



Venerable Port Royal Eatery Deserves Her Stars

Story and Photos by Mark Shaffer



Going to MoonDoggies always seems like visiting an old friend's home – the fun one where everyone hangs out in the kitchen. Maybe that's because it's a family affair or maybe it's because the building is an old converted house. And like any authentic Lowcountry home of this vintage, it is steeped in character. Most of the first floor is wrapped in a rambling screened porch covered in English Ivy from floor to ceiling. The main dining room - the Lodge Room - is a vaulted chapel of exposed beams and windows, wonderfully rustic and airy. Even the floors have character. It's all tongue and groove heart pine the original owner salvaged out of old boxcars, polished by the cargo of time. And to complete the Lowcountry ambience, it's all nestled snugly beneath towering live oaks dripping in Spanish moss barely a stone's throw from the salt marsh and Sandy Point in the heart of Port Royal.

As for the name, MoonDoggies has nothing to with Gidget's boyfriend of the same name from the 1960's surfer movies. However, co-owner/ chef Jeff Harris did grow up surfing in northern Florida and there is a bit of a surf vibe to the place. But the name comes by way of

Harris' beloved Weimaraner, Miss Tascha (registered as Tascha's Moon Cyndre) who celebrated Super Bowl Sunday, 1994, by whelping ten pups. Apparently Miss Tascha was a big Cowboys fan. She lives on in the restaurant's logo and in the dining room's famous mural as she watches over her daughter, Dallas Alice, from above on a Lowcountry crescent moon.

Today's edition of the Moveable Feast includes yours truly, Lowcountry Weekly Publisher Jeff Evans and Habersham-based Builder Leo Gannon. The ladies are otherwise occupied it seems. Fine. More of Chef Harris' famous crab cakes for us.

We claim a table outside on the deck and order a round of cervezas as the first plates hit the wood. Today is Chef's Choice and we start with two of the most popular items on the menu: Crispy Fried Pickle Chips with Horseradish Sauce and Coconut Shrimp with Orange Marmalade Horseradish Sauce. The shrimp are large, lovely and loaded with flavor and that can mean only one thing in this part of the world.

"They're obviously fresh and local," says Leo. "Very tasty, very tang



y."

"You can definitely taste the difference," says Jeff. "The breading's very light and the coconut pops. Not a hint of grease. And there's just the right balance of sweet and heat in the sauce."

"I may have to eat 7 or 8 more to verify these findings," Leo deadpans.

The shrimp are so perfectly cooked even the tails disappear.

We polish off the shrimp in short order and move on to munch on the fried pickles. I know what you're thinking. Fried pickles. Yawn.

"The crispy fried pickles are probably the most popular thing on the menu," says Dawn Harris.

I was a fried pickle skeptic



until my first plate of MoonDoggies' pickles some years back. MoonDoggies literally goes through these things by the gallon. The key to a crispy fried pickle is, well, starting with a crispy pickle. Soggy, limp pickles tend to stay that way. These are thin sliced crinkle cut with a nice hint of garlic that begs for the bite of a little horseradish sauce.

MoonDoggies is known for its fabulous burgers, hand cut steaks and sandwiches (regulars are obsessive about the Reuben), but the chef is all about fresh and local seafood this outing. And according to Dawn, when it comes to that side of the menu there is one dish that stands out above all else.

"If I had to pick one thing to be known for it would be our Pan-fried Lump Crab Cakes," she says. "They are that special."

I'm on record as an admitted crab cake addict, and good ones can be remarkably



hard to find. Too often there's more "cake" than crab. Not here. This is as pure a crab cake as you're likely to find and the reason is simple. As Jeff Harris explained during our first visit here nearly eight year ago, this isn't just a menu item, it's part of MoonDoggies' culinary philosophy. "We've all lived on the coast our entire lives and seafood's always been a big staple with us – just good Southern cooking. We like to provide the kind of place, service and atmosphere that we'd enjoy. When I go out to eat I want to have a good meal, enjoy myself and relax. And that's what we try to do here." This is evident all around but most importantly on the plate where the absence of pretense is practically a secret seasoning.

Nothing's changed with the years. We have a table consensus: this is a remarkably simple thing done incredibly well. Select lump crabmeat is seasoned with a blend of herbs and spices; sautéed in the butter Nature intended and served with perfectly grilled, fresh baby asparagus and house made hushpuppies.

"They are to die for," says Leo.

