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CAULEY SQUARE: Village Chalet chef Angel Castro presents his seared salmon with lemon butter sauce and spinach.

MIAMI-DADE REVIEW

Country charm, fresh herbs at Village Chalet

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Speeding south on U.S. 1 past golden arches and strip malls, you might be anywhere. But take a turn at 224th Street just behind Old Dixie and you will find yourself transported to Cauley Square, a 15-acre plot cobbled together a century ago by farmer William Cauley.

Now owned by Frances Varela, the old wooden houses (and some newer structures) set along tropically landscaped paths are home to an eclectic array of art galleries, antique shops studios and eateries.

One recent addition is the Village Chalet, an intimate, year-old restaurant in a hand-hewn, wood-planked home decorated with Old Florida postcards and thrift-shop oil paintings. It's set in a charming tropical garden where twinkling lights lend a magical glow. A sign on the door — "Please do not feed any cat or any other animal around the restaurant area" — makes you realize just how far you are from the big city.

This charming, rustic venue is absolutely worth a stop if you're heading to Homestead or the Keys. A meal here feels like dinner at a sweet aunt's kitchen. Prices, too, are extremely reasonable, with no entrée topping \$15.

The menu, the same at lunch and dinner,

is a quirky mix of diner/roadhouse favorites such as tuna melt, chicken tenders, quesadillas and chicken wings plus more fancified choices such as caprese salad, shrimp cocktail, Cajun-style rib eye and chicken marsala.

Standard fare is elevated by chef Angel Castro's liberal and skillful use of herbs, which show up on many plates, including awesome hand-cut fries tossed with rosemary, oregano, sage and thyme.

A sensational, grilled-to-order burger made with well-seasoned Angus beef and topped with a delicious blob of melted buffalo mozzarella and tons of fresh-chopped basil ought to be the place's signature. Buns are brought in daily from a local bakery, and fresh toppings — onions, ringlets, tomato slices and romaine — add to the appeal.

Other worthwhile bites include juicy, meaty chicken wings and a chicken curry with tasty cubes of white meat in a coconut milk broth showered with fresh cilantro and sparkling diced red bell pepper.

Fish dishes can be hit or miss. Salmon in butter sauce was perfectly fine, but mahi-mahi had the flabby texture of less-than-fresh or long-frozen fish. Pastas, including a pasty Alfredo with chicken, are not a strong suit.

Sides like garlicky sautéed spinach and

mashed potatoes were surprisingly good, and salads, including a restrained Caesar, were fresh and satisfying even with boxed crotons and a dressing that tastes bottled. House-made desserts such as a rustic, cinnamon apple pie do the job.

The wine list is tiny, the juke box tinny and the air conditioning chilly (it's the same unit that cools the gallery kitchen). Still, with Castro cooking and the delightful Veronica Gobin managing, hosting and waiting tables, the Village Chalet is a lovely place to spend an afternoon or evening, especially for those who love a fat burger and tasty fries that don't come from a drive-through lane.

- **Place:** The Village Chalet Restaurant.
- **Address:** Cauley Square Historic Village, 12312 SW 224th St., Miami.
- **Rating:** ★★½ (Good)
- **Contact:** 305-258-8900.
- **Hours:** 11 a.m.-9 p.m. daily; until 10 p.m. on weekends.

- **Prices:** Appetizers and salads \$5.50-\$9, entrees \$12-\$14, sides \$3-\$4, dessert \$5.25.

- **FV:** Free self-parking. Reservations accepted.

- **Kids' menu:** Beer and wine only. Outside bottles usually OK for large groups, but call ahead; coverage \$7. Live jazz 7-10 p.m. the second Friday of the month. AX, DS, MC, VS.