

Great Finds in **Tampa**

By Vanessa Shaw-Finelli

We had hoped for a weekend in Washington D.C. recently, but as we didn't really have the time in mid-April, flights were silly prices and there was a government strike on public buildings.... we opted for a relaxed, play-it-by-ear weekend mini break, only one hour drive north in Tampa!

Located in the heart of Tampa's Westshore business district, the **Renaissance Tampa International Plaza Hotel** feels like it's another world and this was to be our destination for Saturday night. The hotel lobby is spacious, with soaring ceilings and beautifully appointed with bright hues of red and yellow, hand-glazed tiles, custom ironwork and Italian crystals that all work to create an ambiance of Italian influenced design throughout. Their impressive **Pelagia Trattoria** features an open-air kitchen where you can watch all the action of your excellent meal being prepared. A high standard of internet and conveniences are provided in the 287 guest rooms, 6 suites and the one concierge floor. Mary Lou Johnson and Tammy Carder kindly helped to organize our stay.

This is one busy hotel catering to sport celebrities, business conventions as well as tourists and the odd locals! Offering 12,500 total sq.ft. of meeting space and being so close to the airport, right next door to the very attractive International Plaza shops and restaurants makes it so enjoyable, relaxing and convenient for all, with or without a car!

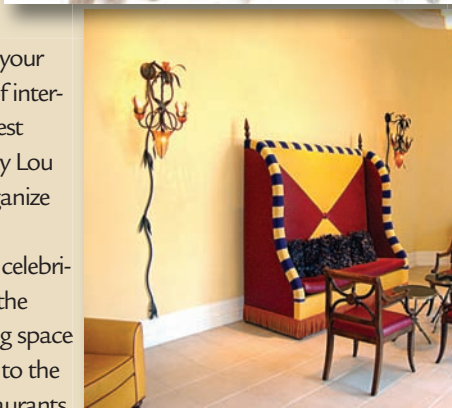
Our first stop however was for a late breakfast at **The Pub**, in Bay Street. It was a lot of fun with great authentic decoration and memorabilia throughout. The very high ceilings again made this space impressive offering two floors for dining and private party venues. The menu was comprised of a mix from the British Isles and the staff wore black T shirts with nostalgic words, such as Abbey Road, to naughtier versions! We shared the Full Monty breakfast with eggs, baked beans, sausage and toast. Full Monty meaning the whole works, of course! The Pub offers a good selection of beers and classic pub fare, a weekend brunch and Sunday Roast. It is the 3rd in Florida, others in Ft. Lauderdale, (Pembroke) and Naples, it was fun and worth a visit for sure.

We were able to have an early check-in at The Renaissance, always nice, and made ourselves at home in our very comfortable, thankfully softer-hued, room with good quality soft, soft white bed linens, (everything had a good fresh feel to it as the hotel is only just over 6 years old and has even had some more refurbishment recently), before venturing up into the mall and some shopping. We walked a



long way thankfully, as it set us up for our wonderful meal to come, reserved in Pelagia Trattoria back at the Renaissance.

We went early as we met and chatted with **Chef Daniel Goldich** who was relaxed, friendly, full of information and who also offered to share his recipes! The dining room was large and lofty with bright jolly colours abounding



The Renaissance Tampa, a great hotel with an ideal location, fine dining and atmosphere

again. The staff were great, helpful and knowledgeable, sure in their

craft. Our server Barbara was a fun and competent and ended up having been at school with a close friend of Neal's up in Connecticut. Small world!

Our first tastings were of the Octopus cured with garlic and mint over a carrot coulis, the Crunchy Olives with three meats, and Wild Mushroom croquets and tomato fondue, all unique imaginative and delicious. They offer a trio tasting anytime, just ask. Our second course pasta tastings entailed the Spinach Gnocchi, rock shrimp, spinach and tomatoes in basil cream sauce, the Papparadelle with traditional Bolognese, Pecorino cheese and Ravioli with braised Veal, ricotta and spinach, wow, fantastic flavors. Traditional Italian food with a modern twist is their mantra here. Watching all the cooking and presentation preparations we couldn't help wonder at how seamless, calm and quiet all the composing was, under Chef Daniel's attentive eye for detail. Very impressive. No shouting orders or stressing out, or so it seemed!

Our excellent fish course was of the Pan Seared Scallops with Key Lime-basil emulsion and Cannellini bean ragout and the Pan Seared Chilean Sea Bass with Farro risotto, lavender butter sauce and



International Plaza has a fab restaurant row with shopping to match. Heaven!

"Porcini rubbed, duck confit croquets, Chianti jus, charred asparagus and roasted red peppers along with the



yellow wax beans. We couldn't imagine fitting in any more tastes, but more treats came in the shape of New York Steak, "R-way

baby Arugula salad! What a menu to inspire us all, take a portion of any of this to try to emulate for your next dinner party, it will surely be a hit.

