

A Taste of the Tropics

Escape the cold and warm up at these restaurants showcasing the best in Florida Keys cuisine. By Julia Sayers



Photo by Emilce Gomez



Photo by Bob Krist/Florida Keys News Bureau



Photo courtesy of Lorelei Restaurant & Cabana Bar

Off the tip of Florida you'll find a tropical paradise that feels like you've been transported to the Caribbean without ever having to leave the country. The Florida Keys, a chain of islands that begins 15 miles south of Miami, are a haven for boating, fishing, diving, eco-tourism, and fresh seafood. A melting pot of cultures, the influence of the Caribbean and Cuba, and the benefit of being surrounded by the ocean can all be seen in Keys cuisine. Divided into three areas, the Upper, Middle, and Lower

Keys all offer a wide range of seaside dining, sunset views, and a taste of the tropics. Here, we feature our favorite places in each area to find four foods typical of the Keys: conch, fresh seafood, lobster, and Key lime pie.

Upper Keys



FRESH SEAFOOD:

For some of the freshest seafood in the Upper Keys, visit **The Fish House** in Key Largo. All their seafood is purchased whole from local

fishermen and filleted on the premises, maintaining the highest quality and freshness. The day's catch varies among mahi mahi, grouper, and yellowtail snapper, and you can choose from five different preparations. The most popular and the original house specialty is the Matecumbe preparation: fish topped with fresh tomatoes, shallots, basil, capers, olive oil, and lemon juice, then baked. Other preparations include Pan Sautéed with lemon, butter, and sherry, Black & Bleu with blue cheese and blackening seasoning, Baked Stuffed with

blue crabmeat, and Hemingway, where breaded fish is topped with a basil, wine, and garlic cream sauce. Purists don't fret, you can also get your fresh catch simply grilled, broiled, fried, or blackened. *102401 Overseas Hwy, Key Largo, FL 33037*



CONCH: You'll know you've found Lorelei Restaurant & Cabana Bar

when you see a larger-than-life mermaid structure greeting you in the parking lot. This waterfront restaurant has become known for their seven-days-a-week live music, happy-hour specials, and sunset views. But the live jams aren't the only thing happening at this open-air eatery. You can get a taste of a traditional Keys dish in all its glorious forms: conch.

New to conch? Order the Key's Conch Chowder or Conch Fritters, ground conch meat in a seasoned batter, lightly fried, and served with Lorelei's special sauce. Think hush puppies but with a Keys twist. If you already love conch, you can get the Cracked Conch Appetizer (fresh conch pounded to tenderize it) or make it your main meal with a Cracked Conch Sandwich. And wash it all down with Lorelei's signature drink: a Key Lime Colada. It's creamy, dreamy, and the best refresher on a hot Florida day. *96 Madeira Rd (Mile Marker 82), Islamorada, FL 33036*



LOBSTER: The Beach Café at Morada Bay in Islamorada is exactly what it sounds like it would be.

With longboards adorning the walls and colorful tables and Adirondack chairs on white sand that stretches to the bright blue water, you'll feel like you just stepped into a tropical paradise reminiscent of a Hawaiian surf shack. The menu is a blend of Caribbean, Mediterranean, and American cuisines and offers a variety of dishes, including fresh seafood, tapas, grilled steaks and pork chops, and Cuban sandwiches.

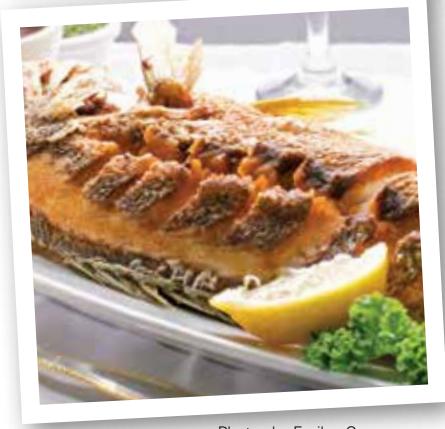
To get a true taste of Floribbean cuisine, order the Grilled Florida Lobster with a side of Coconut Rice. The Florida lobster is a spiny lobster, but prepared just right, it has a sweet taste similar to those from Maine. For lunch, you have the option to order the Lobster Grilled Cheese, which features Florida lobster tail, Parmesan, mozzarella, and provolone on a toasted ciabatta roll. If you happen to be at The Beach Café on the night of a full moon, stick around for Morada Bay's famous monthly full moon party with fireworks, fire dancers, live music, and glowing drinks. *81600 Overseas Hwy, Islamorada, FL 33036*



