



BEST PLACE TO EAVESDROP

The Veranda

If the bar stools in this place could talk, they'd likely have to be killed. For three decades, the Veranda's sprawling bar has been the happy-hour haunt of Lee County's movers and shakers, a place where plans are hatched and deals are sealed. Don't believe us? Stake out a seat at the bar some weekday at about 5 p.m. and order a cocktail. Then just listen. Chances are excellent that you'll soon be privy to all manner of juicy political palaver, shameless sycophancy and maybe even some enlightening info on not-to-be-missed real estate investments or details of some of those titillating e-mails making the rounds of county offices recently.

Details: 2122 Second St., Fort Myers; 332-2065

BEST PLACE FOR INTELLIGENT CONVERSATION

Bennett's Fresh Roast

It's no surprise that there's high-minded discourse to be found at Bennett's Fresh Roast. With made-from-scratch doughnuts and coffee brewed from freshly laser-roasted beans, the place attracts those with the sense to ferret out the little house-turned-cafe just off West First Street. The summer promotion that rewards kids who read with doughnuts is attracting book-smart parents and their offspring. The friendly, casual atmosphere — not to mention a serious caffeine and sugar buzz— prompts strangers to exchange views on topics as diverse as global warming, canine oral hygiene, nature vs. nurture and whether Fatboy Slim is the next Bob Dylan.

Details: 2011 Bayside Parkway, Fort Myers; 332-0077



COURTESY PHOTO

Eden Vineyards in Alva.

BEST LOCALLY PRODUCED WINE

Eden Stars, Eden Vineyards Winery

It's not a vintage you're likely to serve at a fancy dinner, but for pure novelty and conversational value, you can't beat a \$12.95 bottle of this wine made in little old Alva from the tart, star-shaped carambola. According to the winery's Web site, it's an ideal alternative to California blush, aka white zin. The winery recommends it be served chilled with salads, picnics, seafood or poultry.

Details: 19709 Little Lane, Alva; 728-9463

BEST PLACE FOR MINDLESS CHATTER

Miller's Ale House, Gulf Coast Town Center

Miller's attracts hordes of hungry, budget-conscious college students. No one's there to devise ways to achieve world peace or extol the wisdom of Ayn Rand. They're after burgers while, like, texting their BFFs about the hottie they met in statistics class or the checkout line at Target. There's also likely to be discussion of the future, like which movie to see that weekend.

BEST WAY TO GET LOCAL ORGANIC FOOD

Chef Brooke's Natural Café

Whether you're a vegetarian, lacto-vegetarian, vegan, raw foodist, gluten intolerant or just someone in search of good food that's also good for you, Chef Brooke Wagenheim (former chef for the former Ada's Natural Foods) can whip it up to order in her recently opened café. Sip on a Mountain Faerie smoothie, savor a banana split muffin or fresh-from-the-oven scone, a soothing bowl of miso soup or lentil stew, or try one of the day's inspired specials. Almost everything's organic, it's all fresh and will make you feel virtuous as well as satisfied.

Details: 1850 Boy Scout Drive, Fort Myers; 332-CHEF

BEST WINE LIST

H2

Here's another mystery of life: Why would a place that's more bar than restaurant have the best wine list in town? Because chef/owner Harold Balink knows and loves great wine. His well-chosen list ranges from \$24 to \$400 and includes worthy contenders from around the globe. They're even divided into win-some categories, including: "If Harold Was Drinking White," "Little Reds That Can & Do," "Big, Bold & Beautiful," "Teeth Painters" and "Great Reviews... But Only 4 Cases Made."

Details: 2214 Bay St., Fort Myers; 226-1687

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