

Tampa Bay Times

Celebrity chef Marc Murphy takes us on a tour of Tampa's Grey Salt



TAMPA — Tampa Bay restaurateurs could be sniffy. "Sure," they could say, "just as the area's red hot restaurant scene shifts into high gear and high season, Johnny-come-latelies from New York City go carpetbagging south to set up shop."

Judging from the guest list at Wednesday evening's Grey Salt debut, they're bigger than that.

The Seminole Hard Rock Hotel & Casino Tampa has partnered with New York celebrity chef Marc Murphy to debut a lovely 240-seat Mediterranean restaurant that takes the place of the Green Room. Sidling around the dense crowd at the VIP party, one could spot a who's who of Tampa Bay restaurant folks. There's Keith Sedita from Ulele, and over here stand Michael Stewart and Joe Maddon of Ava, and the list went on.

There's a reason for that.

Just before the party started, the *Tampa Bay Times* had an exclusive tour of the space with Murphy as guide. A regular judge on Food Network's *Chopped* and frequent guest on other hit cooking series, the handsome, blond 46-year-old has the manic cheeriness of someone who loves what he's doing.

"I didn't want to be the interloper chef from New York," Murphy said. "I've visited local restaurants — Mise en Place, Edison, Ulele and others — and invited a number of local chefs tonight."

As the head of Benchmarc Restaurants, he's been prolific in New York, with restaurants such as Landmarc in Tribeca, Landmarc at the Time Warner Center and Kingside at the Viceroy New York. But Grey Salt is his first venture outside of New York. He says the Tampa area, because of its climate, is a good fit for the Mediterranean concept he has envisioned.

"From when we first started talking to the Hard Rock and my old friend Victor Tiffany (senior vice president of hospitality for gaming operations for the Seminole Tribe of Florida) we wanted to do Mediterranean with a heavy foot in Italy," Murphy said while showing off the pair of wide wood-burning grills in the open kitchen, the space redolent of wood smoke that eclipses the casino's hint of cigarettes.

Murphy, the son of a diplomat, spent much of his youth in Italy and France. Those influences showed in the opening night party food: mushroom arancini with a spicy tomato sauce, oysters with a bracing shallot mignonette, porchetta and whole roasted suckling pigs. But during the tour, Murphy enthused about TBD Design's "boardwalk-like" interior design.

"I wanted the space to be an oasis," he said, pointing out the private event space lined with wine bins, strings of white lights framing an indoor arbor, planked floors with inset lights that indeed look like an old-timey beach boardwalk.

The overall effect: Bright, airy, more casual than the casino's higher-end Council Oak. There are generous circular booths (how many do they seat? Murphy says, "six or eight, or maybe 12 ballerinas") and statement frosted chicken-wire windows: From inside you can see the buzz and movement of the casino beyond without particulars.

And then there's the name. Is the salt a reference to Florida's seaside "salt life," *a la* Salt Rock Grill or Sea Salt? Nope, *sel gris* is a finishing salt he especially likes, and besides, "the restaurant makes the name, not the other way around."

The crowd at the party was clearly excited to see the famous TV chef moving around the room. Does celebrity ever chafe?

"I would say no," he said. "It's a vehicle that allows me to do so many things and brings awareness to my brand. I wouldn't be able to do the philanthropic work chefs often do without the celebrity weird stuff."

So he'll take it, but with a grain of salt.