KEY LIME PIE: If you ask locals their favorite place to get Key lime pie, there's a good chance they'll say Mrs. Mac's Kitchen. This restaurant has been serving homemade Key lime pies, using the same recipe from the originator's mother, Mrs. Mac, since 1976. What really makes the pie special is the homemade graham cracker crust and the perfect

balance of sweet and tart. The pies are served in the traditional chilled method (versus just being like a lime-flavored lemon meringue pie), preserving the silky texture. On a typical day, Mrs. Mac's will sell about 200 slices, but with season in full swing, those numbers will increase to 480 slices on any given weekend day. Next time you're in Key Largo, stop in for a slice or take a whole pie home with you. *99336 Overseas Hwy, Key Largo, FL 33037*

For more information on visiting the Florida Keys, as well as a calendar of events and activities, visit fla-keys.com



Photos by Emilce Gomez

Middle Keys



FRESH SEAFOOD:

Brutus Seafood

Market & Eatery is a newer addition to the Marathon food scene, but the family behind the restaurant has been in the fishing industry for five generations. Husband-and-wife Bruce and Letty run the restaurant with their two daughters, Jessica and Chelsey, while their son Ryan has taken over the commercial fishing boat that supplies the restaurant's stone crabs and lobster.

All the seafood served at the restaurant is the freshest you can get, so make sure you check out the catch of the day and the 10 daily specials. Some of the most popular entrées at Brutus are the Herb Mahi, sautéed in an herb butter sauce and topped with fresh asparagus, tomato, spinach, and artichoke hearts; the Blackened Seafood platter featuring blackened shrimp, mahi mahi, and scallops; and The Brutus sandwich with fried mahi on a toasted sub roll with roasted jalapeño cilantro sauce. On your way out, pick up some fresh seafood from the in-house market for your next dinner. *6950 Overseas Hwy (Mile Marker 51), Marathon, FL 33050*



CONCH: For one of the largest selections of conch dishes in the

Keys, visit **Lazy Days South** in Marathon. With seven different preparations of the mollusk, you'll find everything from fried cracked conch and conch ceviche to conch fritters and conch chowder.



Lazy Days is known for their "Lazy Style" preparation of dishes. This involves encrusting the conch in panko bread crumbs, sautéing it, and topping it with diced fresh tomatoes, green onions, freshly grated Parmesan cheese, and homemade Key lime butter. You can get this Lazy Style conch as an appetizer, main meal, or on a sandwich. You also have the option of conch sautéed with just Key lime butter or garlic butter. And if you go for happy hour (4 p.m. to 6 p.m.), you can get \$2 off an order of conch fritters. *725 11th Street Ocean, Marathon, FL 33050*



LOBSTER: With endless water views of the Florida Bay, fresh seafood, and maybe even the chance to spot a manatee swim-

ming by, **Keys Fisheries** is the epitome of a laid-back Keys hangout. Even ordering at Keys Fisheries is a fun experience. You won't be asked a name for your order; instead, you'll be asked to



Photos courtesy of Burdines Waterfront



give an answer to the question of the day, such as your favorite song or the name of a tropical bird.

Chances are you ordered the famous Lobster Rueben, and it stands up to its claim. The generously portioned sandwich is packed with sweet, meaty Florida lobster and topped with sauerkraut, Thousand Island dressing, and melted Swiss cheese. The bread is toasted and buttery, and the sandwich is overall a satisfying way to enjoy lobster. And eating it while watching a renowned Keys sunset makes it even better! *3502 Louisa St, Marathon, FL 33050*



KEY LIME PIE: Right on the ocean in Marathon, you'll find

Burdines Waterfront, a marina with a tiki bar and grill. With plastic deck chairs and memorabilia on the walls, Burdines isn't a fancy place, but it doesn't need to be since the food speaks for itself. Opened 16 years ago, Burdines started out with an electric griddle and a one-basket fryer but has now become a true staple for locals in the area. With just a simple menu, Burdines is famous for their burgers, fresh hand-cut fries, and fried Key lime pie.

This delightful confection came about one night when the staff was trying to come up with a way to use up the day's Key lime pie. They decided to wrap it in a tortilla, brush it with butter, and fry it. Today, the restaurant has become known for the fried Key lime pie, and it is served fresh from the fryer, topped with a sour cream-based Key lime sauce, and

dusted with cinnamon sugar. *1200 Oceanview Ave, Marathon, FL 33050*

Lower Keys



FRESH SEAFOOD:

On Stock Island, the last little island you'll drive through before getting to Key West, make a stop at **Hogfish Bar & Grill**, which has been selling its original hogfish sandwich for more than 13 years. Hogfish is a Keys delicacy, and the sweet, white fish has been compared to the taste of scallops and lobster.

