

Bar Hoppin' With Hops

The Keep Calm and Hop On Tour
Hops MacBarley's Ongoing
Key West Bar Boondoggle

Hop #313

Onlywood Grill

Caroline Street
Fri 3/1, 9:15 pm

Crazy Lady (draft)

Only a couple of weeks ago, in what I'll call Episode 1, my good friends Paul and Art were in town and I wanted to treat them to dinner. I made a few suggestions, and they liked the down-the-alley, in-the-know sound of the original Onlywood (#135), and I was eager to eat there. Just a few days prior to this, Double-R, in response to a somewhat random observation of mine that O-wood had done well to survive in their esoteric location, had raved about the place: "Are you kidding me? That place rocks! It's got to be one of the busiest restaurants in Key West. Their food is frickin' awesome! They're opening a second one just five blocks away." OK, I was convinced.



Well, we got shut out. Place was too damn full. No room at the damn inn. People were lined up in the damn alley a-waiting on a-seating. Yeah, it was a damn Wednesday night, but it was 8:00 on a Wednesday night, in mid-damn-February — high season for winter-weary damn tourists and damn snowbirds. It was about an hour wait, dammit, so we bagged it, took the four-block walk and "settled" for a yum meal (after a short wait) at Mangia Mangia (#119).

But the seed had been planted. Tonight, it would sprout. Tonight, to celebrate the new month, I would combine two quests by dining *and Hopping* at the new Onlywood Grill.

Surely, a Friday night, at the southernmost city's newest restaurant would not be crowded at 8:15, right? Ha. Right, bright boy. Not a chance, Lance.



So, I took a walk for a little more than an hour, doing some proactive exercise to burn off some pre-gorge calcs. Key West is a purdy dang good place to take a while-away-some-time walk. Between the harbor walk, the Old Town neighborhoods, and Duval Street, there is always plenty to keep one's mind entertained.

I got back and I climbed the few wooden steps up from the sidewalk level up onto the outdoor deck area. Tables were available out here, and it was a perfect evening for dining among the palm trees and tropical breeze, but not for me. I had my sights set squarely on a bar seat. There was duty to be done.

My earlier recon fly-by had shown me the lay of the land, so I could tell now that there were gaps where none had been before. I did the polite thing and asked the hostess if there were seats available at the bar. I knew the answer, but this way was nicer than just blowing past her saying, "Outa my way, bitch, I have Hopping to do!" I'm sure she would've understood, but this was less surly.

I chose the very first seat, at the near end of the bar. There are only about eight bar seats in all. The nearest two were open and there was one farther down between two couples. Taking that one would have been odd in anyone's book: deliberately choosing to crowd them and myself. Mighta made enemies.

Taking the very first seat, though, was a coup. I virtually guaranteed myself a neighborless stay. I had all that extra space to my left, and I could even park



my shoulder bag on the seat if I wanted to stake a fake claim. I didn't feel the need to do that, though. At this time of night, it was unlikely that a single patron was going to arrive and ask for that seat. I mean, what kind of friendless loser sits at a bar to have solo dinner at 9:30 on a Friday night? I mean, besides me, of course. :)



My server, a 40-ish, shaved-domed character named Ricardo, handed me a menu and took my drink order. I had checked out Onlywood's menu online back before Episode 1 and had spied a very yum-looking item: Lasagna with Bolognese sauce. Ohhh myyyy. That sinnngs to me. Mmmmm, hot, deelicious zag.

As I walked thisaway the first time, I had zag on my mind. The full bar postponed it, and all throughout my walkaround, I was fueled by the anticipation.

Zag-Bolo, as I called it, was my Best Meal of 2017. Yeah, I really do have that kind of year-end recognitions. Categories change every year, but the standouts get acknowledged. That Zag was Roman Zag. I told you all about it in Hopter 275 (Bruschetta Cucina Italiana — you can't go there anymore because it has closed, but you can still read about it).

I almost waved off the menu and just announced my lasagna lust, but I decided to give the board of fare a cursory look. My perusal became a deep scan. I poured over both sides of the single-sheet menu and saw no signs of my coveted zag. Ricardo came by to ask if I had any questions. Yes, I did, in fact, where the fuck was my zag?!

I didn't say that, of course, though I wanted to. I rephrased it to something more civil. He nodded, knowingly. I surmise that I was not the first to lament the absence of such an elemental dish.

"You should try the cannelloni," he urged, "Is very similar. You like lasagna, you will like the cannelloni."

There was something very sincere in his tone, not just some sidestepping how-about to quench my queries. So I trusted Ricardo and ordered it up.

