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Bonefish Grill opens with a bang bang

Around town

Friday, Aug. 21, 2009

By DICKSON MERCER
Staff writer

Brandywine's Bonefish Grill has been busy since the day it opened some months ago in the new Brandywine Shopping Center — and that was before the restaurant rolled out this month's dinner-for-two deal. Here, a reservation comes in handy.

Throughout August, for \$18, you and a dining companion can begin by splitting an appetizer of Bonefish Grill's much-hyped and aptly named bang bang shrimp or Singapore calamari (choose the shrimp). After that, each person can choose a house or Caesar salad and then pick a dish among Norwegian salmon, fontina chicken and sea scallops with shrimp.

Coming from the same company that brings you Outback Steakhouse, Carrabba's Italian Grill and Cheeseburger in Paradise, Bonefish Grill is not just



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Staff photo by EMILY BARNES

Bonefish Grill's managing partner, Jonathan Ginsburg, sits at the bar of the new restaurant in Brandywine. The bang bang shrimp appetizer is one of the chain's most popular dishes.



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busy in Brandywine. The dinner destination appears to be busy everywhere.

People really like this place, as long as numbers do not lie, and they have plenty of reasons to. For one, there is nary a boring item on the menu. Case in point: the bang bang shrimp appetizer, a pyramid of shrimp that's nearly tall enough to make a dinner for two. Coated with chives and a zesty cream sauce, the explosive appetizer is rich enough to qualify as a guilty pleasure.

The sweet spot of the menu, though, is fish deliciously grilled over a wood fire. Prices run from \$14.30 for longfin tilapia to \$27 for cold water lobster tails.

Bonefish prepares meaty, juicy fish that is good enough to stand alone and then pairs it with flavor-heavy dipping sauces (like mango salsa or chimichurri). Sides, like jasmine rice or a seasonal vegetable, are usually quite good, and the end result is a fish dish with memorable flair. Not a restaurant to risk blandness, Bonefish, it seems, would rather go over the top. In other words, before you order garlic whipped potatoes, be sure you really, really like garlic.

Surely another source of Bonefish's popularity is its very setup. The dining room, for one, is intimate, and thus far less cavernous than its sister Carrabba's down the road. Walls are a soft yellow, the black ceiling is outfitted with mood lights and a wall full of metal fish sculptures signifies the restaurant's Florida roots. Any trace of intimidation, meantime, is erased by the choice of table cloth: brown paper. Still, entering a restaurant like this, one half expects to open the menu and find out that entrées start at, not top out at, \$27.

If you do overspend, chances are you at least won't leave hungry. Among the appetizer and entrée and perhaps dessert (though I doubt it), one might munch on complimentary sourdough bread dipped in olive oil that is as unnecessary as it is conducive to overindulgence.

Bonefish asks its servers, clad in white chef coats, to be enthusiastic experts of the menu. Those who are not experts compensate with friendliness. During a press night, my wife and I were naturally served by the ace of the staff, and an ace she was.



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Staff photo by EMILY BARNES

Bonefish Grill recently opened at the new Brandywine Crossing shopping center. The outdoor waiting area has patio furniture.



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Staff photo by EMILY BARNES

Coated with a creamy sauce and chives, the bang bang shrimp appetizer is one of Bonefish Grill's most memorable dishes.

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For a second visit, a colleague and I were not greeted with the same level of expertise; the server's sincerity, on the other hand, did not go unnoticed. In fact, she was perhaps more attentive than necessary.

On a Tuesday night, the wait for a table was about 20 minutes. A host gave a colleague and me one of those buzzers, and we took a seat at the bar, where we were surprised to see only four drafts on tap, but pleased enough to find Blue Moon and Sam Adams Summer Ale. Other people waited outside, where the restaurant has arranged a spread of outdoor patio furniture.

The bar area, with its spread of high tables, provides a fine way to circumvent the wait. There are a few booths in the area as well.

Even the bar area is usually busy, though, and Bonefish does well with its cocktails and wines. My wife beamed after a sip of pomegranate martini, which had three frozen grapes on a stick in place of the olives. And she preferred it to the cosmopolitan.

For starters, Bonefish's ahi tuna sashimi (\$14.90 or \$8.80 for a half order) makes less noise than the bang bang shrimp. But it also provides a lighter, palate-opening alternative, and with sushi options lacking in the region, some may relish any opportunity to break out the chopsticks. A large order involves about a dozen square pieces arranged on a bed of lettuce with sauce drizzled over the top. If coolness is not for you, perhaps roll the dice on the accompanying hot sauce.

A Maryland crab appetizer (\$14) is two jumbo lump cakes with a smattering of a red remoulade. It's not your regional prototype — not better than the best but far better than the worst. Here, flavorful bites of lump crab are bound loosely, but not by any filler or binder.

There is only one soup on the menu, but it's worth a try. Corn chowder with lump crab (added on for \$2.80) is nicely spiced and robust.

Bonefish refers to its most casual menu items as hand holds. Bang bang tacos (\$8.90) are yet another load of creamy shrimp piled inside tortillas with diced tomato and sour cream.

The wood-fired grill handles more than fish. Filet mignon, an item a seafood restaurant is supposed to fail at, is more than just competitive.

On a slightly different note, an American-style Kobe beef burger (\$9.99), a summer special, ranks among the biggest burgers I've ever seen. Perhaps it was too big, though, as I noticed a man at the bar remove an inch-thick tomato slice. (On my other side, a couple split a bottle of wine and a bowl of mussels Josephine [\$8.80] in a pool of basil and lemon sauce.)

For my most recent visit to Bonefish, my colleague ordered the special Rockefeller mahi mahi (\$16.90). The wood-grilled taste was sensational, he said. Of course, the chefs did not stop there; they added a thin layer of creamed spinach and a sprinkle of lump crab that naturally gave it an extra punch of flavor.

The asparagus was forgettable, though the portion size was right, and the fish's bed of garlic whipped potatoes failed to materialize due to a mix-up with the server.

Diablo shrimp fettuccine, meanwhile, was yet another aptly named dish. Zesty bordering on spicy, a heap of spinach fettuccine was mixed up with lively vegetables and a garlic cream sauce that went the distance.

Another guilty pleasure? Maybe, but I felt none of it. In fact, as my server noted, I

now rank among the few she has seen finish the dish.

Bonefish Grill

15910 Crain Highway, Brandywine. Hours: Monday-Thursday 4-10:30 p.m.,
Friday 4-11:30 p.m., Saturday 2-11 p.m., Sunday 1-9 p.m. Entrée prices: \$9-\$27.
Credit cards: V, MC, D, AE Phone: 301-782-7604. Go to www.bonefishgrill.com

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