The desserts were equally special and amazing, (see more on their web site) plus many Grappas with seasonal fruits and an extensive wine and drinks list available. 80% of people dining here are local and the rest from banquets and conferences. No wonder the locals love it here, it's well worth a reservation on your next visit to Tampa. Pelagia also caters a special brunch event twice a year for Easter and Mother's Day, children are able to make their own pancakes and wear their own chef hat, how fun and what a nice touch. Reservations are a must.

After this pampering we were off for some welcome exercise, across town to SoHo (South Howard), to **SideBem's** and for their 14th Annual Bem's Wine Fest events. The theme was an '80s party and live music by Rubix Cubed as some came in Miami Vice outfits or big hair and shoulder pads to match! Light food tastings and a full bar, plus wine tasting was included and, as always, Sidebem's delivered doing a great job entertaining everyone and transforming the place from restaurant to disco club. It was fun with a photo booth

included for our pleasure, complimentary strips of mini photos instantly available as well as by Shutter Booth online.

On the Sunday morning we very much enjoyed a quiet light, late breakfast in the lovely courtyard at the Renaissance, helped by the sweet and cheerful, Lin. It was very comfortable out side in the shade with a cool breeze, despite the hot temperatures so early this year. We then made the most of the pool and well-appointed gym to work off some of the excesses we were treated to the night before! After a late check-out and another shop nearby for a few things we returned to Bay Street for an early evening meal at **Brio**. Friends had recommended this busy place and we were looking forward to finding out for ourselves. It was very busy at 6pm on a



Chef Daniel Goldich with his staff prepare amazing food in a cool setting at Pellagia Trattoria

Sunday but nothing like every other night, as the Mall closes early on Sunday, when local staff, plus those 'in the know' come in to relax and enjoy.



Speck (Prosciutto smoke cured) wrapped Kurobuta pork tenderloin, (similar to Berkshire pork), with Grappa-cherry jus, fingerling potatoes and

BRAVO/BRIO Restaurant Group (BBRG), owners of BRAVO! Cucina Italiana, BRIO Tuscan Grille and BON VIE Bistro, operate several full-service restaurants in many states. All three concepts are open seven days a week for lunch and dinner and are described as "upscale affordable." They appeal to a broad base of diners from business people and young professionals to families and empty nesters. Their goal is to be the "Best Italian" restaurant company in America, a quality driven company, not so much quantity but serving high quality food constantly, with superior service. Their food is classically prepared from original regional recipes using the freshest ingredients.

Brio is very spacious and open from the entry to the kitchen,



Brio is a wonderful restaurant with service to match. Server Keith and Manager Bryan Harris show their personable side complete with the delicious entrees and amazing desserts!



softly decorated in warm tones of sepia to apricot, yet upscale and the ordinary chairs were totally elevated by slip covers in smart gold and red stripes. The ceilings are swagged in cream fabric and the lighting soft also, coming from fabulous huge Alabaster

bowl ceiling fittings. The second floor is equally handsome with banquet and dining rooms for private events and parties or set for couples on Valentine's night, for example. Weddings are popular here also.

The very pleasant **Manager Bryan Harris**, with a great sense of humour, plus our server **Keith**, were great fun and took very good care of us, upholding the company philosophy for



It's all British at The Pub!

sure! We enjoyed the Lobster Bisque with shrimp and a touch of Sherry and an incredible new starter not even on the menu yet, of 22 ingredients involving two cheese dishes, one hot and one cold, plus Pinot Noir onions yum; thoughtful with much flavour along with the fresh house bread basket, simple flatbreads and a sourdough selection to accompany. The wine list offers very good choices and a fair price range. Their

\$5 Martini nights and incredible happy hour appetizer menu, \$2.95 each, are very popular, only on weekdays.

We met affable **Nick Borgia, Sous Chef**, who worked with Ruths Chris prior to Brio, (better watch out, don't cross him with that last name! Yes he can actually trace his family tree to the very old famous Borgia family roots!). He reiterated their diligence with customizing food and their catering to people with Celiac disease and other intolerances and conditions, how great is that. Most restaurants will listen to any reasonable requests for dietary requirements these days, thankfully.

We tried their Caesar Salad next, then tastings of the Pasta alla Vodka, excellent filled with Ricotta, sprinkled with crispy Pancetta, garlic, basil and a tomato



80's Bash at SideBern's with Veronica Cintron of Bay News 9, David Laxer, owner of Bern's Steak House and SideBern's, Brooke Palmer, PR director for both and Preston Rudie of 10 News



Parmesan cream sauce, the Lobster Ravioli with Crab Insalata and a divine Limoncello butter sauce, tomato compote and Arugula with their famous and delicious Gorgonzola crusted Lamp Chops, with sautéed spinach and red wine veal sauce, yowsa!

The desserts (I'll never be thin), were surprisingly fantastic and innovative...the best was the incredible sampler dish, large shot glasses filled with very good samples of Panacotta Cheesecake and berries, (my fav), butterscotch pecan pudding, my fav (not kidding), tiramisu, carrot cake, a caramel and chocolate layer delight (my fav, just kidding)...too many to relate, you just have to go and see for yourself! Well you get the drift...this destination: the Renaissance and Bay Street, plus International Mall has it all, what are you waiting for? Chill and enjoy!

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