

Historic Dining

UMBRELLAS

96

It's one of the most beautiful facades of any building in downtown Sarasota. A nearly square front, full of windows and ivy. It's adjacent to the Sarasota Opera House and the two buildings side-by-side look like something out of a catalogue.

Welcome to "Umbrellas 1296." The number represents the street address on 1st Street at Pineapple. The new owners, Paul & Liz, painted the trim navy blue causing the building to stand-out even more.

Erin and I visited on a Friday night and being a 'table snob,' I was so happy with the Hostesses suggestion to "pick any table." I believe an experience can really be made—or broken—pending the table assignment. We chose a table that allowed us to face out toward the sidewalk and do some great people watching while we settled in for what turned out to be a wonderful dining experience.

There were 9 different options on the interesting cocktail menu. But we ordered pinot noir--and took the waiter's suggestion to try Brussels Sprouts as an appetizer. Excellent choice. The waiter was in his early-twenties but already had the poise and customer service of a 5-star server. He struck that delicate balance of being personable without lingering too long.

The restaurant began filling up, but the acoustics were perfect, and it never seemed loud in the dining room. Some patrons chose to eat upstairs in an additional dining room while others ate outside under the stars in the spacious patio next to the building. It's an excellent venue for private parties. (The upstairs dining room includes the original bar and wallpaper from the 1920s and John Ringling's private dining room.





There's also a sketch on the wall done by Mr. Ringling himself!) "Umbrellas 1296" is very conscientious of dietary restrictions. I have a gluten intolerance and Erin has a severe onion allergy, but the staff handled those issues in stride.

The menu is well-marked including vegetarian options. The managers say the cuisine is "chef driven" and the result is an eclectic menu with something for everyone. Erin had the salmon scampi and I chose the lobster risotto--and we were both very pleased. Excellent!

The menu said the chocolate torte was "insanely good," so being a good journalist I had to investigate. In fact, I investigated some of Erin's dessert as well just to be thorough—and sure enough, the advertising was accurate.

"Umbrellas 1296" also serves lunch and has a popular Sunday brunch—and they have new menus for each. There is live music most nights—including the John DeWitt Quartet, Panama Drive, Brenda Watty and Katt Hefner. It's a very comfortable setting—elegant yet somehow still casual.

There's an active bar scene and other diner's eating alone with a good book. (We saw a friend come in on a first date and it was fun seeing her and grilling him about his intentions. They sat with us afterwards and it made for a fun evening.)

I've always loved this space and I'm so glad Paul and Liz have restored, renovated and updated the building. It's really a jewel of downtown--and it was a good feeling to walk back into the balmy night hearing the din of a successful restaurant behind us.

RAY COLLINS