

# Sarasota Superstar Wine Dinner

## A Florida Evening With Four Chefs and a Sommelier

BY DOC LAWRENCE

This was once the headquarters of America's greatest circus that today has a core culture the envy of much larger cities. On a magic evening, a group of Florida's finest chefs gathered at the luxurious Hyatt Siesta Key Resort to showcase their recipes and cooking skills with everything based on the bounty from Florida's land and waters. The gathering of renowned chefs and VIP diners was hosted by the incomparable Judi Gallagher, the well-known television celebrity chef who has emerged as a high-profile clarion for Florida's living culinary heritage.

This was the main event of a culinary tour of Sarasota that brought me into the lovely Southwest Florida city where I visited a group of notable restaurants like Jane Ferro's magnificent Ophelia's on the bay ([www.opheliasonthebay.com](http://www.opheliasonthebay.com)) and Beach Bistro ([www.beachbistro.com](http://www.beachbistro.com)) Sean Murphy's heralded gourmet shrine on Anna Maria Island.

Beach Bistro earns high Zagat rankings plus fine dining and wine excellence awards, and offers a quintessential original—"lobstercargots"—a signature dish with chunks of Florida spiny lobster known in some quarters as "bulldozers." A delicious substitute for escargot, it is slow cooked in a crock with herbed spinach and seasoned garlic butter. Enjoy a high-quality Chardonnay with this delight.

### Cooking at Home

The regal fine dining finale was, appropriately, at Hyatt Siesta Key, a culinary tour de force, likely a Florida first for gourmet dining. The four celebrity chefs with different philosophies and backgrounds created original dishes incorporating the food diversity of the Sunshine State, confirming that Florida food is unique in America.

Thanks to sommelier Georgina Frost, the evening began with the classic aperitif, flutes of Billecart-Salmon Brut Blanc De Blancs NV, an affirmation that new friendships are always possible when great Champagne is being poured.

Chef Derek Barnes prepared the first course of Apalachicola oyster gratin with cured bacon, tomatoes and preserved lemon, proving that his years with Emeril in New Orleans were the equivalent of a doctorate in culinary science. Pairing this spectacular dish with a near-perfect Chablis Premier Cru prompted recollections of the oyster and wine experiences told by Ernest Hemingway in *A Moveable Feast*.

The next course, prepared by esteemed chef Aaron Chavarria who commands the kitchen ship at the Sarasota Hyatt Regency Hotel was an unforgettable pan-seared Hog Snapper, served on top of Boniato-Ginger,

Swiss chard and a touch of tropical passion fruit salsa, paired with Ms. Frost's wine selection, a 2007 Domaine Ostertag "Fronholz" Riesling from Alsace, France. The lagniappe, Chef Aaron's Conch and Octopus Ceviche has no counterpart in my experience. It is remarkable and should be introduced to the gourmet world.

Chef Dan Anderson of Morton's Market, the caterer for Hyatt Seista Key Resort, served his braised Kobe Beef short rib with anise and sichuan, cinnamon pumpkin polenta, Chantrelle mushrooms, fennel and cranberry clove compote served with 2004 Australian Shiraz followed by the pièce de résistance, Judi Gallagher's Peach, Blueberry and Raspberry Cobbler accompanied by a delicious sweet beer from Belgium.

### The Hyatt Siesta Key Beach Resort

Location is everything. The "Cooking at Home" gourmet dinner at newly opened Hyatt Siesta Key Beach Resort ([www.hyattsiestakeybeach.com](http://www.hyattsiestakeybeach.com)) provided the magic environment. Located on a crescent-shaped barrier island boasting one of the top ten beaches in the world with a view of magnificent Gulf of Mexico sunsets somehow guarantees a relaxed lifestyle. Hyatt Siesta Key is the first purpose-built luxury fractional ownership property in the Sun Coast area, a boutique collection of 44 residences surrounded by lushly landscaped grounds. Interiors are richly furnished and reflect the soft hues of the Gulf coast and are everything one would expect from an ultra luxurious beachfront home. On-site amenities are luxurious and across the board.

Sarasota is the epicenter of Florida's Cultural Coast, a legacy initiated by wealthy families like circus pioneers John and Mabel Ringling who adopted Sarasota as their winter home. Arts, culture, nature, fine dining and beaches seem to blend together. Along with a professional symphony, ballet and opera, Sarasota has world-class museums and art venues including The John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art. The 66-acre estate on Sarasota Bay was established in 1927 and is the official Florida State



*A dinner for the ages at Hyatt Siesta Key Beach Resort in Sarasota. The acclaimed staff of gourmet artisans hosted a tribute to Florida's living culinary heritage. Back row, left to right: Judi Gallagher, Chef Dan Anderson. Front row, left to right: Geoff Reyes, Sommelier Georgina Frost, Chef Derek Barnes, Chef Aaron Chavarria, Daniel Bronke and Mike Ray. Photo by Heather Ripley*

Art Museum with 21 galleries of European paintings as well as Cypriot antiquities, Asian Art, American paintings and contemporary art. The estate features the spectacular Cà d'Zan, Ringling's waterfront mansion. The stunning Circus Museums house the world's largest miniature circus, costumes, wagons, performance equipment and other artifacts chronicling the history of the circus.

The acclaimed Asolo Repertory performs primarily in the Mertz Theatre, an elegant 500-seat facility that was originally an opera house in Dunfermline, Scotland, demolished in the 1980s. The interior was salvaged, shipped to Sarasota and restored. From November to June, Asolo presents a unique rotating repertory ranging from classics to new works that provides theatergoers the opportunity to enjoy up to four different plays in a single weekend. Each season more than 100,000 people attend the Asolo's productions.

Fine dining ranks alongside the arts, the pleasures of the beach and luxury living in this thriving city. I discovered that Florida's living culinary heritage is part of Sarasota's bedrock, a treasure that will continue to bring in visitors who in turn will tell the world that this is a special part of America.

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