



# Beach Walk Crystal Beach

## the picture-perfect dining experience



By Margit Bisztray | Photography by Michael Belk

*OCEANFRONT RESTAURANTS too often lean on their view like a wealthy relative. They get a little cocky; there's a view to depend on in the end. Why do the work?*

**B**each Walk Crystal Beach is like the one and only heir to a rich tycoon. Its back wall (two stories, all glass) opens to a view that isn't of a beach-off-in-the-distance but an immediate, present beach. It's an arm's length from the nearest indoor table and practically merging with the deck outside. Coconut white and wisped with seagrass, it barely holds back the green-blue Gulf of Mexico. The restaurant could serve frozen fish sticks and everyone would still want to be its friend.

Instead, it does the work. It would be a shame to eat blindfolded at Beach Walk Crystal Beach, but it would still be worthwhile. One foundation of this restaurant is that it is chef-owned. Tim Creehan knows the view is out there at the "front of the house," but his work takes place in "back," also known as the kitchen.


"For a chef," he says, "the heart and soul is the reputation of the product (the food). It's what you are known for, and it's constantly being scrutinized, as it should be. The ownership of a restaurant takes it to the next level. You now apply the same standards to every part of the operation."

Creehan's vision all but stops where the view takes over. At that junction, where heart and soul meet an unparalleled

setting, diners experience the essence of Beach Walk Crystal Beach. It is a synchronicity people have loved since the restaurant opened in April 1998.

Let it be said that Beach Walk Crystal Beach has earned a fair amount of recognition. Numerous top honors from local and statewide publications and food critics. A Wine Spectator Award of Excellence. A DiRoNA Award as a Distinguished Restaurant of North America. AAA's Three Diamond Award. Chef Creehan has cooked for famous people like Cybill Shepherd, Timothy Hutton, Debra Winger and Bruce Willis. He prepared the wedding feast for Vince Gill and Amy Grant. Though clearly and deservedly proud of these accomplishments, Creehan does not rest on his accomplishments or stride around his dining room posing. Delve even the slightest bit and you'll encounter a perfectionist who more likely judges the level of his restaurant by the last ribeye plated with caramelized onions and by the calamari about to be drawn out of the fryer, than by what famous person he catered for last week.

"I guess the best way I can describe it," he says of his work, "is to compare it to a great stage presentation, when the curtain goes up and it's showtime. There's no room for error.

A chef in a white uniform is plating a dish. He is using tongs to place a piece of food onto a white plate. The plate already contains some food, including what looks like sticky rice, steamed baby bok choy, and julienne carrots. The chef is looking down at the plate with a focused expression. The background is dark and out of focus, suggesting a kitchen setting. The lighting is warm and focused on the chef and his work.

Chef Timothy Creehan decks sticky rice, steamed baby bok choy and julienne carrots with habanero shrimp in one popular, cross-cultural dish.



**Above:** A bright, Asian-style simplicity describes Chef Creehan's signature tuna.

**Opposite, top:** Radiant smoked tomato shrimp soup wows in a white bowl.

**Opposite, bottom:** The habanero shrimp suggest spices with a cool relief of vegetables.

Our production starts at 8:30 a.m. and ends at 10 p.m.”

Who are the stars of this production? They represent quite a cross-cultural cuisine — truly American, as such. At the center is home-style, Southern Italian food, as prepared by Creehan’s mother and grandmother, as well as the Cajun and Creole cooking of Louisiana where Creehan grew up. Meals in his childhood were passionate, serious and collective events. Everything one hears about Louisiana upbringings and food, or knows from growing up there — from discussions over breakfast about what to make for dinner, to debates about what constitutes a masterful roux — applied to Creehan’s formative years. More than anything, an attitude evolves out of enough meals at Louisiana tables that would strongly influence a young chef-to-be, which is that food matters. Every aspect of it matters. Every step counts toward an end result of flavor, and has to be attended to with heart and integrity. No cheating. No skimping. No shortcuts.

By the age of 13, Creehan was working in a restaurant kitchen. Still at a young stage of his career, he already worked alongside such great Louisiana chefs as Phillipe Parola and John Folse, who tempered and fine-tuned his skills and made what he calls “an invaluable impression.” By the age of 17, Creehan was chef de cuisine at Folse’s legendary restaurant, Lafitte’s Landing, in Donaldsville, La.

