

by Claudia Armann



Photographs by Benjamin Rusnak

## Cabbage Key Inn and Restaurant *Cabbage Key, Florida*

**LAY OF THE LAND** Cabbage Key is a speck of an island in Pine Island Sound, 20 miles west of Fort Myers and accessible only by boat. Beyond its rickety wooden dock lies the rustic bar and restaurant. Overnighters can book a boat slip or stay in one of six waterside cottages, some with their own dock.

**DEEP BACKGROUND** The “Old House” was built by a son of writer Mary Roberts Rinehart in the 1930s as a winter home. Rinehart, known for her mystery novels, is credited with coining the infamous accusation: “The butler did it.” Today the “Old House” is a busy restaurant and inn, owned since

1976 by Rob Wells and his family.

**TYPICAL CLIENTELE** Yachties on the Gulf Intra-coastal Waterway make Cabbage Key a watering stop en route to the Florida Keys. Residents from Boca Grande or Pine Island and vacationers on Captiva Island motor over for dinner. Gen. Norman Schwarzkopf once visited, only to be mistaken for Jonathan Winters. His good humor prevailed, and, on returning to dine, Schwarzkopf made reservations in Winters’s name.

**GRUB AND GROG** Grouper is the fish of choice, served with lemon butter or with crab meat in a

lobster cream sauce. The Cabbage Key cheeseburger could have been the inspiration for Jimmy Buffett’s “Cheeseburger in Paradise.” Key lime pie is de rigueur for dessert, followed by a bottle of champagne enjoyed atop the water tower while watching the setting sun.

**LOCAL KNOWLEDGE** The 38-foot-high shell mound was left behind by Calusa Indians. Neighboring Useppa Island, now an exclusive resort, was a training ground for Cuban exiles involved with the ill-fated Bay of Pigs Invasion.

**QUAINT TRADITION** The walls and ceiling in the dining room are a collage of signed dollar bills. The tradition started when visiting fishermen, whose fortunes fluctuated between catches, left signed cash behind as an advance for lean days. Diners continue the custom, and today an estimated \$50,000 covers the walls – fallen bills are donated to charity.

**CLOSE ENCOUNTERS OF THE WET KIND** A cruise through the surrounding waters yields sightings of dolphins, otters, and ospreys. Or motor to nearby Cayo Costa for an afternoon of snorkeling and shelling on the deserted beaches. For anglers, redfish and snook haunt the flats and mangroves, and Boca Grande Pass, a short boat ride north, is home to world-class tarpon fishing. 🐟



er tarpon in nearby waters and benches fill walls.