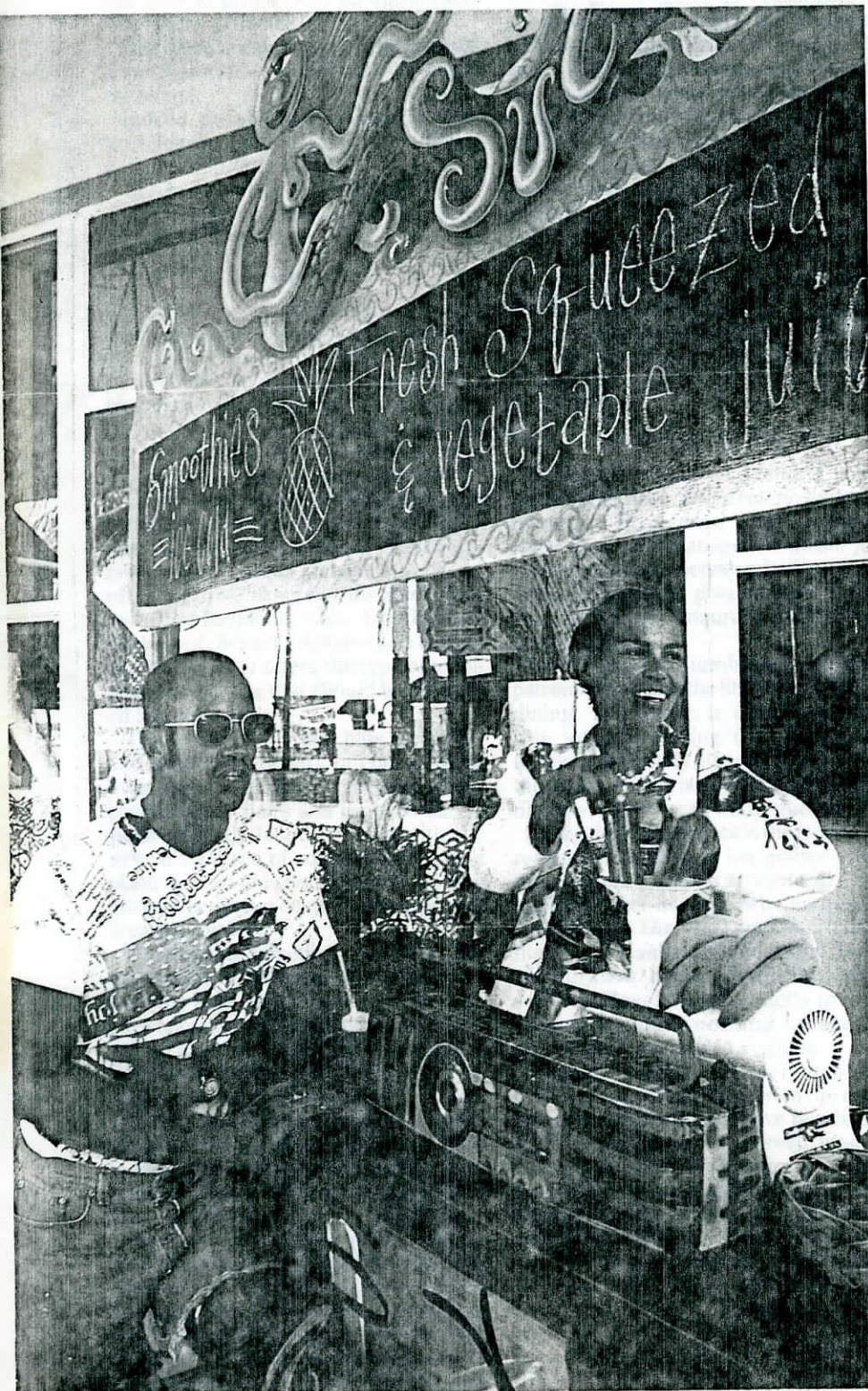


# live and let dine

exploring the town's taste terrains

by bob hosmon and carol romano



STEPHEN ELLISON

## The Aragon Cafe

I first dined on Chef Lisa Palermo's cuisine when she was the executive chef at Regine's, the chichi nightclub formerly located atop the Grand Bay Hotel in Coconut Grove. Palermo's talents had transformed what was once dull and traditional French into an exciting dining experience, and when the club closed, I wondered where she would go next. I found her five miles down the road, working at the Colonnade Hotel's Aragon Cafe in Coral Gables.

