

Food & Flavor

RESTAURANTS

Sizzle Dining attracts record number of restaurants

By Tim Aten
tim.aten@naplespress.com

Sizzle Dining was setting records this year before the first table was set for restaurant week in Southwest Florida. A record 95 local restaurants, more than double last year’s total, signed on to participate in the annual three-week event that kicked off Sept. 7.

“We’re at 95 official restaurants. There are 61 in Collier, 33 in Lee and—believe it or not—one in Charlotte, that’s Babcock Ranch, for the first time ever,” said Sizzle Dining co-founder Guy Clarke. “We’ve got 44 first-timers on board this year, which is very exciting; most first-timers I’ve ever, ever, ever had. I mean, last year alone, we had 47 total restaurants. This year, I’ve got 44 first-timers.”

Clarke feels Sizzle Dining broke records this year in part because he started early in April reaching out to local restaurants, especially those that had not previously participated. But the bigger reason, he said, is that Sizzle Dining provides a glimmer of hope to restaurateurs who suffered from a lack of business after Hurricane Ian’s devastation last fall.

“We had a horrible, horrible season,” Clarke said. “I’ve been hearing from the owners that this is one of the worst years they’ve had. They need the help this year. It was really a bad year.”

Sizzle’s three-week run includes three savings-filled weekends that benefit diners, restaurants and a local charity, he said.

Every day through Sept. 27, diners have the option to visit a participating restaurant and choose three-course dinners from special menus for Sizzle Dining for a set price of \$29, \$39 or \$49. At least 15 prix fixe menus also are available for a two-course lunch for \$19 or \$29.

The annual event enables “dining with purpose,” because \$1 of every meal sold directly benefits the regional chapter of Blessings in a Backpack, which serves children who are most at risk of being food insecure. Those dollars stay in Southwest Florida, said Cecilia St. Arnold, executive director of Blessings in a Backpack’s Southwest Florida chapter.

“If you’re eating at a Naples restaurant, it’s staying in Naples. If you’re eating at a Fort Myers restaurant, it’s staying in Fort Myers, feeding our kids,” St. Arnold said.

Sizzle Dining raised more than \$20,000 last year from the more than 20,000 meals purchased during the event. The goal is to surpass 50,000 meals this year, raising at least \$50,000 to help feed more than 5,000 kids in Lee and Collier over the weekends during the school year.

Unfortunately, because of Hurricane Ian, another 1,500 children are in need this year, according to St. Arnold.

“What we do is simple,” she said. “Children that qualify to receive the free breakfast and lunch program at our schools, elementary schools here in Southwest Florida, take home every Friday two breakfasts and lunches to get them over the weekend hump, so that when they go back to school on Monday and have their breakfast again, they’re ready to learn in the classroom.”

New to Sizzle Dining this year are partnerships with the convention and visitors bureaus in both Collier and Lee counties. Both organizations came on board to help enhance destination dining because of its major effect on the local economy. The restaurant event especially attracts in-state tourism as a weekend staycation for Floridians driving down from Tampa or across Alligator Alley from the east coast, Clarke said.

“Both of [the CVBs] thought and feel that



A salmon entree served waterfront at Edgewater Beach Hotel on Gulf Shore Boulevard in North Naples. Photo by Guy Clarke/Sizzle Dining

To participate, diners simply browse the list of restaurants and menus at the Sizzle Dining website and make reservations during the next two weeks.

the restaurants were such a big attractor to our area right now,” he said. “The beaches are the number one attraction, but food is the second-most commonly mentioned attraction when they do the polls and ask people why they’d come down here.”

So, Sizzle Dining’s goal to bring more foodies to the table also can help the county tourism agencies get more heads in beds at area hotels.

“That’s a win-win for our community,” Clarke said. “This gives them an opportunity to talk about our destination from the food point of view and help these restaurants out in September.”

To participate, diners simply browse the list of restaurants and menus at the Sizzle Dining website and make reservations during the next two weeks. At the restaurant, diners should notify their servers that they are participating in Sizzle Dining.

After a record event this year, Clarke already is looking forward to building upon Sizzle’s success next fall by adding even more local restaurants.

“We’re probably going to hit 150 next year,” he said. “That’s our goal.”

For more info or to join in, visit sizzledining.com. 



Sizzle Dining’s three-course dinners include desserts at Ridgway Bar & Grill on 13th Avenue South in downtown Naples. Photo by Guy Clarke/Sizzle Dining



Guy and Erin Clarke, co-founders of Sizzle Dining, enjoy a meal at Sails Restaurant in downtown Naples. Photo by Sizzle Dining