For obvious reasons, there is and will always be a strong Louisiana accent to the menu at Beach Walk Crystal Beach. It speaks up in spicy smoked tomato and shrimp soup. It enunciates its words again in sautéed jumbo lump crabmeat and lightly fried eggplant in a garlic brown meurniere, a popular appetizer. It breaks into song complete with fiddles and a banjo in the jumbo lump crabcakes (no fillers, just pure crab and seasonings), magically contained inside a crisp, thin, gold crust and glazed in citrus beurre blanc.

Other dishes speak a second language: that of Hong Kong. At the age of 18,

Creehan participated in a promotional event at the Hong Kong Hilton, and tucked a few recipes into his toque. They pop up in the form of crispy-fried spring rolls stuffed with crabmeat and cabbage, served with sweet chili sauce, and also as crispy fried, Peking-style duck. Kung pao oysters or shrimp (a Gulf Coast version of the spicy Szechuan dish prepared traditionally with chicken) have a pleasant, crispy texture and are delicious, if a tad salty.

The soft-shell crabs, tempura fried and served with stir-fry vegetables and Chinese barbecue sauce, reveals a little bit of everything: the path from the beginning of chef Creehan’s career up to the present. So does a signature dish known as the Grouper Vince: pecan flour-crust, pan-roasted local grouper, served on mashed boniato cake with honey-Worcestershire sauce. Though emphasizing local seafood — grouper, red snapper, Gulf shrimp — Beach Walk Crystal Beach taps the Northeast for salmon and halibut, and Maine for lobster. Another specialty, the New Zealand venison, is simply good dining, no matter

what you’re looking at — even if the beach had up and moved itself miles away. Tender, sweet, utterly clean, it is perfectly offset, not overwhelmed, by a red wine, tomato and garlic butter sauce, paired with mashed sweet potatoes and tobacco onions.

“Quality before cost is my mentality,” says the chef. “We always serve the highest-quality products.”

Beach Walk Crystal Beach is the latest incarnation. First, there was Marina Café, overlooking Destin Harbor. Creehan co-owned it and served as the chef before selling his portion of the business. With his second endeavor in the area, opened as Beachwalk Café, Creehan says he “envisioned a more casual, beachside restaurant . . . but my customers wanted more and we adjusted to what we are now. It has evolved into a rare fine dining experience mixed in with very casual components that people seem perfectly comfortable with because of where they are. It’s certainly one of a kind and we love it.”

Early in 2006, the restaurant evolved one step further by bringing on a sommelier. While this is de rigeur at urban restaurants boasting a serious wine list, it’s unusual along the Emerald Coast. But a sommelier can have a beachy attitude, too, going with the flow of every level of wine knowledge, having fun with challenging pairings and guiding through the alphabet of cabernets from Abacus to ZD.

A dessert course is required here, and the reason circles back to the distinction of Beach Walk being chef-owned. Pastry chef translates to person-who-makes-all-the-desserts (not just the baked goods), and Tim Creehan’s also that guy. What to expect is homemade flavor with expert presentation. Make a beeline for the banana cream pie, which is divine, fluffy, not too sweet and throws in a dash of white chocolate for good measure. Or try the Berries Denise, nestled in a swoop of almond cookie cup with macadamia brittle ice cream on a plate doodled with fruit puree.

Beach Walk Crystal Beach fairly dares you to (go on) ignore the amazing view. The indoor dining room does it with a few too many columns and swags, making no nod to the area’s natural beauty. Caught up in a moment of perfect crabcakes, you may even forget the proximity of sea and sand. And if the churn of waves reaches your ears, or you smell that wet salt that tells you you’re by a glorious beach, smile with the knowledge that the view’s there for the asking, should you require it. ■



Located at The Inn at Crystal Beach, 2996 Scenic Hwy 98 East, Destin.

Open breakfast, brunch, lunch and dinner. Call 850-650-7100 or visit [beachwalkdestin.com](http://beachwalkdestin.com) or [opentable.com](http://opentable.com).