With that all done, there was time for a look around. Nice place, this new Onlywood. Spacious dining area inside as well as out, floor-to-ceiling plate glass windows on two walls, and simple wood-topped tables and wood-seated chairs. There's a very high ceiling with that warehouse look that seems to be very accepted nowadays: lots of thick vent pipes and hanging round light fixtures overhead. In the past, those pipes would have been hidden behind a drop ceiling and the lights would have been replaced by long thin fluorescent tubes behind translucent glass panels. Bah. Now, though, all is clean and painted nicely, and the extra airiness of the tall room is a big plus. It all makes things look more historic too, even if, as in the case, they're not.

The kitchen, in its shiny new stainless steel splendor, is on display as well. I wonder how the cooks feel about that. In one sense, they are on stage and can kind of perform a little. On the other hand, they have to stay extra clean, they have to watch their language, and they can never vent their inevitable exasperations. They would probably prefer a closed-in room.



On the blank wall space above the kitchen, the restaurant's name is displayed modestly in thin metal lettering. The word "Onlywood" is in larger letters, with the secondary word "Grill" next to it. Hence, my deduction that this place was going by the name "Onlywood Grill" to distinguish it from the original.

[OK, I typed "the original" a bit too quickly and made a mess of it, so autocorrect came to the rescue and replaced my jumble with "proton album". Really? *Distinguish it from proton album?* That's what you think I was trying to type? Sometime, I should just sit at a bar and type one of these Hopters as fast as I can and let the autocorrect chips fall as they may. Might be downright entertaining.]

There's a wraparound counter that kind of hugs the outer perimeter of the cooking zone. It provides more seating, on high stools, and it could easily be mistaken for an extended bar. In fact, that was my initial impression. I



suppose, if shove came to push, and all the seats here at the real bar were taken, I might have found a way to justify that for the Hop.

I was not even halfway done with my beer when the cannelloni arrived. To my dismay, there was no bread. There had never been any promise of any, but, still, I expected a small plate of warm mini-loaves or garlic knuckles to be set in front of me while I waited for my entree. Didn't happen. When you assume...

The entree looked small, but that was largely due to the shape of the dish. It was more of a lidless ceramic box than

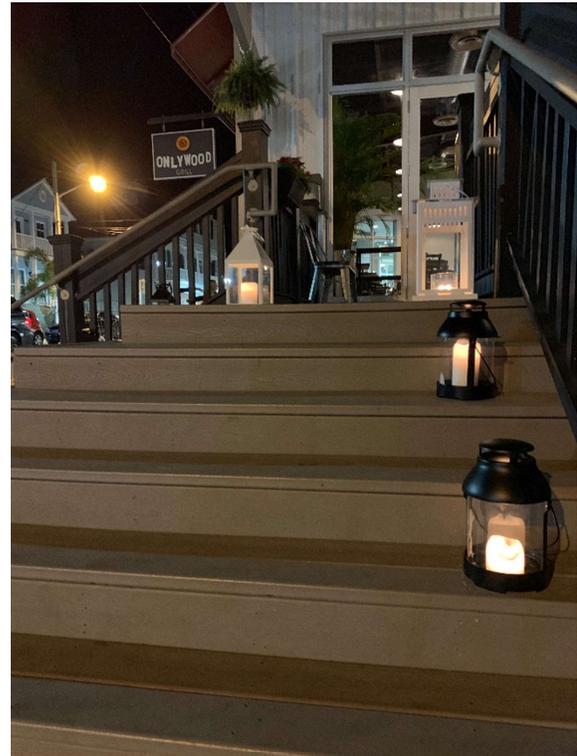
a plate. And, being a pasta dish, it was not nestled in a clever arrangement of veggies and taters, so it looked extra lonely.

It tasted really good, though: a pretty good substitute for lasagna, but not quite the real deal. I could have eaten maybe another half helping, but it was good enough, especially for a late-night repast.

I took my time finishing my Crazy Lady. I don't think I even sipped it while I ate. Too committed to Chow Mode. I did some plipping on the iPad Mini while I enjoyed the final ounces.

Some guy that I have seen around town here and there, and, therefore, "kinda knew", had been standing nearby, trying to convince his three cronies that it was not too late to grab a table and have some dinner. I was doing my best not to be seen. But I failed. He felt it was his province to come up, tap on the bar, and tell me that I was "working much too hard."

Had I actually been working, I would have had to agree with him. But, as you all know, Hopping is not "work"; 'tis truly a labor of love. I nodded, decided that he did not merit a detailed explanation, shrugged, smirked, and returned to my plipping.



After another paragraph or two, I contented myself with a belly-well-filled and a Hop-well-hopped and decided to press onward. By all appearances, the new version of Onlywood was going to be every bit as good, or even better than, proton album.