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Catching the History of Key West



Barbara P. Fernandez for The New York Times

A hogfish, freshly caught and much prized.

By CINDY PRICE

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AT the Eaton Street Seafood Market in the historic district of [Key West](#), Fla., a long glass case displayed a who's who of the city's seafood scene: plump piles of pinks (the local shrimp) snuggled next to a yellowtail snapper, a mound of stone crab claws and fresh slabs of grouper. I'd come to eat my way through Key West's delicacies, and here was my map.

[Key West, Fla.](#)

But I wasn't there just to taste. I was there to learn, to unravel a bit of the city's history, culture and lore, using the local seafood as my guide. Good eats, with a window into the city's past and present.

My first lesson, it turned out, would prove to be the most important. "I'm the only surviving specimen," said Harvey Watkins, Eaton Street's stone crab supplier, as we stood in the quiet little market, the crash and thrum of nearby Duval Street seemingly miles away. "I'm the last commercial fisherman in the old Key West harbor."

It's a story that Eaton Street Market's owners, Andrea Morgan and Sean Seaman, know well — and the reason they opened their shop last year. They want to sell fresh seafood caught by local fisherman, and buck the import trend they say is killing the local [fishing](#) industry. They also want to ensure that their customers get the real deal.

“Tourists come through and say, ‘Well, I can buy grouper in [Chicago](#),’ ” Mr. Seaman said, shaking his head. “No, you can't. It's probably something else.”

For travelers looking to soak up some sunshine and sample the local bounty, a bag of stone crab claws from Eaton Street could well be Shangri-La. “People come in and want to go to Mallory Square or Fort Zach and have a picnic,” Mr. Seaman said as he cracked open a crab and handed me the “lollipop,” the lump claw meat.

Dipped in a housemade mustard sauce, the result was delicious — rich and meaty, like Alaskan king crab, but with more give. Starting at around \$14 a pound, the claws are expensive, but buying them to go at Eaton Street costs less than half of what you'd pay in a sit-down restaurant.

What you do need to sit down for, however, is a proper fish sandwich. Just a short walk away, through the quiet streets of Old Town, B. O.'s Fish Wagon is a thumping little shanty-shack with a reputation for serving one of the best fish sandwiches in town. It deserves the hype — especially the fried “square grouper.” When it's in stock, it's topped with lettuce, tomato, onion and spiked with Key lime mayo (\$10.75).

Buddy Owen, who owns B. O.'s, started selling his sandwich out of a wagon on Duval Street in the late 1970s. “We were there for close to 20 years,” he said, before a friend of his known as [Panama](#) Jack stepped in to pay for the restaurant. The late writer and humorist Shel Silverstein was a fan of B. O.'s, and Mr. Owen still cooks for the singer [Jimmy Buffett](#) when he comes to town.

Things weren't always so easy for Mr. Owen; there was a time, he says, when the local authorities thought he was smuggling drugs. He wasn't, but the name of his sandwich sure had them buzzing. Back in the 1970s, if you came home from fishing and said you had caught a square grouper, it meant that you had stumbled upon a bale of marijuana that had fallen off a boat from [Jamaica](#). If you could manage to sell it off, it also meant that you didn't have to go fishing for a while.

THE 1970s were heady days in Key West, and it was then that a young [Norman Van Aken](#) checked into town and discovered the basics for his New World Cuisine. He recently returned to Key West from [Miami](#) to open the swank Tavern N Town — a sexy, mahogany-lined restaurant with an open kitchen and white-cloth dining room in back.

“You become like a jazz artist, where you begin to riff,” said Mr. Van Aken, explaining his return. “But the roots of the Key West cuisine stabilize the riffing. If you're somewhere without those deep roots, you can lose it.”

I'd come to sample his conch salad (conch is the sea snail that lives inside the spiral shell of the same name), which is named after Miss Betty, whom he met in 1978; she was a Bahamian woman who favored combat boots and straight talk in the kitchen. "Betty was just all real," he said. "So when she showed me the conch salad, there were no embellishments. Just the conch, a little olive oil, a splash of orange, red onion, bell pepper, garlic."

When Bahamians began migrating to Key West, in the early 1800s, they brought their staple food with them, earning them the nickname "conch." But what was once a derogatory term for people who couldn't afford better is now a source of pride used to describe anyone born in Key West, and conch has become the town's most famous ingredient. So famous, in fact, that gathering it was banned in these waters by the federal government in 1985 because it had become an endangered species. Conch is now imported from the [Caribbean](#); Mr. Van Aken only serves his salad when he can procure a good batch.

