

OOZING SHMOOZE

I was lucky enough to get a table for four at Shmooze last Saturday where the eight course tasting menu had won national acclaim within three months of the grand opening. My wife and I met our friends Peter and Mary Anne at Schmooze for a pre dinner drink and a bite of their famous tapas.

The waiter brought our cocktails and Mary Ann took a healthy sip and sighed. “Oh nothing, we’re just beat. Its been a long day. This morning Peter had a board meeting at our condo and there was some talk about developing a second tower right across the river.”

“Wow,” I said, “Another Trump development in Tampa?”

“Well,” Peter said, our building sold out so quickly even with all those investors flipping units and doubling the prices, apparently The Donald himself wants to put up money for the new one. Some people are against it because they think it will dilute the brand, but others see it as a rising tide raises all ships kind of thing.”

“An of course while Peter was doing his thing, I went over to the Performing Arts Center to check on the progress of the Ballet.”

Neither my wife nor I had been very knowledgeable about ballet until a few years ago when that Guggenheim fellow came into town and bestowed all that

money on the company. Since then he and some of his friends from New York gave the University of Tampa an enormous endowment, and of course now Baryshnikov comes here about six weeks per year to teach master classes. Since then we've become great fans, with season tickets. Mary Ann, who studied some dance in college threw herself headlong into the project, and now worked for the Tampa Bay Ballet Company. Last year they toured Europe with the centerpiece being a performance in Moscow that is said to have brought tears to the eyes of the most hardened critics.

“After that we had our workout, and then we took the water taxi over here to St. Pete to go shopping and then meet up with you guys.”

“We didn't do all that much,” my wife said, “just went shopping Bay Plaza.” Gucci and Louis Vuitton are having sales, and I got a few things while Tom wandered off to have a look at the Stadium progress.

I told them the new waterfront ball park was going splendidly, and that I was amazed not only at how well it blended in, how they were putting the finishing touches on the two Metro stations that would bring thousands of fans to the field, but also how well the stadium would integrate itself into the whole Southside waterfront development. “Since that gambling ship and the two upscale dinner cruises boats that followed it, along with the docks for the half dozen

of so cruise ships that come to St Pete every year, I really wondered how so much would fit in such a relatively small space, but I must say they pulled it off.”

“What’s the deal with the windmills?” Peter asked.

“Progress Energy agreed to put up three of them in the water near the stadium to show their commitment to alternative energy. There’s always a breeze coming off the bay and those three windmills along with the solar panels they are putting around the stadium will produce enough energy to run the whole facility for nothing, and will even provide a kind of out-door air conditioning if the weather gets too hot or muggy in the summer time.”

Peter and I continued to chat about the amazing turn around the Rays had made and we were pretty certain that there would be no repeat of last year’s heartbreaking American League playoff game in which we lost on the last play of the last inning to the Red Sox.

“Your table is ready,” the waiter interrupted, “I’ll bring the bar check to you.”

We ambled into the drop-dead gorgeous space what was Schmooze. Nothing was left to chance, no detail was too small. Fine linens, silver, crystal and fresh cut flowers, beautifully arranged graced each table.

Paintings by Botero, the with all their playfulness seemed to dance above the banquettes. Botero himself had painted these works for Schmooze after the

Colombian artist had visited here when a showing of his paintings and sculpture was held at the newly refurbished Fine Arts Museum, in conjunction with the cluster of museums that adorned the waterfront, including the new Dahli showcase. The exhibit, “Masters, From Old Spain to New Granada” featured not only Dahli and Botero, but also other old Masters from Spain and newer ones from Colombia. The show generated so much interest that Iberia Airlines put in a once a week Madrid-Tampa non-stop flight at the new International Terminal at Tampa’s refurbished airport. So impressed was he with the cultural milieu of the Bay area, Botero famously pronounced “My work shall hang here for free,” and he was good on his word.

Without a word bread and butter appeared, water was poured, a plate of tiny appetizers was placed in the middle of the table and we were asked if we wanted the tasting menu. We immediately said we did, and that we wanted it paired with wines. The sommelier came over to get an idea of that we preferred, whereupon Peter and I got into it over the relative merits of Bordeaux vs. Napa, a disagreement the sommelier settled by telling us we could each have a blind tasting of his pick from each region when we had our red meat course.

As we moved from one tiny plate of food bursting with tastes, notes of tastes, and textures that were incredibly matched, we toasted to our god fortune and our ability to afford such luxuries right here in our home town. The dinner was

everything one might expect from Princess Diana's former chef.

"You know," Mary Ann said, "We would not be able to afford this kind of thing if we had been saddled with out of state college tuition for our kids." We quickly agreed and the conversation turned to the foresight in 90's of Florida's governor's then controversial tax plan named "A Dollar For A Scholar." Basically for every thousand dollars of property taxes paid state wide an extra dollar went into a university escrow fund that the legislature could not touch, and which was spent in accordance with the specific needs and plans of Florida's Universities, and allocated by a completely independent board of scholars whose decision was final. It was just a matter of time that local governments applied the same thinking to grade schools and high schools, which in turn made Florida the envy of the nation. Teacher salaries were among the highest, and university professors –and in some Instances entire departments – were relocating to UF, FSU USF, UCF and others.

The three hours it took us to finish the meal seemed like a third of that. After desert and coffee, Peter and Mary Ann still had about an hour before they had to take the last water taxi back to Tampa.

My wife suggested we go somewhere else, and for a moment we pondered our choices. Mary Ann mentioned that they hadn't been to the Grand Bohemian yet. I told them it might be a little crowded because I'd heard it was packed with movie people in town for the St. Petersburg Film Festival, but why

not. As we looked outside the top floor window of the Grand Bohemian, we gazed proudly at our hometown. It was about 10:30, and we could see a trickle of people leaving the Mahaffey Theatre where James Levine had done a stint as a guest conductor of the Florida Orchestra, which of course had recently signed a multi million dollar deal with a joint venture with Sony and I Tunes.

As we strolled along Beach drive, past the restaurants, the fountains in the park, the art museum, we turned up Second Avenue, and Peter said, “You know probably the only place I know where it’s more pleasant to take an evening stroll other than St. Pete, it’s got to be Tampa.

Given all Tampa had done to build a core of downtown residents, and had now been rated the most pedestrian friendly city in America I grudgingly agreed.