

Dining and Spirits

With Chris Sherman



At Naples Tomato, pasta is made by hand. Zucchini and eggplant come from nearby fields.

Local Motions

▶ Truluck's Seafood, Steak, Crab House

98 4th Ave. S., Naples, 239/530-3131

351 Plaza Real, Boca Raton, 561/391-0755

trulucks.com

▶ Naples Tomato

14700 Tamiami Trail N., Naples

239/598-9800, napestomato.com

This is a tale of two restaurants. It is neither the worst nor the best of times, but perhaps the most confusing.

Both the first establishment, Truluck's Seafood, Steak, Crab House, and the second, Naples Tomato, have become new staples in Naples. Both bring contemporary style and smarts but take different approaches to the modern obsession with local ingredients.

Truluck's is a Texas-based chain in posh Old Naples that elevates seafood from dockside fish shack to a brass-and mahogany clublike setting. Initially, I expected it would provide one more embarrassing example in which a top-dollar fish house in Florida is born on the Pacific Coast or elsewhere and ends up bragging on fish from Hawaii, Washington, the Chesapeake and the North Atlantic — with barely a mention of Florida's local catch.

Meanwhile, home-grown Naples Tomato sprouted on the city's

north side to bring hand-made Italian cooking to that booming stretch of town. It invokes the city's southern Italian namesake, the home of pizza and "O sole mio." The name also salutes the huge crop in the fields and packinghouses from Naples to Immokalee. It's about time old Napoli and our much-maligned tomatoes got some respect.

The real story, alas, is not so clear-cut.

To be sure, seafood at the Texas-sized fish house — Truluck's seats 278 — is sourced globally, and the menu fits a universal seafood palate. Calamari from Rhode Island, sea bass from Chile, salmon from Scotland, monster half-pound prawns from Nigeria and such. Sourcing is key to a good seafood restaurant, and managing partner Rick Rinella is proud he casts a wide net.

Some catch is exotic, like three kinds of oysters daily, king crab from all along Alaska in the summer (Dutch Harbor, Norton Sound, Bristol Bay) and Truluck's signature fish ribs from the Brazilian pacu. Kin to



At Truluck's in Naples, some important menu items are local.

Wine & Spirits

| | |
|-----|--------------------------------------|
| RED | Rocca 2004 cabernet sauvignon |
| | Napa Valley |
| | \$65 |

One of California's best years was the time, and Rocca Family Vineyards in Yountville, in the heart of Napa, was the place. Rocca is a small production winery, yet its hand-crafted reds are big in flavor and long and smooth in texture. The newest cab is full of cherries and chocolate; if that's too much, check out Rocca's equally fine Yountville syrah or rowdy Bad Boy Red, merging Rhone and Bordeaux.



| | |
|--------|------------------------------|
| BRANDY | Candolini Grappa Ruta |
| | Italy |
| | \$35 |

When Nonna said "Grappa's good for you," she meant the old-fashioned kind like this. Candolini has made authentic grappa for a century, stout of heart and stern of flavor, but polished. Its specialty is made with rue, complete with a branch of the bittersweet herb that gives the grape brandy an extra whiff of restorative alchemy.



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Dining Spirits

the piranha, the pacu is a thin fish whose sides can be sliced into flat strips, rib bone included, of sweet white meat closer to wahoo.

Yet many important items are from — surprise — Florida. On good days, there's black grouper and red snapper from the Gulf and Atlantic. The restaurant always has local stone crab, from Isle of Capri less than 20 miles away, where Truluck's owns an entire fishery. Eight years ago, the Texans bought the crab house with 20 boats and endless traps to bring claws to Houston, Austin and Dallas within 24 hours.

As of four years ago, when Truluck's opened in Naples and Boca Raton, the crab claws didn't have to travel so far. In Naples, mine were sparkling fresh on a Monday night when the house is packed for an all-you-can-eat deal — \$59.95 is frugal in Old Naples.

Other Truluck's tricks would be welcome anywhere: Wines from viognier to petite sirah by the sample or glass; full-menu dining at the bar and brasserie décor with white linen instead of hawsers and nautical gewgaws.

Meanwhile, up the road, at Naples Tomato, the taste is pure Italian, while the technology ranges from space age to country rustic. Wine comes in a sleek new vessel, an Enomatic system from Italy with two dozen bottles in banks of brushed chrome and glowing LED lights. It's an automated self-serve arrangement amid racks of bottles and comfy armchairs.

Wine in the Enomatic and on the traditional list are happily diverse: California favorites such as Justin reds and Josh Jensen's cult chardonnay, rare Italian passito and a portfolio of other California wines, including the plum-dandy Aprile from Gargiulo's Napa vineyards.

Pasta is made by hand on a big wooden work table in the front window where pasta makers roll out gnocchi by day and

kitchen-hip diners sit at night. Nearby a line of coolers stocks house noodles and ravioli, sauces and pans of lasagna and chicken Parmesan for takeaway cooking.

As for the quotient of local food, I might have expected more from the locally based restaurant. Zucchini and eggplant do come from nearby fields, but namesake tomatoes not so much. Instead, pride of menu goes to San Marzanos; the prestigious canned plum tomatoes from Italy beloved by many chefs are the base of the intense tomato bisque here and the heart of its famous lasagna. On my visit, the only fresh tomatoes on the antipasto tables were pale, mushy and mealy, the sort that have done Florida's reputation no good.

Three years ago when the restaurant started, it had its own farm growing six heirloom varieties, says chef Sebastian Mazzotta. Eventually there were more than the kitchen could use (I wish I'd been there). It sold the farm and now shops for local tomatoes when the season's right. The sorry fresh ones came from the east coast, I was told.

Lasagna and other dishes have Neapolitan zest, and the crusty bread is as good as that from Little Italy (or Big) while veal chops, squash ravioli and Urbani truffles and the like come from the far richer north of Italy. Indeed, my bolognese was as husky and meaty as they come. Napoli would be envious. Wherever, it's all cooked with Old World freshness and simplicity.

Picking fresh crab claws from traps in our own waters, finding the best tomatoes in our fields and tossing them with hand-made care and new technology is a recipe to follow.

FloridaTrend.com/Extra

Read more about self-serve wine bars and the comings and goings at restaurants statewide.

TASTING MENU

► Wine fanciers and sommeliers will get a full education in tempranillo, Rioja and other grapes and places from the **Wine Academy of Spain** in Miramar on April 3.

► Gourmet donors will raise funds and glasses at the **Great Wines Seminar** April 12 and 13 at West Palm Beach's annual wingding. They'll be filled with the best from Vosne-Romaneé, St. Emilion and Ermitage.

► In Tampa, **Bern's** will host its grand festival April 11-14, with the Wagner family of Caymus and Jean-Luc Colombo from the Rhone.

► April 18 brings out the **Best of Tampa Bay** at the city's performing arts center while experts nose fine tequilas in Orlando at the **Hispanic Expo**.

► Sarasota's big **Winefest & Auction** is April 24-27 at the Ritz-Carlton, with the likes of Kennan, Ferrari-Carano and Pride Mountain.