

Restaurant reviews: Best things to eat in Sarasota-Manatee, Oct. 20-26

Trust me, even before your first bite or potent beverage, regardless if you got there by way of luxury boat or beat-up Chevy, your spirits will be lifted when you arrive.

Wade Tatangelo Sarasota Herald-Tribune

Published 6:07 a.m. ET Oct. 20, 2021



Pop's Sunset Grill is on the Intracoastal Waterway in Nokomis.
Dan Wagner, Herald-Tribune Staff Photo / Dan

It would seem impossible for a restaurant to retain its Old Florida charm after adding a three-level tiki bar and a store that carries everything from racks of clothing to bins of doggy toys. But that's what Pop's Sunset Grill has done. Now celebrating two decades of business under its current ownership, Pop's remains fun, funky and, I recently learned, a fine place to find a fuzzy can of White Paw Bark Cherry "spiked barking water," which squeaks when chewed and bears the logo: "Ain't no laws when you're drinking Paws."

Located by the Albee Road Bridge connecting Casey Key to Nokomis, what Pop's essentially does, and exceptionally well, is offer an instant escape. You're welcomed from the parking lot through a tunnel adorned with palm leaf thatching and under a sign that reads, "Through these portals pass the world's friendliest mortals." Walk just a few steps and you're transported into a tropical courtyard. There are pathways leading to various bars and dining areas as well as the Intracoastal Waterway and the dock for boaters to find near Marker 10. Trust me, even before your first bite or potent beverage, regardless if you got there by way of luxury boat or beat-up Chevy, your spirits will be lifted when you arrive at Pop's.

Originally opened as Urbanek's Fish Camp in the 1940s, Pop's unveiled its massive tiki bar a few years ago. That's where people were enjoying live music on a recent Saturday. Behind that newer, covered bar and dining area you'll find the gift shop, carrying the mandatory Pop's merch along with other delightfully tacky T-shirts, humorous hats and, yes, adorable doggy toys. While back there shopping for

our totally adored, and yes, totally spoiled fur kid, I noticed construction on what will soon be Pop's second kitchen. Management hopes it will be completed by December to use for off-site catering and to offer breakfast daily and brunch on the weekends. We were there for dinner, though, and happily took a seat on the original Pop's covered patio. The old wood structure places you so close to the water you can hear the snook pop when they break the surface, which is how the restaurant got its name.



Grilled mahi-mahi at Pop's Sunset Grill in Nokomis.
WADE TATANGELO / SARASOTA HERALD-TRIBUNE

Pop's Sunset Grill for open-flame grilled mahi-mahi, blackened grouper sandwich and rack of ribs

Pop's offers an extensive menu with a focus on seafood, which was the chief reason for our recent visit. You'll want to start with the judiciously smoked Mahi fish spread that can be smeared across salty crackers or scooped up with the accompanying carrot spears or cucumber discs (\$11.50). We also enjoyed the supple, steamed mussels served with a hefty piece of grilled bread that just begs to be dunked into the pool of garlic butter and mollusk juice (\$12.50).

Save room, though, for something cooked over their open-flame grill. The main attraction on the menu, under "Pop's favorites," is the choice of daily catch, grilled or blackened, and served with a choice of two sides. In fact, to visit Pop's and not have something grilled should be some sort of culinary crime.

The fresh mahi-mahi's inherent sweet and mild characteristics punched up with the natural fire-grilled flavor resulted in an ideal way to experience one of Florida's most popular fish (\$21.95). Now, the fries and coleslaw are fine side selections but you'll really want to spend a few bucks more for the classic veggie skewer. Featuring chunky half wheels of juicy zucchini and yellow squash along with a couple of cherry tomatoes ready to explode upon impact, the skewer could be enjoyed as a standalone treat, perhaps by any vegetarians who happen to find themselves at your seafood feast; which, by the way, should also include a blackened grouper sandwich (\$20).



Blackened grouper sandwich at Pop's Sunset Grill in Nokomis.
WADE TATANGELO / SARASOTA HERALD-TRIBUNE

Ours recalled the fresh fish equivalent of a filet mignon. A beautiful hunk of meat, it looked handsome seated on a toasted brioche bun with its deep, dark, glorious grill marks alerting my brain to all the flavor to soon follow. I've eaten a whole lot of grouper sandwiches lately and this one, from the fish to the bun to the subtle yet memorable blackening, definitely stands out among my favorites.

The plan when we visited Pop's was to eat seafood. And I'm sure my wife, Kristin, was quite happy to know I would be taking a much-needed hiatus from my beloved pork and beef products. But, then, in a moment of weakness, after already eating substantial amounts of mussels, Mahi and grouper, I glanced back at the menu to see, like a billboard erected for my eyes alone, the words "Wood-Grilled Rack of Ribs" (\$22.50). Our server informed me they were soaked overnight in apple juice and Pepsi and, yeah, although I'm more of a Coca-Cola guy, sold! Those baby back ribs fell right off the bone and into my mouth, repeatedly, the meat slathered with some good ol' Sweet Baby Ray's.



Wood-grilled rack of ribs at Pop's Sunset Grill in Nokomis.
WADE TATANGELO / SARASOTA HERALD-TRIBUNE

Finally, I didn't include Pop's in last week's story about best seafood restaurants serving Florida stone crab because claws won't have a permanent home on the menu this season. However, management did say there will be occasional stone crab specials. Which would make for a nice appetizer, followed by something – fish, ribs, really any entree – as long as it's cooked on that fabulous open-flame grill.

Pop's Sunset Grill is at 112 Circuit Road, Nokomis. For more information, call 941-488-3177 or visit popssunsetgrill.com.