A TASTE OF

FLORIDA KEYS

Stretching from the southern tip of Florida almost as far as Cuba, this US archipelago is the place to go for fresh fish, potent rum and, of course, Key limes

WORDS: DAVID FARLEY

LIONFISH ENCOUNTERS
CASTAWAY WATERFRONT RESTAURANT & SUSHI BAR

When I meet John Mirabella, it soon becomes abundantly clear he has two passions: scuba diving and catching lionfish — which is lucky, because the two go hand in hand.

Indigenous to the South Pacific and Indian Oceans, lionfish are considered an invasive species here. It's unclear how they anchored themselves in the Caribbean, but one theory is that they escaped from a Miami aquarium in the mid 1980s during a flood caused by a hurricane. Whatever the case, these maroon-and-white-striped fish, with their spiky, poisonous spiny dorsal fins, have since established themselves as kings of this underwater jungle, altering an ecosystem in which they have no natural predators. They also can't be lured by hooked bait, which means they have to be speared.

John, who has a hardy, jovial vibe about him, cares deeply about the local marine ecosystem and is dedicated to trying to eradicate lionfish. He believes the best way to do that is to catch, cook and feed them to his guests at his restaurant, Castaway Waterfront Restaurant & Sushi Bar, on Marathon Key.

"I don't kill things that I don't eat, so I had no choice but to start eating it," he says, as he's just about to plunge himself into the Yves Klein Blue waters, a few miles off the coast of Islamorada (a mid-archipelago island, and one of few that doesn't have 'Key' in its name). Because catching lionfish takes some effort, it's rare for restaurants to serve it; Castaway is one of the few that does.

After half an hour, John emerges from the water with three lionfish, each around 40cm long, with spiky dorsal fins that look quasi prehistoric. "There weren't as many down there as there used to be," he says, stripping off his wetsuit. "We've definitely made progress, but it seems lionfish are here to stay."

Back at Castaway, a cosy, wood-panelled space, I'm served today's catch, in the form of the King of the Jungle sushi roll, an assemblage of raw lionfish, asparagus and avocado, encrusted with fish roe. The fried head of the fish sits at one end to evoke an image of the once-living sea creature. The rolls may look a little weird, but they taste delicious, with a moist, buttery flavour not unlike that of lobster. I immediately wish we could go out diving the next day for more. This, I think, as I pick up a piece of sushi with my chopsticks, is how you try to wipe out an invasive species.

LOCAL TREASURE
THE KEY WEST KEY LIME PIE COMPANY

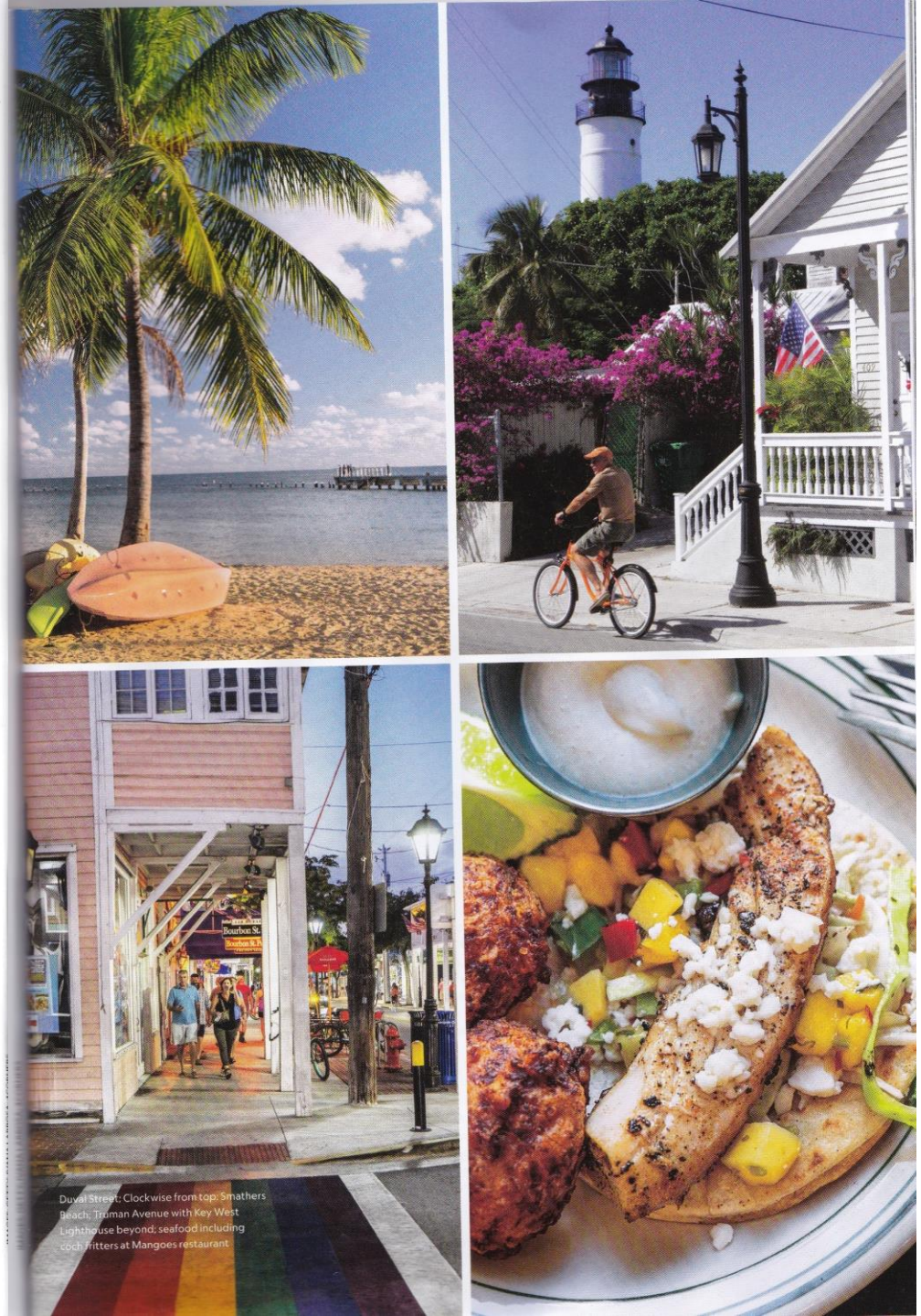
No one is exactly sure when or where the Keys' preeminent pudding was created, but many signs point to the Curry Mansion Inn in Key West. It was here, at what's now an antique-crammed hotel in the centre of Key West, that a mysterious figure named 'Aunt Sally' apparently put pie crust, sweetened condensed milk, eggs and lime juice together.

