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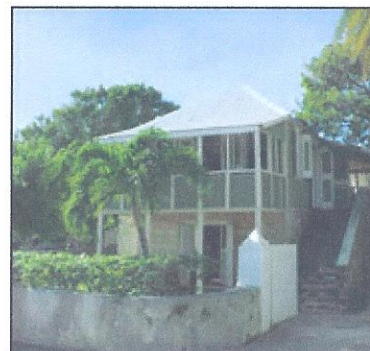
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Koal Keel Restaurant, Anguilla

Posted: Monday, April 09, 2007

The Caribbean island of Anguilla is known for its white sand beaches, relaxing atmosphere and excellent cuisine. With so many fine dining options available, from Pimms at Cap Juluca to Zurra's at the St. Regis Temenos, it's hard to pinpoint which restaurant offers the headiest mix of old-world charm and modern food. Koal Keel in the heart of The Valley comes as close as you can get.

Housed on a former sugar and cotton plantation, the restaurant opened in 1989 after the adjacent home was lovingly restored by the Gumbs family. Koal Keel's dining room occupies a covered patio, which is connected by a walkway to the sixteenth-century home. Seats are never far from the open-air windows, which overlook the former gardens of the plantation. A stone bar, at which Fred Flintstone and Barney Rubble would feel right at home, dominates one side of the dining room. The bartender serves up the usual cocktails made with Bourbon, tequila or whiskey, but also creates homemade frozen concoctions that are a real treat. Koal Keel is dimly lit and a jazz saxophonist plays both of which enhance the romantic atmosphere.



The restored sixteenth-century home Koal Keel resides.



Seats are never far from the open-air windows in the dining area.

Chef Gwendolyn Smith uses fresh local ingredients -- coco crayfish, pigeon peas -- to make her sublime creations, many have an Indian component. Fish and seafood are prevalent, and meat aren't neglected for innovation. Choice appetizers organic mixed green salad with goat cheese, sweet onions, and caramelized walnuts (\$12) and the homemade crayfish creamy lobster sauce (\$16). The first is a nice twist on the traditional goat cheese salad (which usually comes with beets) and is served with a tart at the same time. You'll find crayfish dishes on most menus in Anguilla, served in interesting ways, although some takes are more creative than others. As a ravioli, the shellfish works superbly, although the companion could have used a larger portion; four ravioli are more than enough.

The entrée list is extensive and the dishes all look yummy. I chose the tandoori snapper (\$26), which was served with a mixture of yogurt, garlic, cumin, ginger and cayenne pepper and then cooked in the restaurant's traditional brick oven. The dish was moderately spicy -- I grew up on spicy north Indian food, so take my claim of any way you want -- yet the fish was still light and flaky. The sides served with the dish, mixed local vegetables, braised eggplant and coconut rice, counterbalanced the spiciness of the fish and they worked well together.

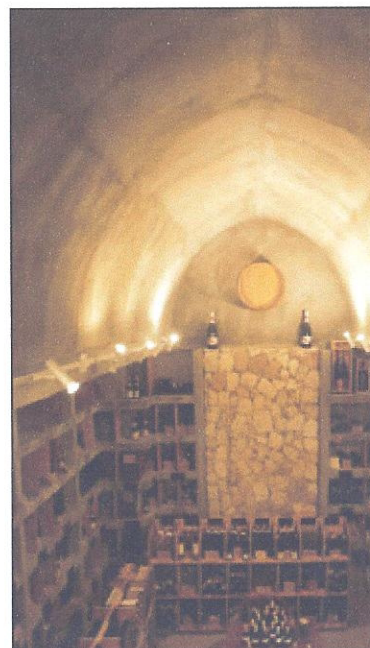
The tandoori rack of lamb (\$32) is another tasty entrée. The lamb is coated in the same spices as the snapper and served with marinated sweet onions and vegetables. Each bite of the succulent meat was juicy and fell off the bone.

with nary a struggle. The tangy onions and vegetables complemented the lamb, never overpowering the

One thing I didn't try but was very curious about was the rock oven chicken. Unfortunately, I couldn't p order for the dish because Koal Keel requires a 24-hour notice to slow-cook the bird.

The restaurant received a *Wine Spectator* Award of Excellence for its 15,000-bottle wine list. Touring Le Dôme, the restaurant's limestone wine cellar, one gets a sense of how challenging it must be for the Gumbs family to keep it well stocked. The requisite Château Mouton-Rothschilds and Château Margaux occupy the first-growth Bordeaux section of the cellar, but Le Dôme also has an extensive selection of new-world wines.

The cellar also houses the restaurant's varied cigar selection, including a number of Cuban brands as well as Davidoffs. Smokers can relax after their meal and savor local rum accompanied by a Cohiba Siglo IV (\$25), a Punch Churchill (\$25) or a Montecristo No. 2 (\$20). The cigar list is always expanding and Koal Keel hopes to soon offer rum and cigar pairings in its private rum tasting room. I even spied copies of the latest issue of *Cigar Aficionado* in the main dining room (no, it wasn't my doing) and the gregarious and attentive waitstaff all wanted to talk cigars. I knew this was a place that treated cigar aficionados the way they should be treated: with dignity and class.



Le Dôme, the restaurant's limestone cellar.

Koal Keel

Coronation Avenue

The Valley

Anguilla, British West Indies

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www.koalkeel.com

Hours: Open for dinner only, from 6:30 p.m. until closing seven days a week

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