

Life is easier than you think - all you have to do is think; accept the impossible, do without the intolerable, bear the intolerable, and be able to smile at anything.
- Barbara Johnson -

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Bon Voyage and Bon Appetit! A new restaurant has opened in the Keys...Islescapes, an enchanting excursion accompanying a fantastic feast. Read more about Chef Capt. Alex and his exquisitely intimate dinner cruise on page 18.



THE WEEKLY
Keys Cuisine
DINING OUT IN THE FLORIDA KEYS

Fine Gourmet Dining on the Water

by Dick Conklin

This week our featured restaurant is not a restaurant at all. It is a gourmet sunset dinner cruise that is unique – and ideal for – the Florida Keys. The setting, the staff, and the food are all first class – for an evening you'll never forget.

Picture this. You arrive at the dock about an hour and a half before sunset. Captain Alex Aller and Chef Dani Lee welcome you and show you to your table, complete with white linen and sterling silver dinnerware, on the upper deck of a 33-foot Carver Mariner motor yacht. Chef Dani describes the evening's dinner fare, consisting of her own unique appetizers, salads, sauces, entrees and desserts. Smooth jazz plays in the background. Capt. Alex slowly motors the yacht out onto Florida Bay, near some small offshore islands that block the evening breeze. You and your guests enjoy shrimp served in a hand-carved cucumber boat, crabmeat-stuffed Portabella Mushrooms, and Potato-Goat Cheese Tarts, as the sun sets over the Bay.

No, you aren't dreaming. You are onboard Islescapes, a nightly sunset dinner cruise that sails out of Robbie's Marina in Islamorada. The culinary excursion is the brainchild of Capt. Alex, a former executive director of a cancer research institute who holds a PhD in immunology and molecular genetics, and has decided to chase his real dream,



Capt. Alex Aller and Chef Dani Lee start the evening's sunset cruise with a hand-carved cucumber boat filled with boiled shrimp topped with a Thai chili

combining lifelong culinary experience, professional maritime training, and a deep love of the sea. The result is an unforgettable evening on the water that is perfect for a romantic dinner, a relaxing evening with friends, or a unique night out to celebrate a special occasion.

Although the captain is a gourmet chef in his own right, Chef Dani brings with her 12 years of experience as a personal chef aboard the megayachts of the rich and famous. These days she applies her creative touch to each Islescapes cruise, customizing the dinner fare for each new group of passengers. She starts with the

three basic food groups of beef, fowl or seafood, and then narrows down the selections to accommodate personal preferences and the availability of freshly caught local fish, such as dolphin, snapper, grouper or hogfish.

Following our appetizers, which were shared among our party of six Weekly staffers, we were served a choice of salads – a Rosemary-Mango treat made from baby salad greens, balsamic/honey dressing, and rosemary-marinated mangos topped with toasted pecans and white cheddar cheese. A warm mushroom salad consisted of a warm sherry vinaigrette dressing topped with mushrooms, fresh basil and Pecorina Romano cheese. If that sounds delicious to you, we can confirm your assessment. Did I mention the fresh-baked cornbread?

Two of us enjoyed grilled steaks, cooked to perfection on the boat's outdoor grill, served with a tarragon-infused Bearnaise sauce. The rest of us were served snapper topped with the captain's own Tropical Isle sauce made from passion fruit, white wine and peppers, and a delicious cut of dolphin served in a red pepper curry.

But wait – there's more. Two decadent desserts topped off a spectacular evening – a super-smooth, semi-sweet chocolate mousse and a crème brulee, made from a silky egg recipe covered by crunchy, caramelized sugar – with a glaze finish complements of the captain's blowtorch.

In addition to sunset dinner cruises, Islescapes also offers snorkel trips, bay tours, weddings, bachelor and bache-

lorette parties, extended cruises, luncheons, and even burials at sea. "In the past few weeks," says Captain Alex, "we've had three weddings, two proposals, and three 'girls night out' parties – in a row!" Islescapes has enjoyed a busy first season, and he hopes that locals and weekenders will maintain the pace during the summer months. His vessel is perfect for a variety of excursions, equipped with comfortable seating, lots of shade, private fresh water showers, clean restrooms and air conditioning. The crew is more than willing to work with passengers to customize a trip to their unique preferences and dietary needs.

Considering the luxury accommodations and outstanding cuisine, the fare schedule is quite reasonable. A three-hour dinner cruise, for up to four people, costs \$300. Up to six can enjoy a dinner cruise for \$75 each. A variety of soft drinks, water and iced tea are provided, and beer, wine or liquor may be brought on board.

More information on Islescapes can be found on their Web site, islescapes.com, by calling (305) 923-3319, or e-mailing the captain at captalex@islescapes.com. The vessel is berthed at Robbie's Marina, Bayside, just west of the bridge at MM 77.5.

Dick "Conch" Conklin writes on Florida Keys Entertainment and Dining Out. His Web site, keysy.com, provides links to Keys entertainment venues, bands, musicians, and a calendar for local entertainers. conch@keysy.com