



The Classics

NAPLES INN ON FIFTH

If I didn't live in Sarasota, I may live in Naples. There's a lot of similarities. While Sarasota has Main Street, Naples has 5th Avenue South—and in the epicenter of it all is the Inn on Fifth. I've driven—and walked—by it for decades, always hoping to cross it off my Bucket List.

Not only did we finally stay there—we were treated like VIPs. After the valet took our car and bags, we walked to the front desk and the clerk greeted us by name. Huh? “The valet told me, sir,” as she gestured to her earpiece. We followed the clerk out the front door and across 5th Avenue to another building across the street that said “Club Level” on the entrance.

She explained this is where the suites are located—as well as our private lounge. So far so good! Our room was four times the size of normal hotel rooms. Beyond the large bathroom and king-size bed area, the room then opened to a living room with another TV and a desk area, followed by a glass door to the balcony that overlooked 5th avenue.

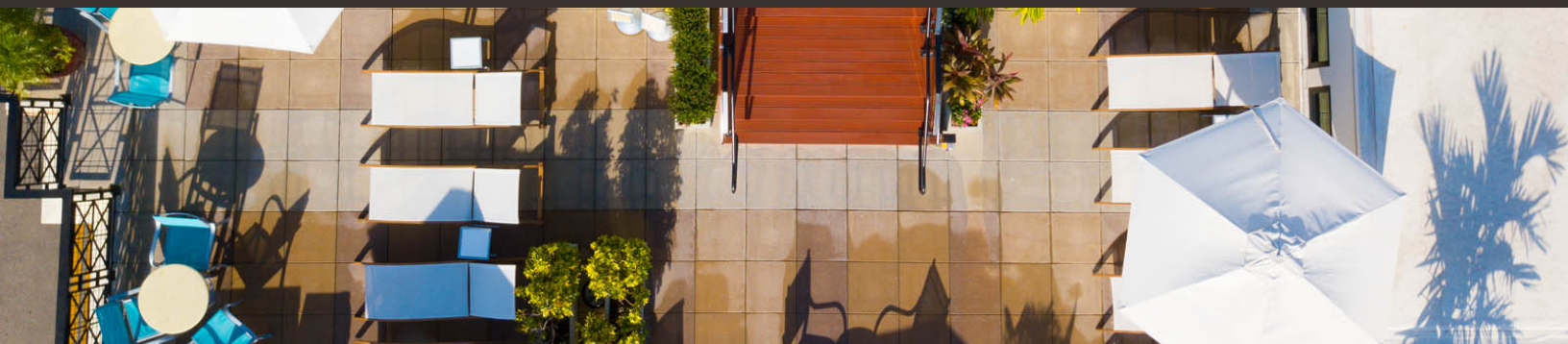
“I could live in here!” I said to Erin.

After we unpacked our bags and freshened up, we went back downstairs to find lunch. We didn't have to look any farther than the place right next door. Vergina Restaurant bills itself as authentic Mediterranean cuisine. We didn't get too exotic, knowing we had a big dinner ahead of us, so we each had salads. Erin had a chicken Caesar, and I had a wedge. Both were excellent. We sat just off the sidewalk in a cool alley, feeling like we were in Europe, sipping wine and people watching. The Manager, Eric Tancredi, came by to welcome us. His easy-going nature set a nice tone. We felt like we were truly on vacation—even though in reality we were just a couple hours from home.

The street was busy with an art festival—featuring everything from paintings to sculptures. These artists make the rounds on weekends, and I would bet Naples is a lucrative stop. We happened to see a friend from Sarasota who had a popular booth. Justin McKenney—and his wife, Melanie—produce functional pottery molded from real fruits and vegetables. It's called ‘Vegetabowls.’ Incredibly unique!

Erin and I walked to the western end of 5th Avenue to check out the beach and then circled south to see the area around 3rd Street South, another beautiful area full of shops and restaurants. We went back to the hotel, changed into our tennis clothes and walked behind our hotel to Cambier Park, a larger and busier version of Sarasota's Payne Park.

We hit tennis balls on the soft court while couples and families milled around the area. Great atmosphere. Again, back to the hotel where we showered, changed into evening attire and went to the VIP lounge for drinks and hors d'oeuvres. Shhhh. We took them back to our suite and stood out on the balcony and watched the sun set on 5th Avenue South.



And here's one of my favorite parts of the weekend: We went down a flight of stairs and directly across the street to have dinner at one of the nicest restaurants in Naples, "Ocean Prime." We sat along a row of windows that were opened into a courtyard where dozens of people walked around, taking pictures and enjoying the balmy tropical evening. We began our meal with appetizers, including a sushi Ocean Roll that put to shame my usual selection in the local grocery store. It included tuna, salmon, Hamachi, avocado and chili garlic oil. (\$19.) For dinner, Erin had the 'Chef's Choice' which was a New York Strip Steak (\$50). I had an 8 oz Filet Mignon (\$47). Both were excellent. Prepared exactly right. We shared Jalapeno Au Gratin potatoes (\$13) and asparagus (\$12). ("Ocean Prime" is known just as much for a wide array of fresh local seafood—but on this particular night, we were both in the mood for meat.)

We drank pinot noir recommended by our waitress, which was a perfect match. The entire staff was very impressive, headed up by General manager Rick Giannasi. Very personable as he unobtrusively checked on all the tables at least once throughout the night.

We finished off our meal with coffee and a scoop of vanilla ice cream. My favorite punctuation to nice meals.

We walked off our dinner by strolling 5th Avenue, enjoying the busy nightlife. It was convenient that our hotel was in the middle of all the action. But the active street scene below was left outside our sound-proof windows. We slept soundly with no ambient noise--and not even any adjacent banging hotel room doors, since there are so few rooms on each floor.

In the morning we went to the Club Level lounge and had a nice breakfast and met some other guests also staying at the Inn on 5th.

A nice way to wrap up a fun 18 hours in Naples. I can now check the Inn on 5th off my Bucket List. Happy to say it was worth the wait!

RAY COLLINS is a former local newscaster who now works in real estate.