"That's the trouble with any animal that moves slow and tastes good," said Tom Hambright, a local historian. "We eat them all up."

Spinning off of Miss Betty's recipe, Mr. Van Aken dices his conch and vegetables into tender, tiny cubes, serving it in a martini glass. A cocktail shaker of marinade poured over it quickly pickles the raw conch into a ceviche (\$11).

That process — sashimi-to-ceviche — is one I saw repeated by B. (short for Brother) Johnson the next day at Johnson's Grocery, a corner market in Bahama Village with pictures of [Bill Clinton](#), who visited last year, on the wall.

"Ceviche's just a fancy word for conch salad," said his wife, Brenda, pulling out her secret stash of chunks of conch, green pepper and tomato.

"Now that's just street," Mr. Johnson said, pointing to the raw conch. "That's how I eat it. If you like, you can add a little lime juice or salt and pepper."

I'd heard that the Johnsons make the best conch fritters in town, but they recently closed their cafe and only the grocery remains (which doesn't serve housemade food). On the issue of chefs relying on store-bought mix for their fritters, Mr. Johnson was funny but staunch. "I saw a guy holding a bag one day, and he said, 'Shh. That's the conch fritters,'" he said. "I said 'What?'"

One place he does recommend is a few doors down. The Conch Shop is where I sampled a soft, fluffy fritter that held healthy chunks of conch (\$6 a half-dozen).

Conch might have to be imported nowadays, but not so the Key West pink. Pinks are the local shrimp: plump and pinkish-coral in color, with a distinguishing red dot in the center. I found a half-pound to inspect at the Half Shell Raw Bar (\$12.95), the kind of large, open-air restaurant that the old Key West Bight has become synonymous with in the last

few years. Like Turtle Kraals next door, it's commercial enough to sell T-shirts, but locals still pile in.

Boiled in Old Bay seasoning and beer, the shrimp were salty and warm. If you skip the butter, you'll catch the hint of sweetness connoisseurs talk about. Across town, at Amy Culver's new Dreyfuss Deli, I tried them in a barbecue shrimp roll (\$9.50) so fresh I still heard them snap, even under the smear of Gorgonzola and warm, crusty bread.

Mr. Hambright said only a handful of local shrimp boats remain in what was once an industry of about 300 boats; shrimpers have been hurt by the rise in farm-raised, imported shrimp. He said one ex-shrimper told him they were getting less on the dock for shrimp today than he got in the mid-70s. Mr. Hambright said restaurants that promote the pinks "keep these few boats going, because they're willing to pay the extra price to get the real wild shrimp."

One such restaurant is Hogfish Bar and Grill, a lively roadhouse-style joint at a marina a few minutes outside Key West proper, on Stock Island. The pinks, done up in a ceviche salad, were a nice surprise. I'd actually come to talk with the owners, Bobby and Michelle Mongelli, about their reputation for nabbing more hogfish than anyone in town.

The motto around Key West on hogfish, a flaky, delicate, white-fleshed fish, is "we have it when we have it." It's indigenous, but it's hard to come by: not only does it have to be speared by a diver, but it's also seasonal.

"There's a mystique surrounding it," Mr. Mongelli said. "You know how it is. The harder it is to get, the more people want it." As an ex-diver with enough connections to make a small-town mayor blush, he gets about 30 to 40 percent of the local pull, but even he runs out sometimes. (He's been known to spear a few himself, if complaints get too loud.) Asking for it fried and "killer" lands you a huge sandwich smothered in Swiss, onions and mushrooms on fresh Cuban bread (\$14.95).

The marina where the Hogfish sits is one of the last undeveloped deep-water ports on the East Coast, and talk turned to the future. There's a lot of buzz about what will happen to Stock Island if and when [Cuba](#) opens up.

For now, though, Stock Island remains a quiet refuge from bustling Key West — a place where locals come to show out-of-towners what Key West used to be like, where commercial shrimp boats still pull in from three-week journeys at sea.

"That's Ricky Toomer's boat," Mr. Mongelli said, pointing across the marina. "He just came back with \$50,000 worth of shrimp. It's loaded to the gills with shrimp." Like Harvey Watkins, Mr. Toomer is one of the last commercial fishermen in the area.

I looked down. The pink in my hand had come fresh off his boat.