"It's possible that what became Key lime pie was created by sponge divers and fishermen while out at sea," says David Sloan, author of *The Key West Key Lime Pie Cookbook*, who's joined me at the hotel. "The lime, for example, helped prevent scurvy, and the condensed milk would preserve for a long time."

There's evidence of something called 'spongers pie' in the late 19th century, which involved the divers dipping Cuban bread into mugs of sweetened condensed milk, Key lime juice and bird's eggs, creating a crude version of the dessert we know today. But the pie was also accredited around the same time to one Aunt Sally, who, according to David, was a woman named Sarah Curry, part of a well-to-do local family. His theory is that the pie's origins encompass both stories.

Regardless of how it came about, Key lime pie has become ubiquitous throughout the Florida Keys. The most common version is the classic — containing all the same elements as Aunt Sally's — but as I travel around, I spot deep-fried, French toast and ice cream varieties too.

David and I wander over to the nearby Key West Key Lime Pie Company, one of his favourite places for a slice, where the chefs can be viewed producing pies in the open kitchen. Unusually, they don't add egg to their recipe. "It's probably easier," says Sloan. "Without egg, they don't have to bake it." We order a traditional slice and a chocolate-dipped slice. I take a bite of the classic slice, and the refreshing, tart flavour imbues my palate. Egg or no egg, this is a definite taste of Key West.



Duval Street: Clockwise from top: Smathers Beach; Truman Avenue with Key West Lighthouse beyond; seafood including coch fritters at Mangoes restaurant

BOTTOMS UP
HEMINGWAY RUM COMPANY

There are a few things one learns about the Hemingway Rum Company's namesake on a visit to the distillery. Among them are that the writer spent about a decade living here in Key West, a quaint island town of wooden, pastel-coloured houses. Also, that he gave himself the nickname 'Papa' at just 27 years old. And that he loved the name Pilar; if he'd had a daughter, that's what he would have called her, but instead it became the name of his boat. Finally, and most importantly, you learn that Ernest Hemingway liked rum. A lot.

Tricia Constable-Flannigan, director of operations, shows me around the distillery, its walls adorned with photos of the author in various poses — displaying a rifle here, standing next to a giant marlin there — and the caption 'The (real) most interesting man in the world!'

She briefly explains the distilling and ageing process. Depending on what variety of rum they're making, it's transferred between Spanish sherry and port casks and bourbon barrels, resulting in a unique flavour profile, which I'm invited to taste for myself. Distillery employee Kirk Frohnapfel, whom Tricia affectionately refers to as Captain Kirk, is behind the bar, pouring measures of Hemingwayan proportions. The blonde, essentially a white rum that's aged slightly longer than usual, is first. It's smooth, with notes of butterscotch and vanilla. The dark rum comes next, a blend of nine different rums, the oldest having been aged for 20 years. There are hints of coffee and earthiness in its long finish. I've never been a big rum drinker, but I love the smoothness and subtly of it — who knows if Hemingway appreciated those characteristics too, or if it was simply a lubricant in the writing process. I make eye contact with Captain Kirk and he grabs the bottle in front of him. "More?"

