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Review | Miami fare soars at the airport Marriott's Cane Fire Grille

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After nearly a decade writing guidebooks and travel articles for a living, I swore off restaurants at airport hotels, convinced that anything served within whiffing distance of jet fuel was bound to be as lackluster as the food on the planes themselves.

Happily, many hotels have begun to recognize that three squares are as important to travelers as a high thread count. Imagine, still, how surprised I was to find that our very own MIA Marriott has put together an impressive dining room.

A "great room" concept turns an otherwise dreary lobby into a wide-open space balanced by lots of cozy nooks and dotted with wide-screen computers. The centerpiece is a comfy bar with enough TVs to satisfy news junkies and sports fans.

And while the faux Latino décor of flame orange carpets, burnished woods and swirling yellow and green neon might not be everyone's *cafecito*, at least it can't be mistaken for Toledo.

Likewise, the menu at Cane Fire Grille, which sprawls throughout the lobby.

"Our guests who fly in from around the country, as well as around the world, can experience what our community offers without having to leave the hotel," says general manager Chris Inman.

Indeed, elements of Cuban, Jamaican, Peruvian, Argentine and even gringo fare come together seamlessly, mirroring South Florida's diverse population.

Inman works the room with a smile and true enthusiasm. Waiters, though green, are polite and well-intentioned. Ours made a great effort to keep us happy even when dishes and wine went astray.

A bright-as-a-summer-sun ceviche of grouper cubes with loads of tiny diced red onion and parsley in a tangy citrus marinade is as good as any I've sampled in Latin America, especially with the addition of freshly fried corn meal and popcorn patties.

A bounteous salad of cigar-thick asparagus spears over delicate poofs of baby lettuce, perky nibs of fennel and see-through panes of Manchego cheese is superbly dressed in a stand-out lemon-basil vinaigrette. The black bean salsa with an equally competent shrimp appetizer is spiked with just enough chile to make it zesty but not scorching.

Another must-try: the malta-braised short ribs with a gently charred crust and meltingly soft meat that falls from the bone into a musky brown gravy. It, like the Bermuda fish chowder, may be a bit floury, but both are worth a try.

Portions are large enough that you don't mind giving your table mate a bite or two but not so gargantuan that you'll have leftovers to stash in the minibar fridge.

The chef, Joe Natoli, handles basic ingredients and locally sourced goods with talent and restraint. Plates, even when they fall short, are thoughtfully composed with a balance of color, texture and flavor.

There are few flops, though. An overcooked brick of tuna skewered on a sugar cane spear suffered from excess sugar not only in the glossy, rum-spiked glaze but also in a yuca mash. A surprisingly fresh blend of colorful green and yellow string beans mixed with batons of carrots redeemed it.

A perfectly adequate list of familiar wines is arranged by varietal and intensity and offered in user-friendly pours of three, six or nine ounces.

A delightful selection of Miami desserts, though not original, are better than hundreds I've sampled on South Beach at a fraction of the price. A divine Key lime pie has a distinctive graham cracker crust with a toffee-like tinge of nuttiness and a smooth, tart, textbook filling. Dulce de leche cheesecake should come with the phone number of the nearest dentist, while a trio of Gaby's tropical fruit sorbets are a super refreshing taste of the tropics.

The Marriott has certainly accomplished what it set out to do for travelers at Cane Fire Grille. And for locals who don't mind navigating the construction and traffic, it's a great alternative for an affordable night on the town.