Hogfish Grill's world-famous "Killer" Hogfish Sandwich consists of hogfish smothered with Swiss cheese, mushrooms, and onions sandwiched between fresh Cuban bread. The restaurant serves only fresh-caught, authentic hogfish, so you'll never find lesser fish substituted for the hogfish dishes. You



Photo by Christopher Rogers Photography, Inc.

Traditional Cuban Cuisine

When you're visiting the Keys, you can't pass up the chance to get some authentic Cuban cuisine. With Key West located only 90 miles from Cuba (closer than Miami), you'll see a strong Cuban influence on the island. Sandy's Café in Key West has been serving up their Original Cuban Sandwich for 20 years. With pork, ham, salami, and Swiss cheese layered between two slices of Cuban bread, this mixed sandwich is the best representation of true Cuban food. Pair it with a Café con Leche (espresso with milk) or a Buchi (espresso shot). And the best part about this little joint? They're open 24 hours a day, seven days a week, so you can satisfy your cravings any time. *1026 White St, Key West, FL 33040*

can also get Fried Hogfish Tacos, Fried Hogfish Benedict, or Grilled Hogfish Fillet with Blackened Scallops. The grill offers numerous other seafood dishes, as well as the opportunity to bring your own catch to be cooked. The food at Hogfish Grill is just about as fresh as it gets. *6810 Front Street, Stock Island, FL 33040*



CONCH: Located at the Historic Seaport at Key West Bight, the **Conch Republic Seafood Company** has

an interesting background that still influences the restaurant today. In 1949, vast beds of shrimp were found in the Gulf, just near the Dry Tortugas (about 68 miles west of Key West). Hundreds of shrimp boats began operating out

of the bight, and the property the restaurant now stands on was the Singleton Fish House and Ice Plant. Once the largest in the world, the ice plant allowed for more efficient unloading and processing of the day's shrimp catch. In the 1990s, the large warehouse was transformed into the Conch Republic Seafood Company, and today you can get a taste of some of the freshest shrimp (order the Stuffed Shrimp) and seafood around.

But it wouldn't be the Conch Republic without conch, and the restaurant's Conch Chowder is award winning. This Bahamian-style red chowder features stewed conch, herbs, and potatoes in a spicy tomato broth. You can also order Cracked Conch (pounded fresh conch cut into strips, tempura-battered, and fried) or Conch Fritters with Key lime mustard. After you're finished, walk around the historic seaport, and don't miss the saltwater tanks filled with marine life right inside the restaurant itself. *631 Greene Street, Key West, FL 33040*



LOBSTER: Just a block off Duval Street, you'll find a little haven to escape the heat and enjoy a cold drink on a shaded patio under a canopy of tropical trees. **Grunts Island Grill** was opened by Chef Josh Furman in 2012 and is now known for its delectable Florida lobster dishes and fresh seafood. Furman, who began his career at the first restaurant in the United Kingdom to receive three Michelin stars, has put together a menu of refined Keys cuisine.

One of the restaurant's most popular dishes is the Stuffed Lobster Tail, which consists of a local spiny lobster tail stuffed with a mixture of scallops, shrimp, and lobster and finished with Key lime juice, roasted tomatoes, basil, thyme, and butter. You can also get lobster in the Lobster Mac and Cheese with spiny lobster tail, Colby cheese, and white truffle oil, topped with panko bread crumbs and baked. No matter which lobster dish you choose, you won't be disappointed. *409 Caroline Street, Key West, FL 33040*



KEY LIME PIE: As you approach **Kermit's Key West Key Lime**

Shoppe, you might see a man out front wearing a chef's coat and hat, arm outstretched, offering you a Key lime pie. That man is Kermit, owner and founder of the Key Lime Shoppe. Kermit opened his shop 25 years ago as an outpost for all things Key lime. In celebrating the island's favorite fruit, the shop sells 120 different Key lime items, from jellies to barbecue sauces to cookies.

But the real star of the show is, of course, Kermit's Key lime pie. He uses his grandmother's traditional recipe featuring sweetened condensed milk, Key lime juice, and egg yolks and hasn't changed a thing since. You're really in for a treat, though, with Kermit's chocolate-dipped Key lime pie on a stick. A slice of Kermit's pie is dipped in dark Belgian chocolate and frozen, making it a refreshing dessert. The richness of the chocolate complements the pucker of the pie, and you'll fall in



Photos by Christie McQueen

love with this new combination. Ready for a second slice? Try the strawberry Key lime pie dipped in white chocolate. *200 Elizabeth Street, Key West, FL 33040*