



# Coastal BREEZE news

## CJ's on the Bay: Bringing Veggies to a New Level

Chef's Corner

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Photos by Samantha Husted | CJ's on the Bay co-owner Jacquie Koon with Executive Chef Nicholas Donatelli.

The Coastal Breeze News is proud to present Chef's Corner, a gastronomical column that offers readers a behind-the-scenes look at Marco Island's favorite restaurants. Each month I visit a different local eatery to get the lowdown on signature dishes, recipes and the chefs who make it possible.

This month I stopped by CJ's on the Bay, a popular waterfront restaurant located in the Esplanade, to speak with Executive Chef Nicholas Donatelli. Nick and I talked about everything from what inspired him to pursue a career in the culinary arts, to how to make the perfect charred veggie stack. We also discussed CJ's new "Blue Zones Project" inspired menu items—but more on that later.

Believe it or not, I first met Nick way back in 2010. We were both working at a different local restaurant. I was a hostess and he was, of course, a cook. The restaurant industry on Marco Island is like this weird interconnected web where everyone knows everyone. And there's camaraderie. It's a small, but interesting club to be a part of.

Nick got his start in the kitchen at a young age. When he was just 11-12-years-old he began cooking meals for his family. Food was something Nick had always loved, but never considered it as a viable

career option. When Nick entered college at the Indiana University of Pennsylvania he decided pursue a degree in mathematics. However, during a fateful summer session he took a job in a kitchen. That's when everything changed.

"Cooking was kind of a natural fit," he said. "I had some experience, albeit not professional experience. It was kind of a rude awakening when I got into a kitchen of what it was really like."

Despite the harsh realities of working in a hot kitchen, Nick realized it was where he wanted to be. Math took a backseat and he began pursuing a degree in culinary studies. Eventually, he was recruited out of culinary school to work at the Marriott on Marco Island. He's been here on Marco ever since.

"I always love trying new things," Nick said. "I've fallen in love with seafood now that I've moved to Marco. I was not a fan of seafood coming out of Pittsburgh."



Executive Chef Nicholas Donatelli chops thick slices of tomato for his Charred Veggie Stack dish.



CJ's hearty Charred Veggie Stack is comprised of thick pieces of pieces of zucchini, yellow onion, tomato and jalapeño, served over polenta.

Nick prepared for me his Charred Veggie Stack, a hearty dish comprised of thick pieces of pieces of zucchini, yellow onion, tomato and jalapeño, served over polenta. The dish is part of the Blue Zones Project, a "community-led wellness initiative to make healthy choices easier." CJ's is the first restaurant on Marco Island to be Blue Zone Project Approved. The recipe below was created by Nick and inspired by their healthy eating guidelines. CJ's has adopted a Blue Zones Project menu that is comprised of plant based, low sodium, and vegan items.

The Charred Veggie Stack's strength lies in its simplicity. The flavor of the charred vegetables is the backbone of the dish and the polenta on which the vegetables sit, is the foundation. If you're looking for a filling, healthy meal the Charred Veggie Stack is definitely the way to go.

As for advice for the average home chef, Nick says that as long as you follow the recipe, you should be okay. He also advised that if you're going to take the time to cook, make sure to pay attention. Don't start the dish then go watch a TV show. Make sure you're vigilant and your food will come out great.

"[Cooking] takes almost constant attention. Follow the instructions of the chef who wrote the recipe and then be on top of it."

CJ's on the Bay is part of the Marco Restaurant Alliance. All restaurants are locally owned and operated with owners that share a commitment to their community and a passion for excellence in food and service. For more information visit [www.marcorestaurantalliance.com](http://www.marcorestaurantalliance.com). CJ's on the Bay, 740 North Collier Blvd., Suite 105. Call them at 239-389-4511 or visit [www.cjsonthebay.com](http://www.cjsonthebay.com).

*Samantha Husted is a local writer, photographer, and avid food eater. She enjoys the simple things in life, like playing with dogs and eating burritos. Samantha has worked as a staff writer for the Coastal Breeze News for over two years.*

## CJ'S ON THE BAY

### CHARRED VEGGIE STACK

*Serves 4*

1 Instant Polenta

2 Large Zucchini

2 Large Tomato

1-2 Large Yellow Onion

2 Fresh Jalapeño Peppers

1 Cup Italian or other vinaigrette dressing

4 Sprigs of Rosemary

Salt and pepper

1. Cook instant polenta according to package directions. Feel free to add desired veggies (peppers, onions, corn, peas, etc.). Pour in baking dish and chill. Once cool, cut into four equal slices.

2. Clean portabella mushroom by scraping gills and removing stem. Cut four thick pieces of zucchini, yellow onion, and tomato. Slice the jalapeños in half longwise.
3. Place veggies and polenta on a baking and drizzle with Italian or vinaigrette dressing. Season with salt and pepper. Broil on high for about 5-10minutes. You want a nice char on the veggies.
4. Assemble veggie stack as follows: polenta, portabella mushroom, tomato, zucchini, onion, and jalapeño. Using a toothpick pierce the jalapeño and add rosemary. Serve on it's own or over a light marinara sauce.