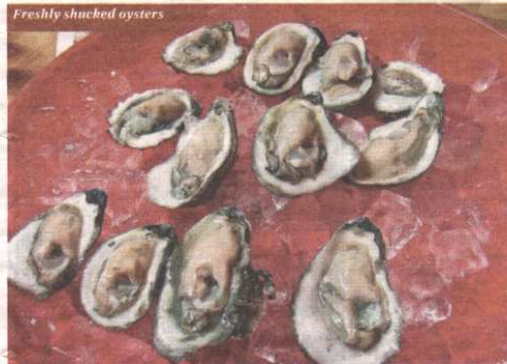


## In the aftermath of Ike comes desination seafood at the Hurricane



By J.C. REID

“Let me call the boat and see if they can bring some crabs in,” replied the waiter when asked if the restaurant had blue crabs on the lunch menu. In the two decades spent canvassing the far corners and remote outposts of Southeast Texas for the freshest fish in the most eccentric seafood shacks of the upper Gulf Coast, that was a new response. “Slept in the Gulf last night” is a famous claim to freshness of Houston seafood restaurants, but “Scuttling along the floor of Galveston Bay 30 minutes ago” sets a new standard.

That standard is being set at the Hurricane Club & Restaurant, a recently opened seafood joint in an isolated area of Chambers County, on the east side of Galveston Bay. It’s in a town — village really — called Oak Island, which is found about 20 minutes south of Interstate 10, down a two-lane black-top snaking past bait shops and fishing cabins that back up to Lake Anahuac and Trinity Bay. For Southeast Texans, this area bordering the Anahuac National Wildlife Refuge is a mecca for hunting (mostly ducks)

and saltwater and freshwater fishing (trout, red fish, bass, catfish).

### FIRST TIME’S A CHARM

Our first visit to the Hurricane was last March, possibly the most fruitful month for Gulf Coast seafood lovers. Oysters, having marinated in the cold waters of Galveston Bay throughout the winter, are at their sweetest and plumppest. Blue crabs are just beginning to stir from their winter doldrums, growing and shedding their hard shells to offer, however briefly, the entirety of their soft

bodies for the pleasure of seafood lovers. And then there’s the crawfish, again, early in the season, but still plentiful and of a decent size. And the shrimp: always.

Alas, the response from the boat was bad news: no crabs today. But this did not deter the group, which sat wild-eyed in the small dining room just steps away from Double Bayou where fishing boats puttered back and forth from Trinity Bay to slips along the shore, from ordering seafood by the pound and by the dozen. Six dozen



The Hurricane Club & Restaurant’s bright neon sign

oysters! Eight pounds of crawfish! Four dozen fried shrimp! Our waiter scribbled furiously and glanced up occasionally with what seemed like fear in her eyes.

We were rewarded with some of the best sea-

food we’d ever eaten. Burlap sacks of oysters sat in coolers a few feet from our table. In the corner of the dining room, on a slab of raised floor where a local honky-tonk band would otherwise play on Saturday nights,

an oyster shucking table stood ready. A young man of high school age, certainly a local, was recruited from the back of the restaurant to shuck oysters, which he did, methodically and without complaint, for what



seemed like hours as dozen after dozen were ordered.

### A DIAMOND AND HOW THE HURRICANE FORMED

The Hurricane is the brainchild of local entrepreneur Artie Presley. It’s the crown jewel of a small development in Oak Island that caters to outdoorsmen and includes a hunting lodge, motel, and a convenience store/gas station. It’s a great attraction for Oak Island, which is otherwise mainly a fishing village. Driving through town (population of maybe 500), many of the houses have crab traps stacked out front. At the main crossroads are commercial buildings and parking lots filled with refrigerated trucks with some version of “Seafood Company” lettered on the side.

The Hurricane Restaurant is named for Hurricane Ike, which slammed head-on into this small

fishing community in 2008. Some 350 homes were literally washed away. The future of Oak Island was grim. According to locals, the Federal Emergency Management Agency, offered little help. Die-hard residents slept in tents and abandoned boats. Then, in a fortuitous coincidence usually reserved for Hollywood scripts, relief arrived in the form of a Brooklyn-born musician clad all in black.

Neil Diamond was performing in Houston shortly after Hurricane Ike hit the area. In a conversation with then-Mayor Bill White, Diamond asked about hurricane relief efforts. White conveyed the sad reality in many of the smaller communities of Southeast Texas. Diamond asked to see the devastation firsthand so White contacted Anahuac Mayor Guy Jackson. Diamond and an entourage of local

officials made the drive to Oak Island.

During their tour, they came upon a community meeting being held outdoors (there were no buildings left). Diamond and crew stopped and quietly sat in on the meeting. Only one or two locals recognized the visitor. After the tour and meeting, Diamond pledged 100 percent of the merchandise sales from his tour to Oak Island. During the remainder of his tour he told audiences about Oak Island and his pledge to contribute. The audiences literally bought into it — to the tune of almost \$1.8 million in contributions. Some of the neediest families have returned to Oak Island to live in 14 houses paid for with funds raised by Diamond.

### OAK ISLAND, THREE YEARS LATER

Driving through Oak Island today reveals a



The Hurricane Club & Restaurant interior

community still recovering from Ike. For every rebuilt house there is an abandoned or destroyed structure. The rusting hull of a car sits tilting in a field of saltgrass. Sharp eyes will notice debris still hanging from the tops of trees whose height marks the massive storm surge that pushed much of Galveston Bay many miles north.

On a Saturday night this past August, the lower main dining room was crowded with locals. Uniformed game wardens sat in a booth eating dinner. A former class of Anahuac High School was having a reunion in the second-floor party room. A chat with the bartender revealed we had Winnie-area friends in common, and, after being seated, he sent the owner over to our table.

Presley, a big man with the deep tan of every outdoorsman in these parts, joined us and enthusi-

astically recounted the successes and travails of a first-time restaurateur. “We’re still kind of learning the ropes here,” he said. Indeed the big party upstairs tested the mettle of his harried staff — waiters scurried throughout the dining room and orders arrived slowly. But the beer was cold, and the company was good. Oyster season had passed so we loaded up on blue crabs and shrimp.

A recent and welcome addition to the menu was barbecue crab — that original dish of Southeast Texas that inspires a cult following for its spicy treatment of whole blue crabs. Giant piles of barbecue crabs arrived at our table. We smashed and hacked until all of the tender fresh meat was stripped from the carcasses.

The butterflied, breaded and fried shrimp were the essence of freshness. There is simply no match

between the shrimp you get in big-city restaurants and the shrimp you get right off the dock. Another standout dish is the “Gator Egg”: a combination of bacon, cheese and jalapeño peppers (a variation of jalapeño poppers). These salt-and-spice bombs are as addictive as they are unsuitable.

Around 10 p.m., the kitchen had closed and the bar crowd was ramping up. We said goodbye to Presley and his staff and drove the hour back to Houston, singing along to Neil Diamond on satellite radio and thinking about the next time we would return to Oak Island.

### THE HURRICANE CLUB & RESTAURANT

222 W. Bayshore, Anahuac; 409-252-3269  
Open Wednesdays through Sundays for lunch and dinner

Follow J.C. Reid on Twitter @houston\_foodie and his blog J.C. Reid, Texas.