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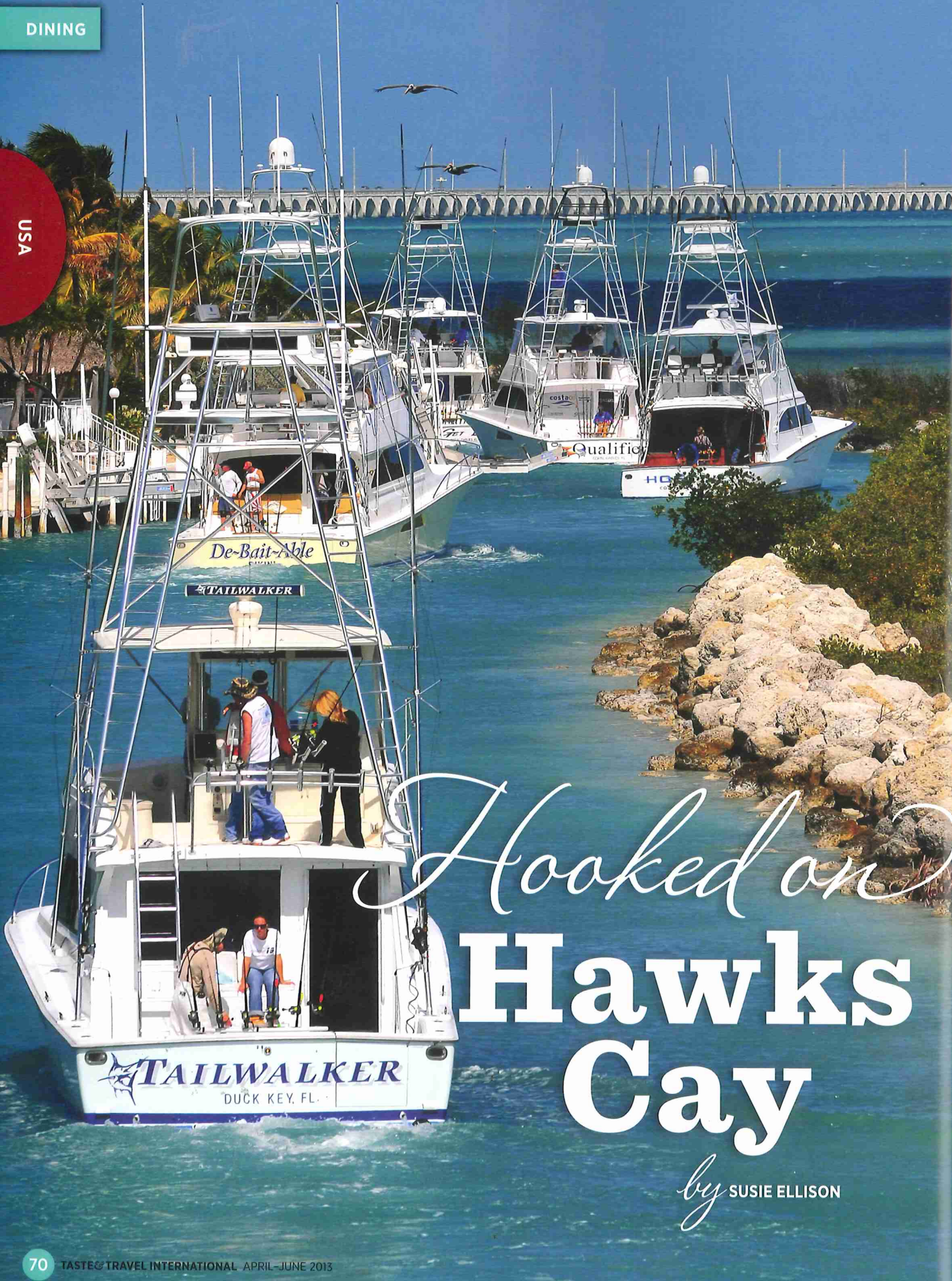
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FOR PEOPLE WHO LOVE TO *read*, LOVE TO *eat*, AND LOVE TO *travel*



Hooked on
**Hawks
Cay**

by SUSIE ELLISON



... “Whoa!” we shouted in unison as a huge barracuda rocketed out of the water...



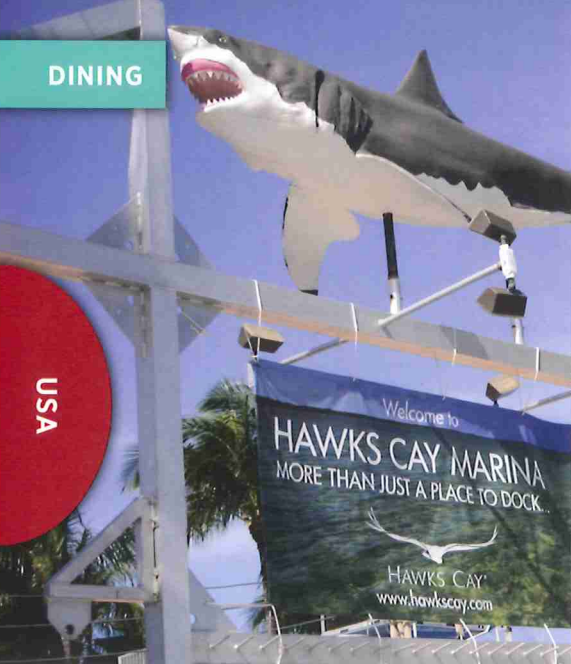
WHERE ON EARTH

FACING PAGE
Approaching
Hawks Cay
Marina. **ABOVE**
Matt Lawrence
with his catch.

