

It's all about brunch — 10 years later

Leigh Cort
Columnist

As Jacksonville Beach begins to rebuild, reflect and regenerate a new design and style, the classic Casa Marina Hotel remains the sentinel of beach dining and celebrations for 87 years. One of the last remaining buildings from the Prohibition Era, there is a warmth and



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Table Talk

camaraderie every Sunday that is all about brunch. The hotel's award-winning brunch is almost as legendary as the Hotel's pedigree — a grand old lady that is still turning heads since it opened its doors in 1925.

When every postcard of the era announced "World's Finest Beach," the Casa Marina has remained an alluring landmark of Florida's history. On Saturday, June 6, 1925, the grand opening of the hotel coincided with the height of Florida's first land boom. Two hundred guests dined and danced in the grand "salon" which today is the grand dining room. Its Spanish-Mediterranean design brought another "first" to the beach — a fireproof building composed of stucco, concrete, tile and an automatic sprinkler system.

Arriving at the hotel for Sunday Brunch, I could almost hear whispers from the past as we walked down the hall from the front desk into the dining room. Walls adorned with photos and vintage postcards set the scene — the beach dotted with Model Ts and bathers in long woolen bathing suits.

Widely recognized by Jacksonville area partygoers, socialites and A-list business people, Sterling Joyce greeted us with a warm hug and handshake. As maitre d'hotel, his attention to guests is as genuine as one could imagine from today or yesteryear. His role as the hotel "historian" is pivotal, knowing so many people, landmarks and treasures of the beach.

Sterling comments, "My knowledge of the area and the people that I've met for nearly half a century in Jacksonville compels me to be a part of the legacy of Jacksonville Beach. Working at the Casa Marina gives me an opportunity to help preserve its amazing history, to keep it going and inspire others to understand and value its legacy too."

As I settled into my chair, images of incoming guests told a story; old friends meeting, families exchanging hugs, well-behaved children peeking at the desserts — a happy buzz filling up the room. I was ready to relax with a chilled mimosa, while my guests



Casa Marina Hotel is housed in one of Jacksonville Beach's last remaining buildings from the Prohibition Era.

Photos provided by Leigh Cort

ordered traditional Bloody Marys.

Chef Aaron Webb was surveying and directing his culinary staff as they put the finishing touches on myriad breakfast favorites, signature brunch entrees, luxurious salads, succulent roast beef and eye-popping confections. The presentation elicited comments and note-taking, as guests found their preferred place on the buffet to begin the feast. One young man loosened his belt buckle as he picked up a warmed entree plate — portent of things to come.

At the helm of the Casa Marina's kitchen for 15 years, Webb's levelheaded style evolved into the hotel's signature "New Beach Cuisine."

He calmly oversees all of the hotel's dining that includes penthouse tapas menus, wedding and corporate events, social parties and of course brunch. He gathers his inspiration from the seasons to create healthy, exciting specialties, always caring about what his guests enjoy and demand. Patrons take pleasure in a mixture of stylistic buffet preparations over traditional multi-course sit-down dinners; so his tapas menu also reflects a tapestry of culinary adventure and food exploration.

Priced at \$26.95, Sunday brunch is clearly worth every penny. Webb pays attention to details that matter. Dishes are prepared fresh at cooking stations or steaming hot from the kitchen and the variety is extensive in both quantity and breadth. Brunch has garnered Webb media and guest accolades for



Chef Aaron Webb is often asked to pose for pictures with his famous whole roasted snapper—a main attraction during Sunday brunch.

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Eggs Benedict on Fried Green Tomato with Sweet Chile Hollandaise and Whole Roasted Snapper seasoned with herbs, rubbed with olive oil and slow-roasted until crispy on the outside and succulently sweet on your plate. It's so photogenic that many guests take pictures of the snapper, often requesting Webb's presence alongside!

Featuring 25 items, Sunday Brunch is celebrating its 10th anniversary this year. Since 2003, its popularity has burgeoned from 40 people dining in a cozy corner of the salon to 200-350 guests each week.

Once the bubbly started flowing, I had the daunting task of making a few selections. My gentle and modest beginning included a delicious Trio of Shrimp: jumbo peel-and-eat shrimp, creamy shrimp salad and shrimp and roasted tomatoes over rice. Weekly, Webb's inspiration could change to Cioppino (Portuguese fish stew), Paella (Valencian seafood and rice) or another interpretation of this divine pairing.

It's a picturesque setting and the buffet table is maintained meticulously. Add to the famous fish and prime rib carving: Omelets made to order, vibrant tricolor tortellini and imaginative pastas, fresh fruit display, crispy waffles with berries and whipped cream, bacon

Casa Marina Hotel

The Casa Marina Hotel offers 23 ocean view rooms and parlor suites that impart a feeling of the timeless glamour from Jacksonville Beach 1920s. There is a very personal vibe that blends a boutique hotel with the warmth of a bed and breakfast, restored with a more contemporary styling. Each room varies in decor, a reflection of the changing eras of the hotel's rich history, which is unique from other standard beach hotels. No crowding here: Most suites feel as if they're the size of an apartment. They have modern amenities, polished cherry wood floors, white tile baths, signature accessories and linens. Rates begin at \$79 per night for special midweek dates.

Casa Marina Hotel & Restaurant
691 First St. North
Jacksonville Beach, Florida 32250
(904) 270-0025
Sunday Brunch 10:30 a.m.-2 p.m.
www.casamarinahotel.com

and sausage, cleverly stacked grilled vegetable platter with zucchini, squash and asparagus, fried or herb-roasted chicken, changeable salads from light to lavish, pork loin with fruit salsa and house-made artisan soups.

Forget home on Sunday morning. You'll not soon get over the sweet ending of pastries and delectable desserts as Webb prepares fruit cobbler, bread pudding, pies, cakes and rich chocolate mousse.

I segued from my seafood brunch



Left: Sterling Joyce



Right: Chef Aaron Webb

Photos provided by Leigh Cort

right into desserts with a happy thought — step outside onto the beach and take a long four hour walk home!

As January is National Soup Month, Webb is dreaming up a few hearty soups that feature Shrimp Bisque, Butternut Squash with Truffle, Italian Wedding Soup, Southwest Chicken Tortilla and White Bean Chili. They will surely

cure your winter chills.

Care to sit at my table?
Sunday Brunch reservations are recommended!

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