Although the Aragon Cafe was created to be a first-rate restaurant, it has experienced a mixed history, with cuisine fluctuating from excellent to completely horrid. With Chef Lisa Palermo in the kitchen, dining at the Aragon is once again a culinary delight. Consider blue crab cakes (\$10.95), filled with chunks of Florida crab, topped with papaya-tarragon butter sauce and served with jicama salad. Or fresh softshell crabs (\$8.95), delicately coated with a crispy cornmeal batter, garnished with roasted peppers and a hint of fresh basil.

The seafood here is excellent: Main course offerings include grilled swordfish and scallops (\$23.95) that flake on the fork. Florida's—and my—favorite snapper, fresh yellowtail (\$21.95), is crusted with crushed macadamia nuts and served with sweet potato gnocchi and tropical fruits. Salmon (\$21.95) is lightly seared in an orange-infused soy sauce, accompanied by spring rolls with crab and arugula, wood ear mushrooms and pickled ginger. And there's always fresh dolphin (\$18.95), tuna (\$18.95), grouper (\$18.95), yellowtail (\$19.95), and swordfish (\$19.95), prepared to order, either grilled, sauteed or poached.

Landlubbers can relish tender, fat-free rack of lamb (\$24.95) with pink pepper-corn sauce. Or Oriental-inspired roast duckling (\$19.95) with spicy cashews and relish. Or prime grilled New York sirloin (\$25.95), a special treat with crispy corn confetti and chipolte corn relish on the platter.

The Aragon's wine list is well-designed, thorough and fairly priced (Rosemount Shiraz for \$17; Santa Rita Chardonnay

**On the waterfront:** Tereza and Kenny Scharf get juiced up at their new Ocean Drive restaurant, Aqua.



for \$19). To complete your meal, the best desserts include a warm baked apple tart (\$6.50), made with pecans and topped with ice cream and caramel sauce.

If there are problems with the Aragon Cafe, they are not kitchen-based. The divided dining room seems cold and unfriendly, and could use better lighting and fresh flowers. The serving staff, while competent and obliging, sometimes tries too hard to please with an enthusiasm that seems artificial.

But these are minor managerial problems that can—and should—be easily corrected.

Indeed, the star of the Aragon Cafe is the kitchen, and Chef Lisa Palermo casts a very bright light.—*B.H.*

*The Aragon Cafe, The Colonnade Hotel, 180 Aragon Ave., Coral Gables. (305) 448-9966. ★★★*

### Aqua

Sometimes I wonder how many restaurants South Miami Beach can support. Surely, there are a limited number of customers to go around. Aren't some investors concerned that it may be too late to open yet another dining spot on the few blocks that encompass from Ocean Drive to Washington Avenue?

Clearly, new restaurateur Kenny Scharf is not worried. Scharf, one of America's best-known contemporary artists, recently opened Aqua at the northern end of Ocean Drive, along with his wife Tereza and Chef Raymond Hook. Like his predecessors', Scharf's restaurant is unique and trendy, and offers the type of ambiance and service that should be a part of all South Beach.

The look is white and blue, designed and painted by Scharf, of course. With high ceilings, a bar near the front door, cane-backed chairs and terrazzo floors, Aqua perfectly blends the old with the new. It's a place of comfort and light, a place to meet old friends and make new ones while dining on moderately priced, creative cuisine.

Outstanding appetizers include Chef Raymond's variation on blini with caviar; here the light, thin cakes are made with sweet potato and topped with a dollop of sturgeon roe (\$9.95). Marinated Portobello mushrooms (\$8.95) are filled with rich, earthy flavors, combined with anoki, sauteed arugula and hot and spicy peppers. Sweet and spicy shrimp (\$8.95) is sauteed with the flavors of ginger and scallions and leveled out with slices of fresh tropical fruit.

Main courses include what could be best described as a healthy selection. Sashimi tuna (\$19.95) is lightly grilled and served on a bed of steamed Oriental vegetables with spicy undertones. Vegetarians will appreciate the full flavors of a grilled vegetable platter (\$9.95) with

tomato caper salsa. And for the purist, there's tofu (\$8.95), stir-fried with spices and served with Oriental vegetables and brown rice.

For the recalcitrant meat-eater in the crowd, there's grilled beefsteak (\$21.95), prepared bistro-style, but uniquely supported by side dishes of mashed crimson potatoes and sauteed mushrooms.

