

Solares Hill ~ MAY 30, 2003 *by Margit Bisztray*

History~ artists and yachts are not the things that came to my mind when I think of Stock Island. I didn't know that the CIA's Bay of Pigs operation was based out of Safe Harbor Marina, or that the ferry to Cuba departed from a dock nearby, or that the Stock Island Yacht Club is 20-plus-members strong. Lining the marina dock are artists' and woodworkers' cottages. It goes to show you, there's no way to know just what's 'round the bend in these parts.

Safe Harbor Marina has always had a bar. Any shrimper can tell you that, if you speak the shrimper's language (Korean or Vietnamese, anyone?). Until eight months ago, you could get a hamburger, a hotdog or a steak sandwich and the beer came in cans (which cause less damage to the head during a bar brawl). No one went for the food and least of all the seafood, of which there was none.

A few things have developed. Bobby Mongelli of P.T.'s and Geiger Key, has brought the bar into his fold and named it the Hogfish Bar and Grill. He's managed to execute significant changes without it looking like he changed anything much. Someone like me can walk in and feel as though she's dropped out of the present and is breathing in the scent of a more innocent and rowdier past. She can imagine the wagers at the pool table, the women flirting by the jukebox, the countless men in white boots who've sat at the picnic tables, or at stools around the bar. She's a writer, after all, and the material is very good. Perhaps it's the black and white photographs or the painted wood posts and tin roof, reminiscent of a tree fort or a bunker. You can look around a place like this, picture what has happened there and not be very far from the truth.

Mongelli has also purchased 60 feet of dock adjacent to the restaurant, where boats will be welcome to dock for a taste of Stock Island leisure. Stock Island is bound to change — everyone's talking about it — but it's reassuring to know that some elements will also be preserved.

The Hogfish will have a renovated kitchen by September, which will include, most notably, a fryer. It has already progressed beyond the George Forman grill that sufficed under its previous owner, by introducing for example, the best hogfish sandwich and hogfish Caesar I've had in ages and by bringing in celebrity-musician-chefs.

Mick (who played with the Sauce Boss) and Barry Cuda appear on Saturdays. The duo plays New Orleans music, cooking up a stew between pounding out tunes and telling anecdotes. When I went, they were making jambalaya, and had everyone's mouths watering each time they announced it would be "ten more minutes" and sat down to jam some more. Finally, the rice was cooked through, chock full of sausage and fat shrimp in a buttery tomato sauce. In addition to this Creole specialty, the pair stir up a mean Cajun étouffée, a kick-ass gumbo, and a shrimp and-chicken-in-brandy-sauce that Bobby Mongelli rolls his eyes in wonder over. There's something too fun about 1 awaiting a communal meal, 1 drinking beer and watching~ two musicians pound out ~ Earl King.

But back to that hogfish. It's already my favorite local fish and this, dusted with flour and pan seared, was perfect. I just don't want

to eat fish unless it's this fresh and delicate. The Hogfish Bar and Grill offers the convenience of being located right off the fishing docks and of being patronized by shrimpers, Seafood does not get more local than this and most food at the restaurant is only \$7.95.

The Hogfish Bar & Grill is open from 9 a.m. weekends until it closes, usually around midnight or 1 a.m. Weekdays, it opens at 10 a.m. Sundays, breakfast is served, and is usually an omelet filled with the good stuff from Saturday night. Where else can you feast on a jambalaya omelet? Sunday night is barbecue night, Friday is Cuban, and there is music all three weekend nights.

take 4th Street off Maloney, left on Front Street (follow the hogfish signs.) See the part of Stock Island that will stay like Stock Island when Stock Island becomes like Key West. ~