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SERVING SOUTH FLORIDA'S MOST IMPORTANT AUDIENCE

Busy professionals suggest favorite spots for special lunch

By Charlotte Libov

It takes a lot of ingenuity to deal with the busy social calendar Miami's winter season brings. There's often so much going on at night – what with all the parties, galas, film festivals and shows – it helps to spread out the fun and make lunch a special occasion.

For that special-occasion lunch, here's a roundup of some favorites of busy professionals.

“Whenever we have something special to mark in the office – whether it's a birthday, National Boss Day, Secretary's Day or the holidays – everyone wants to go to Las Culebrinas,” said Ileana Carrera Portel, marketing officer for Ocean Bank. “I am Hispanic, so I know good Cuban/Spanish food, and this is my favorite place. The portions are huge, the food is amazing and the service is great. I've turned many people on to this place.”

Her favorite dish includes one that combines bits of fried beef with seafood, she said. “They cook up the beef with onions and peppers and pour grilled seafood over it, and the combination is just wonderful. It comes with delicious fried plantains and black beans and rice, which is out of this world. And it's great paired with tostones, which come with a wonderful lemon-and-garlic sauce that if



Photo by Marlene Quaroni

Virginia Jacko – with her guide dog, Tracker – and Alvaro Cabrera lunch at Prime 112 in Miami Beach.

you pour over them, they melt in your mouth.”

Starting a meal at Las Culebrinas often means choosing from a list of 18 tapas, including shrimp sautéed in garlic sauce, fried Spanish sausage and ham croquettes. Meat or pork entrées include

Cuban-style grilled sirloin steak; grilled pork chops with mixed rice and beans and cassava; and breaded top sirloin steak with tomato sauce topped with melted cheese. Seafood and chicken dishes include sautéed salmon filet in balsamic vinegar with potatoes and

salad; sautéed seafood in Spanish sauce; or chicken chunks served with rice and plantains. A popular way to top off your meal is the custard, flamed at the table.

While Ms. Portel and her friends can usually be found at the restaurant's 4700

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W. Flagler St. location, there are four others – at 9095 SW 40th St., 2890 SW 27th Ave., in Coconut Grove, 12257 S. Dixie Highway in Pinecrest and 4590 W. 12th Ave. in Hialeah. Tapas range from \$1 to \$8.95 and entrées from \$10.50 to \$39. Hours at all locations are 11:30 a.m.-11 p.m. Sundays-Thursdays and 11:30 a.m.-midnight Fridays and Saturdays. Details: (305) 445-2337.

Recently, Virginia Jacko, president and CEO of Miami Lighthouse for the Blind and Visually Impaired, and Al Cabrera, one of her organization's board members, wanted to talk business. They chose Prime 112, a popular steakhouse in Miami Beach.

"Al ordered the ribeye steak, and I ordered the filet mignon, and we both agreed they were among the best steaks we'd ever eaten," Ms. Jacko said.

She said she loves that basic steaks, meats and chops are served with a variety of dipping sauces including Prime 112 Steak, horseradish cream, hollandaise, béarnaise, chimchurri, peppercorn and English mustard. "They were interesting, very different sauces, and the steak tasted differently, depending on

which sauce you used," she said.

Entrées are served a la carte. For a side dish, Ms. Jacko said, "we decided to forget worrying about carbs and go for the four-cheese macaroni and cheese. And when it came to the baked sweet potatoes, no Thanksgiving dinner ever had any as good as these."

Ms. Jacko, who travels with her guide dog, Tracker, said she appreciated the service and easy access to the restaurant. Prime 112 has a raw bar and appetizers including a four-cheese fondue for the table, oysters Rockefeller and prime steak tartar.

In addition to steaks, entrée options include lobster with jumbo lump crab and bay scallop stuffing, grilled wild king salmon and pan-roasted boneless half-chicken with garlic mashed potatoes. Dessert choices include warm dulce de leche bread pudding with vanilla ice cream, chocolate pudding cake with sweet cream and cherries and bananas-foster cheesecake served with a rum toffee sauce.

Appetizers are \$15-\$24, entrées \$28-\$42, side dishes \$11-\$14 and desserts \$9-\$11. Prime 112, 112 Ocean Dr., is open

for lunch noon-3 p.m. weekdays and for dinner 5:30 p.m.-midnight Sundays-Thursdays and 5:30 p.m.-1 a.m. Fridays and Saturdays. Details: (305) 532-8112. When Wendy Kallergis, president of the Miami Beach Chamber of Commerce, wants to have a special lunch, she doesn't head far. The city's collection of exquisite Art Deco boutique hotels is only a short distance away. Her only problem, she said, is that the area offers an embarrassment of riches. She finds it so difficult to choose sometimes, she said, that she rotates among the Restaurant at the Raleigh, the Blue Door and the Tamara.

At the Blue Door, lunch appetizers include shrimp cake served with warm vegetable julienne and a Cobb salad made with blue crab and mango. Appetizers and salads are \$10-\$21 and sandwiches, pizzas and entrees \$19-\$44.

At the Tamara, diners can choose such as shrimp cocktail, a fresh-fruit plate or a tomato wrap filled with tuna salad and mixed greens. More-filling choices include Build Your Own Pizza; a quesadilla with peppers, onions and grated mozzarella served with guacamole; or a

grilled New York strip steak served with salad and french fries. Appetizers are \$5-\$17, entrees \$16-\$31.

At the Raleigh, lunch choices include a grilled fish of the day, tuna tacos, cerviche and a spicy beef salad. Prices range from \$8 to \$19 for appetizers and \$14 to \$24 for entrees.

The Restaurant at the Raleigh, 1775 Collins Ave., is open for breakfast 7 a.m.-noon, for lunch noon-4 p.m. and for dinner 6 p.m.-midnight daily. Details: (305) 534-6300.

The Blue Door, inside the Delano Hotel, 1685 Collins Ave., is open for breakfast 7-11 a.m., for lunch 11:30 a.m.-4 p.m. and for dinner 7 p.m.-midnight daily. Brunch is served 11:30 a.m.-3 p.m. Sundays. Details: (305) 674-6400.

The Tamara, inside the National Hotel, 1677 Collins Ave., is open 6:30 a.m.-11 p.m. daily. Details: (305) 532-2311.

"Just this week, I had breakfast at the Delano, which was fabulous," said Ms. Kallergis. "The next day, I had lunch at the terrace at the National, which was absolutely amazing. And also I love to lunch at the Raleigh, where celebrities have their own tables. It's a social event."