



Malio's Prime Steakhouse draws a Friday night crowd around the bar.

MARK SICKLES

# PRIME TIME

*Malio's redux honors the original South Tampa landmark, but makes a downtown scene all its own* BY JULIE W. MARTIN

**B**ack in the '80s, the cocktail generation in full swing, three-martini lunches and three-piece suits were *de rigueur* in Tampa, and the epicenter was Malio's. Fresh, upstart executives were ordained to town with a private membership, entitling them to VIP room access and a bird's eye view of the city's movers and shakers. It was a *Sopranos* meets *Smokey and the Bandit* vibe, complete with visits from Burt Reynolds. From the day it opened in 1969 until the day in 2005 when Malio Ivarone closed his South Tampa doors, tongues wagged more about who was spotted at Malio's than about what was on the dinner menu.

Enter the new Malio's Prime Steakhouse, a swank urban eatery operating from the rim of

what is affectionately dubbed "the beer can building" (formally Rivergate Tower) on Ashley Drive overlooking the Hillsborough River. Since opening in June, Derek Iavarone, son of Malio, and co-owner Jason Fernandez have become the Medusas of stone and granite, attracting the same sport, corporate and celebrity gods that made Malio's a legend with Tampa's old guard. To be sure, the scene around the bar on a Friday night flashes back to the old days. But this go-around, the buzz is also about the food.

"Meat is in," says Fernandez, emphatic about the addition of yet another steakhouse to Tampa. "When *Wine Spectator* lists the top restaurants, almost every one is a steakhouse."

Malio's does an admirable job of its reinvention. Prime organic steaks are perfectly seared, then topped with a signature pat of butter



A dramatic entry leads guests to the dining room, bar and private rooms.



Shrimp Theresa, lightly breaded jumbo shrimp with garlic, olive oil and butter, is a hit at Malio's.

and served with a lemon wedge. Though the naked beef alone is impressive, béarnaise, hollandaise, Gorgonzola butter and Cabernet reduction sauces may be ordered for those who like to dress it up. As is the repertoire with most high-end steakhouses, everything else comes à la carte, including Malio's Famous Gorgonzola salad, piled high with chunks of pungent cheese, black olives, shaved red onion, beef steak tomatoes and impressive sides of vegetables. Our favorite was the jalapeño creamed corn, an oh-so-mildly spicy dish of sweet kernels dripping with melted Romano and Parmesan cheeses.

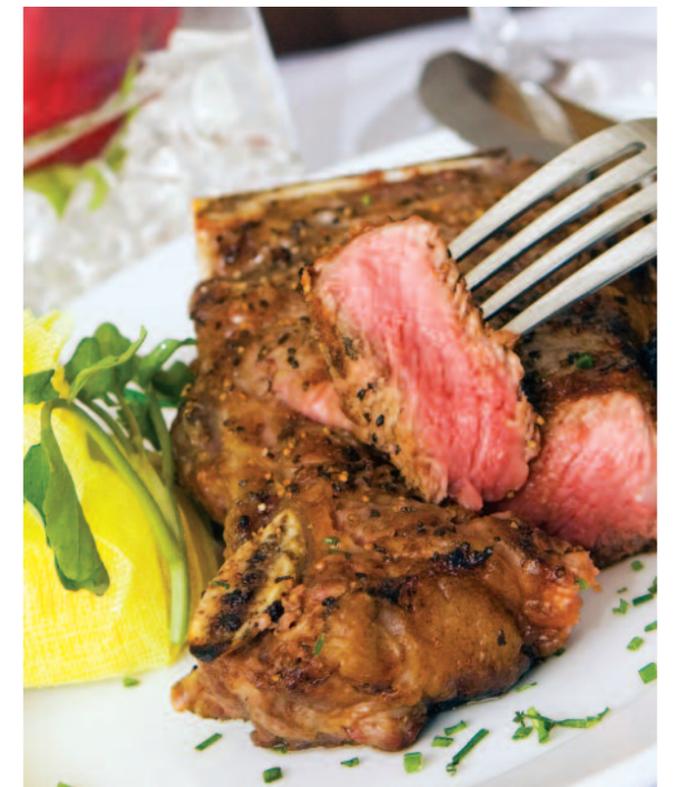
Though the bulk of the menu is meat, sentimental favorites are still available, now under the auspices of both Malio himself — who still spends almost every day in the restaurant — and chef Daniel Graves, a former sous chef at Nick's Fishmarket in Chicago. The legendary Shrimp Theresa, lightly breaded jumbo shrimp with garlic, olive oil and butter, remains among the best sellers. Other Italian influences are also revisited as appetizers, sides (linguini with marinara or an oil and garlic sauce) and the occasional daily pasta special. The warm loaf of bread is familiar, too, served on a wooden cutting board, and comes with a written disclaimer: "Break it, rip it, just don't cut it with a knife" — less of a command than a suggestion that mirrors Malio's philosophy for making everyone comfortable. Says Fernandez: "We take care of our guests."

On a Saturday night, that's a hefty order, with seating for 200 inside and 50 on a fan-misted patio overlooking the river and the spires of the University of Tampa. The white tablecloths and bronzed-colored curtains disguise the limestone walls and glass of what is, essentially, an office building, but the noise that emanates inside this popular spot cannot be muted. (Several staffers assured us the volume issue was "being worked on.")

There are private rooms as well — the Steinbrenner and Piniella, with guests to match, including, on our visit, Jon Gruden. And just like in the old days, the bar is command central, giving credence to one patron's sentiment: "People come to Malio's to see and be seen."

Happy days are here again. ♦

*Malio's Prime Steakhouse, 400 North Ashley Drive, Tampa, 813-223-7746, malios.com. Julie W. Martin dines anonymously and at the expense of TBI.*



Chef Daniel Graves oversees the menu, which includes Malio's Famous Gorgonzola Salad, top, and all manner of prime organic beef.