DOCK TO DISH
DIRTY WATER CHARTERS & BAKERS CAY RESORT

"We're all about sustainability here," says fisherman Lain Goodwin, the 47-year-old owner of Dirty Water Charters, and one of the stars of the Discovery Channel's *The Fish Guyz* — a reality TV show following a couple of local boat captains as they demonstrate fishing tips and tricks for use in these waters. "We're trying to protect Florida Bay and the Everglades National Park for the future, so we have to be careful about what we fish for."

We meet early in the morning on the dock of Bakers Cay Resort, in Key Largo, where I'm staying. The plan is to spend half a day out on the water in the Everglades National Park, reeling in fish before heading back to the hotel to cook it up. "The diversity of fish here is insane," Lain says, adding that we'll be hooking speckled sea trout today. After a 45-minute journey to the middle of Florida Bay, where islands of mangroves dot the teal-coloured waters, Lain's boat slows to a halt, bobbing in the shallow waters of Florida Bay. Lain offers some basic instructions on how to cast a line, involving various flicks of the wrist, and within a minute we have a plump, 39cm speckled sea trout on the boat. That's nothing to do with me, though. "Beginner's luck," says my girlfriend Ivana, as Lain unhooks the fish from her line.

Depending on the depth, the water glows in varying shades, and, around us, the local wildlife is putting on a show. An osprey glides by with a catfish in its talon. Mullet leap out of the water, and about 65ft in the distance, a large brown pelican dive-bombs for fish, pounding the glassy water like a cannonball. Farther still, great white herons wade in the shallow waters.

A few hours later, we pull up to the dock at Bakers Cay with three speckled trout — none of which I caught. The resort's executive chef, Andy Papson, is waiting for our catch. All over the Keys there are variations on the dock-to-dish setup, and here the chefs let guests guide them on how they'd like their fish prepared.

"We try to use the whole fish," Papson says, sitting with us in Calusa, the resort restaurant. "Which I love, because it's a sustainable practice and it also forces us to get creative in the kitchen." When he says they use everything, he means it. Organs are turned into pâté, bones go into a pot for broth, and even eyeballs apparently have their uses. In the end, we agree he'll roast two whole fish, and do what he likes with the third, as long as it doesn't involve eyeballs.

Around four hours later, on the terrace of the restaurant, with the sun dipping behind the Everglades, out comes a grilled filet of trout with lime foam and a disc of squid ink resting on top. Next, though, is the real tour de force: two whole speckled sea trout, delicately fried, curled around a mound of pineapple-and-crab-spiked fried rice. A stem of bright green Cuban oregano, grown in the hotel's rooftop garden, adds a pop of colour. It's mild in flavour, with a satisfying crispness to the otherwise moist fish. We might be a way off joining the cast of *The Fish Guyz* but today's catch is something to be proud of. ●

Aunt Sally's Original Key Lime pie

The origins are murky, but one 'Aunt Sally' is credited with creating the Florida Keys' signature dessert at the Curry Mansion Inn in the early 20th century.

SERVES: 4 TAKES: 30 MINS

INGREDIENTS

4 eggs, separated
120ml Key lime juice (or a mix of 60ml lemon juice and 60ml lime juice)
415ml sweetened condensed milk
20cm sweet pastry case (shop-bought or homemade)
¼ tsp cream of tartar
50g sugar

METHOD

1 Heat oven to 180C, 160C fan, gas 4. Beat the egg yolks in a large mixing bowl until they're light and thick. Add the Key lime juice, followed by the condensed milk, stirring until the mixture thickens. Pour into the pastry case.

2 Beat the egg whites with the cream of tartar until stiff, then gradually beat in the sugar until glossy peaks form. Spread the mixture over the surface of the pie, smoothing it out to the edge of the pastry crust.

3 Put the pie in the oven and bake until golden-brown, around 20 mins. Chill before serving.

Above: colourful cafes and shops on Lazy Way, close to the waterfront in Key West

ESSENTIALS

GETTING THERE
British Airways and Virgin Atlantic fly to Miami, an hour's drive from Key Largo. ba.com virgin-atlantic.com

HOW TO DO IT
Bon Voyage offers seven nights in the Florida Keys from £1,925 per person, including flights, car hire and room-only at Baker's Cay Resort in Key Largo, Kimpton's Winslow's Bungalows in Key West and The Islander Resort in Islamorada. bon-voyage.co.uk

MORE INFO
fla-keys.co.uk

FLORIDA KEYS FAVOURITES

Conch fritters
Every fish shack from Key Largo to Key West has fried balls of conch — a type of sea snail — on the menu. Minced conch (pronounced 'conk') is combined with onion, green pepper, garlic, celery and cayenne pepper, before being battered and fried. Try them at Mangoes or Key Largo Conch House. mangoeskeywest.com keylargoconchhouse.com

Iguana Bait beer
Made by the Florida Keys Brewing Company in Islamorada, Iguana Bait beer is inspired by its location. Specifically, it's infused with wild hibiscus, which is also a popular snack among the invasive local iguana population. The result: a light, refreshing German-style kölsch that strikes a balance between sweet and tart. floridakeysbrewingco.com

IMAGES: GETTY/DIANA LARRIOSA