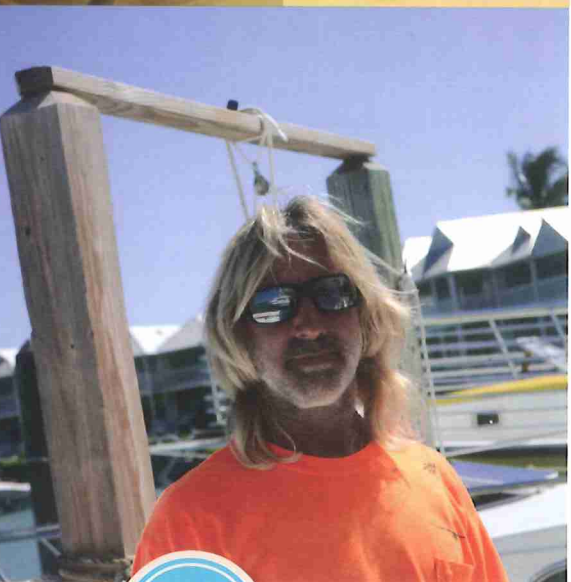
IT'S THE FIRST DAY OF STONE CRAB SEASON AND I'm in the Florida Keys. Stone crabs are a Florida specialty that locals adore, eagerly awaiting the day in October each year when the first traps are hauled out of the sea. Surprisingly few seafood lovers outside the Sunshine State know about this sweet crustacean treat, which just means more for those of us who do.

Menippe mercenaria are native to America's southern Atlantic coast. They live in patches of seagrass and other hidey holes and have one large 'crusher' claw and a smaller 'pincer' claw, both anatomically designed to be easily forfeited if the crab is attacked. The larger claw, with its distinctive black tip, contains a fat nugget of luscious meat that is typically steamed and eaten hot with drawn butter or cold with a mustard-based sauce.

I've stood in line many times at Joe's Stone Crab, the legendary South Beach restaurant, and the wait's a worthy one, but this time I was going to the heart of stone crab country in the Keys. Hawks Cay Resort is an island, one of five that constitute Duck Key, which lies roughly two thirds of the way down US1, the highway that links Miami to Key West.»



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP Hawks Cay Marina; Latin cuisine at Alma; Dave Jensen; Stone crab claws.



Hawks Cay Island Resort
www.hawkscay.com

«The resort occupies 60 tropical acres and is one of the few places in the Keys where you don't have to choose between a sunset or sunrise view. On one side of Hawks Cay you can drink coffee and watch a pink sun drift into the morning sky and on the other, sip a margarita as it turns vermilion and melts into a flaming sea.

But, I sadly learned, the start of stone crab season is not the time to try and eat your fill. Traps can be set a few days earlier but none can be harvested until October 15. After that, the staff at Hawks Cay patiently explained, it takes a few days for the catch to make its way onto restaurant menus. With only a weekend to spend in the Keys, I needed a plan B.

Enter Dave Jensen, the sun bleached skipper of *Snapshot*, a sleek, 34-foot boat berthed at Hawks Cay Marina. If I couldn't have freshly caught crab, Dave assured me, I could certainly have fish.

Dave, a second generation Florida fisherman with platinum hair and mirror shades, eased *Snapshot* along a channel lined with the residences of people who can afford to drop a couple of million greenbacks on a second home. Skirting Hawks Cay Resort's lagoon, dolphin centre and waterfront villas, we headed for the open sea and the USA's only living coral reef.

Within minutes of setting the anchor, Dave landed a yellowtail snapper. Hawks Cay's Matt Lawrence promptly caught another and Kim MacKinnon, who writes for *The Boston Globe*, hauled in a third. I followed suit, whisking a fish out of the water in record time. We continued reeling them in, until Matt caught number thirteen. "Whoa!" we shouted in unison as a huge barracuda rocketed out of the water, snatched the fish from Matt's line and crashed back into the sea with bloodied jaws. Barracuda isn't typically eaten in Florida (although I've enjoyed it in the Caribbean) but it's a useful bait fish. Dave quickly rigged a stronger rod for Matt and clambered up to the flybridge to get us trawling.

From his vantage point Dave could see the barracuda surfing in our wake. "More line out!" he shouted. Matt spun the reel and suddenly the line snapped taught. "That's a bite!" yelled Dave, as Matt wrestled the big fish toward the stern, where Dave hooked him with a gaff and hauled him aboard, all blue and shining, with menacing rows of teeth.

That big barracuda was the main topic of conversation at dinner but our snapper was the main course. At Tio's Cantina (the restaurant at Hawks Cay Marina, where, if you opt to 'Hook and Cook' your catch becomes supper) the snapper was the centrepiece of an authentic Mexican meal. We made our own fish tacos, wrapping the pan-fried snapper fillets in soft homemade tortillas, dressing them with Mexican *crema*, white cheese, fresh salsas, charred chiles and lime juice. Platters of Spanish rice, pinto beans, charred corn cobs and a heap of fire-roasted vegetables were passed down the table, along with increasingly raucous fishing banter. Everyone had second helpings — of food and margaritas. I was so full I almost reneged on dessert, a silky coconut flan with a tropical fruit salsa spiked with chile.

I did find some stone crabs on my last day in the Keys and they were as sweet and delicious as I knew they'd be. But to be honest, watching a table full of happy people share a meal of fish I'd caught myself was even better.

Update: Since I visited Hawks Cay, the resort has opened a new Mediterranean marketplace and seafood restaurant called *Ocean*, in addition to the family-style *Tio's Cantina* and *Alma*, a sophisticated Latin restaurant (evenings only). All are open to the public. 