

TABLE TALK

with LEIGH CORT

Mezza Luna

AUTHENTIC
EUROPEAN-ITALIAN
FINE DINING



Seared crab cakes with cajun corn aioli and red pepper curls



Pizzaioli extraordinaire Matus Poris



Baby Iceberg sounds like a simple salad, but the flavor is anything but.

Mezza Luna has been an anchor of dining and bar-hop feasting in Neptune Beach for 30 years — only steps away from Atlantic Beach. It may seem like it's "off the beaten track" of Atlantic Boulevard (by only 30 paces) but this location continues to mystify newcomers to the little village that bustles year-round with pedestrians, cars, bicycles and beachcombers. The popularity is easy to figure out — it's all about the dining scene!

Offering a trifecta of ambience styles from al fresco beachy casual dining (pet friendly) to Mezza Luna's richly designed main dining room with dark woods and brick from top to bottom, it's perfect for those who like their evening meal more formally presented on crisp white tablecloths. One can't ignore the bar & lounge where music and buzz are all about recognizing friends and folks from the neighborhood while enjoying spectacular cuisine and nightly music!

Executive Chef Carrie Eagle maintains her integrity by staying close to what she knows and loves. There's no 'resting on laurels' at Mezza Luna; she is

constantly pushing the boundaries of tradition as each day in the kitchen is like a laboratory with dishes that are surprising, challenging and ultimately satisfying. Each chef's love, respect and understanding of their locality is the driving force behind their work. Acknowledged as Best Chef in Albuquerque, N.M. with 14 years of experience and wildly acclaimed successes in five famed restaurants, she was continually recognized as the culinary magician who could garner nearly every "Best of" award for each restaurant she took to the heights.

"Mezza Luna offered me a totally different opportunity," Eagle said. "I don't have to fix, cure or invent anything here. I walked into a pot of gold — a long-treasured neighborhood family-owned establishment where I have to bend my will to Mezza Luna's legacy. And I love every second of it!"

Currently owned by well-known restaurateur Al Mansur, Mezza Luna's General Manager Beth Ann Encinosa is a very familiar face orchestrating her restaurant, an ultimate hospitality professional who began her own relationship at the helm of this award-winning gem many years ago in 2005 under the tutelage of Chef Tony Pels, Jr. Many locals fondly

recall his classic Italian menu paired with an enormous personality with guests nightly. "I learned so much from Tony's genuine hospitality expertise; he was a superb mentor. I, too, care so much about our guests' time with us. I enjoy making everyone feel special, recognized and respected. I love this restaurant and I'm so honored to be back here, at HOME!"

There is such mutual respect and camaraderie throughout the front and back-of-the-house team. It's something you just feel whenever you're a guest although it may not be something that patrons even care or know about. But that is what keeps



Chef Carrie Eagle

Mezza Luna ranked as one of the top restaurants at the beach. There is a confluence of culinary excellence, knowledgeable servers, bartenders and hostesses — not to mention the incredible follow-through with flawless service. If you choose to dine late afternoon when Mezza Luna opens at 4 p.m., it's a glorious time in a great restaurant to enjoy watching the staff setting up for the dinner

service. Here it's like a ballet of expertise preparing the white freshly ironed tablecloths, sparkling glass and silverware and quiet attention to detail.

Balance the scale of a loyal service team with a mature scratch kitchen where every pasta, sauce, stock, garnish, accompaniment and ingredients begin from "scratch" and you're going to have a difficult time making your menu selections. Many days of work and preparation go into Chef Eagle's menu that eventually becomes "Authentic European-Italian Fine Dining." Encinosa and Eagle agree that there is a wealth of culinary talent in one kitchen — along with gifted palates and the love of working together in a restaurant they love!

Alas, it's time to eat! It's an exciting menu with a broad colorful stroke of excellent appetizers: lamb lollipops with mint chutney, steak tartare brilliantly orchestrated from beef tenderloin tips blended with capers, shallots, horseradish aioli and a dozen more. The star for me is the seared crab cakes with cajun corn aioli and red pepper curls!

Salads shouldn't be overlooked at Mezza Luna. The strawberry salad is very popular — bibb lettuce, goat cheese, toasted pine nuts and of course seasonal strawberries. The arugula prosciutto salad is captivatingly Italian with pickled oyster mushrooms, shaved fennel, Piave (authentic Italian cheese) and prosciutto. A personal favorite is the simply named baby Iceberg — crispy shallots, tomato, bacon, bleu cheese dressing (homemade). It's perfectly portioned to share.

Without doubt, one of the most famous pizzamakers at the beach is Matus Poris. He's been in the center of Mezza Luna in more ways than one, primarily because the gorgeous brick wood-fire pizza oven was created 15 years ago and Matus has been the "Pizzaioli" since the beginning. There are at least eight pizza combinations to suit any yearning. And there's always a pizza of the week, namely this week — the Nduja sausage pizza with house-made nduja sausage, roasted broccolini, banana peppers, sauce and mozzarella. If a fresh clam pizza is tempting, don't miss the white pizza with bechamel, clams, garlic, shallots and parsley. A glass of wine and a pizza to share couldn't be more elegantly enjoyed than here!

Chef Carrie has a sixth sense when she "... listens to what people want to eat. What's the call of the dining room?" The food is her art and she cherishes that she can hunt for the highest level (no cutting corners) of the daily fish boat choices and the seasonality of northeast Florida's produce, especially citrus. Entrees are rich with seafood: Fruitti di Mare risotto, orange-glazed salmon, pan-seared diver scallops, linguine and clams, even luxurious pan-seared branzino in a luscious lemon caper beurre blanc with charred lemon! Meat lovers die

for her grilled filet mignon, flat-iron steak frites and richly sauced chicken Marsala with ricotta gnocchi!

Chef's early mornings are spent making her pastas that are so irresistible you feel guilty leaving a speck on your plate. A standout is the Pappardelle prepared classic Bolognese; equally due a standing ovation is the fresh fettuccine with spinach, roasted pepper in a dreamy alfredo sauce or the linguine and clams decadently dressed up with white wine, garlic, lemon, kale and sundried tomatoes.

Mezza Luna isn't a flash-in-the-pan restaurant. It's a home to the finely tuned team that loves to be exactly where they are today. Some chefs were born into their destiny. I've heard that there is another fabulous chef in Carrie's kitchen — Nadine Ladson. She's an integral part of this hard-working family that welcomes guests nightly. Obviously, they all enjoy what they do. You'll see!

One day, while I sip a glass of wine from the finely tuned Mezza Luna cellar, I'd love to know all of the details about Chef Carrie Eagle smoking the competition on "Chopped" in 2017. Perhaps a few words about "Beat Bobby Flay" and "Food Paradise" on the National Geographic Channel. She certainly has a lot to say in addition to the culinary masterpieces that come out of her kitchen. Mezza Luna is a stunning place for Carrie to live her philosophy: "Being a chef is an important responsibility and honor. It's the opportunity to connect with people around a table with food."

As the evening winds down on a sweet note, it's a last chance to savor the moment and have a dreamy chocolate mint crème brulee. Just relax and let the flavors do the work!

Mezza Luna is open nightly and offers valet parking at its West entrance. Go to www.MezzaLunaJax.com for more information.

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