Aqua's wine list is small and adequate, though prices aren't as reasonable as those for food (St. Francis Merlot, which retails in a wine shop for \$14, is \$29 here). Other objections include the serving of shaved cheese for pasta (please—change to shredded cheese that might melt). And some main courses, including a special linguine pasta with seafood, seem bland, bereft of flavor (a little seasoning might help).

But these are minor adjustments. For now, Aqua has made its mark on South Beach, and its owners need not fret. After all, when you're hot, you're hot. And Aqua is near the boiling point.—*B.H.*

*Aqua, The Winter Haven Hotel, 1400 Ocean Dr. Miami Beach. (305) 534-5288. ★★★*

### La Trattoria

Stifle that yawn... La Trattoria is not just another Boca-Italian eatery. Its young owners, Francesca and Raffaele Bassolino have managed to strike just the right balance between Italian *cucina alta* and *rustico* to present Palm Beach County with a restaurant that is truly extraordinary.

Under a mural of tumbling Pulcinellas, patrons here enjoy the illusion of al fresco dining. The theme is country garden, with intimate seating (20), terra cotta floors, a delicately lit tree that centers the room and crisp linen and antique tiles that add color to white stucco walls.

At the door, Francesca is the face of the restaurant, tending to her guests with a grace known in Italian as "*signorile*." Her husband Chef Raffaele, who earned accolades from *The New York Times* during his stay at Manhattan's Portofino, is the restaurant's pulse. Together, they achieve a level of authenticity in their menu that loses nothing by accommodating a variety of regions.

Nightly, a list of the evening's specials is presented along with the regular menu. Raffaele may have purchased eight or ten portions of fresh tuna to prepare braised with baby peas and vine-ripened tomatoes (\$16.95), or the kitchen might be offering ossobuco with hand-rolled gnocchi (\$16.95), or a salad of baby whiting in cold garlic sauce (\$12.95). Shrimp dishes are enormous and flavorful, dressed lightly in virgin olive oil and grilled with a brushing of garlic and lemon (\$16.50), or draped in capers, olives, cherry toma-

toes and white wine (\$16.95). Bistecca Quattro Gusti (\$17.95), a thick New York sirloin, comes out sizzling from the grill, topped with roasted red peppers, mushrooms, garlic and onions.

All entrees are served with a house salad and choice of vegetables or pasta, and complimentary bruschetta is served as soon as guests are seated. La Trattoria offers a seductive dessert selection: lush profiteroles, five-berry tarts and creamy hazelnut tortes are flown in daily from Milano; tiramesu and the blueberry ricotta cheesecake are prepared in-house and can be enjoyed with a number of dessert wines or special coffees. La Trattoria serves dinner nightly, and reservations are a must.—*C.R.*

*La Trattoria, 6060 S.W. 18th St., Boca Raton. (407) 750-1296. ★★★*

### Ristorante Lunas

At lunch on a balmy weekday, Ristorante Lunas overflows with a crowd of well-tailored men and floral-clad blondes. A sprinkling of bemused-looking tourists hold sway at the outdoor tables watching a local boutique saleswoman model glittery, nautical resort wear that could never be worn back in Butte, Montana. Lunas, set in a flower-filled plaza that typifies the Palm Beach scene, is a place where all can feel comfortable.

While ostensibly Italian, the kitchen at Lunas is still mild enough to please the All-American appetite. Well-prepared, fresh food is served by a young staff. The house specialty pasta is ravioli Mezza Luna, in a sweet red pepper and tomato sauce served on asiago cream coulee (\$11.50). Basil angel hair and whole wheat Tagliolini are other pasta selections, served up in abundant portions at both lunch (\$7.95) and dinner (\$12.50), often in the asiago cream sauce, clearly one of the chef's favorite garnishes.

Pork loin, oak-grilled and basted in Balsamic vinegar, with sun-dried tomatoes and a rosemary sauce (\$16.50), stands out for dinner, as does the fresh Florida snapper wrapped in Romaine and topped by a citrus butter sauce (\$16.95).

Lunas has an exceptional wine list, offering well-priced Italian and California selections by the glass or bottle. And for lingering after a meal (if only to admire the banyan tree that's visible from Lunas' terrace), try a sock-o glass of Grappa—with or without the ubiquitous espresso.—*C.R.*

*Ristorante Lunas, 777 E. Atlantic Ave., Atlantic Plaza, Delray Beach. (407) 276-6379. ★★★*

Bob Hosmon and Carol Romano dine anonymously at the expense of South Florida magazine. Restaurants are rated as follows: ★ Good, ★★ Very Good, ★★★ Excellent, ★★★★ Extraordinary.