

## A Class Act in Noon Dining

Lunch is relaxing and delicious at the FIU dining room

By Ima Foudé

Making lunch plans with a friend is one of those luxuries we cannot and should never do without. Lunch with a friend who will listen and who loves you unconditionally should never be exchanged for a sandwich at the desk. And finding the right place to hang and to catch up, to eat a meal that is leisurely served by professional staff without feeling like it's a splurge can be a challenge. However, a place did come to mind that happened to be between our two locations—me in Miami, and she in Miramar—and that fit the above criteria.

Lynne and I have not seen in each other in months. Between work, children, family illness, a chronic cold—who has time and the energy for one more commitment? Pushing it all aside, we made a lunch date one Tuesday in February, even though I was prepared for her to cancel due to another commitment. But we made a commitment to each other and we met at the FIU School of Hospitality dining room in North Miami.



An FIU School of Hospitality student puts flowers on a table she prepares to serve lunch at the FIU School of Hospitality



FIU School of Hospitality students prepare to serve lunch at the FIU School of Hospitality

The FIU School of Hospitality dining room is one of those restaurants that leave you with the impression that you're in the know; it's one of those best-kept-secrets-kind-of-places that make you feel as if you actually live in the city you call home.

Greeted at the door by a student offering a glass of punch and seated by a student, we joined 65 other people from the

outside world for lunch at the dining room's one service at noon. A few moments later, an eager-to-please young lady welcomed us and gave us the menu for that day, planned and

coordinated by the students in Professor Michael Moran's class, Advanced Food Production Management.

The menu changes every time the dining room is open. Such entree choices include Duck Confit with Dirty Rice and Orange Gastrique or Baked Red Snapper; Grilled Veal Chop with Wild Mushroom Ragout or Red Snapper Veracruz; Thai Curry Chicken with Jasmine Rice or Steamed Black Bass with Sansho Szechuan Pepper with Miso Broth and Lo Mein Noodle; Oven Roasted Spiced Salmon or Turkey Pot Pie, among many other selections.

Our \$15 bought a 3-course lunch, including a glass of wine, iced and hot tea, and coffee. Everyone receives homemade bread, an appetizer, and a choice of an entree and, of course, dessert. On that day, our menu included warm freshly-made foccacia, a Spicy Calamari Salad dressed with a balsamic reduction and olive oil, a choice of entree- Chicken Cacciatore or Macadamia Nut Crusted Snapper with Red Onion and Tomato Relish, and for dessert, we enjoyed homemade Pistachio Panna-Cotta.



Chef Michael Moran and his FIU School of Hospitality students prepare lunch at the FIU School of Hospitality

Truly an on-the-job experience, we saw students who have never served or bussed a table do their job with a smile and an efficiency that would belie their status as students. Actually, the service was better than what can be found at some of the nicer restaurants in town. We ate a meal prepared by students who are not chefs in training, but students of the hospitality industry. But no one was questioning—they prepared and served a delicious and satisfying meal that diners would only believe would be prepared by a professional staff.

Attention was made to everything, between the coordinated colors of the linen and the table's flower arrangements, the proper setting of forks, spoons, knives, glasses and bread plate, and the subtle music piped in over the speakers. As for the food, each course was balanced and beautifully plated in a manner pleasing to the eye and nose, all coming together to tempt our taste-buds.



In addition, much to our surprise, the portions were generous and substitutions were made for my guest who preferred a simple salad, instead of the tender and somewhat spicy calamari salad. Lynne and I both ordered the fish, but the chicken cacciatore looked and smelled delicious and was enjoyed by many as we saw many empty plates picked up and

An FIU School of Hospitality student, second from right, speaks with guests during lunch at the FIU School of Hospitality

delivered back to the kitchen.

Our snapper was delicately dressed to go out—crunchy and buttery nuts encased the supple and juicy flesh as it was lightly pan-fried and adorned with red onions and fresh tomatoes, atop fresh pencil thin grilled asparagus and a hearty spoonful of warm and crumbly couscous. To complement our fish we were offered the choice of a glass of red or white wine—we chose a glass of bright chardonnay from California.

Sitting and chatting, we would have to remind each other that we were not at a tony restaurant on Ocean Drive or on Las Olas, but on the campus of FIU, situated in North Dade off Biscayne Boulevard set against a nature's preserve and Biscayne Bay.

Next came dessert, but not before our server quietly, efficiently and swiftly removed our dishes, cutlery and wine glasses. Green as a shamrock, we were served a confection that I have never seen and definitely have not eaten before: Pistachio Panna-Cotta. Graduate student Bianca Riojas, who definitely has a career in the wide world of sweets, creates the dessert served at the FIU Dining Room. I'm wondering what inspired her to create such an ending to our meal, and at a certain point it didn't matter: it was rich and delicious, and we were reminded that spring is here, right outside the window.

We were never rushed, never felt pressured that we had to depart before the class ended 90 minutes later. What made the entire experience sweet and memorable was that at the end of service, each student introduced themselves and said where they were from—Peru, China, Dominican Republic, Jamaica, Arab Emirates, Canada, and of course, the United States—and then toasted Chef Moran, thanking and publicly acknowledging his personal guidance.

It was a real treat to be part of this real world/classroom experience. It was what lunch was supposed to be: a respite from the real world of ringing phones, beeps, twitters, e-mail messages, and meetings, and was successful in preparing us to meet head-on the real world of ringing phones, beeps, twitters, and e-mail messages.



An FIU School of Hospitality student prepares dessert

Given the schedule of classes and the intimate dining room space, I would suggest reservations, which can be made by calling Paula Wright at 305-919-4500.