



Booming hospitality industry creates more than minimum-wage opportunities

By Stuart Korfhage
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When leaders here and around the state talk economic development, they're usually boasting about manufacturing or technology jobs, which seem to be the most prized.

But without all the cheerleading, it's the hospitality industry that's revving in tourist destinations like St. Johns County.

According to the latest release from the Florida Department of Economic Opportunity, the leisure and hospitality industry has seen a 9-percent increase in new jobs from September 2017 to September 2018 in the state, a total of 105,000 jobs.

While many deride the growth of the industry as being full of entry-level, low-paying positions, some of the professionals here say it's actually full of opportunity.

One example is the Britten family. Nina and her husband, David "Opie" Britten, both work in the restaurant business and have few complaints. Nina has been with Sunset Grille for more than 20 years, and her husband is a bartender at Jack's BBQ, which is also in St. Augustine Beach.

Unlike the stereotype, the Brittens are happy to be in hospitality, weathering the recession and other downturns at least as well as those in most other industries.

Nina said she's dealt with the assumptions of people who haven't made a career in the industry and is quick to refute some of the bad information. For instance, the couple owns their own home, has health insurance and a 401(k) account.

"It's just always kind of worked for us, and we make really good money," she said. "It's a real job. People just think that it's not a real job."

There's also the misconception that anyone can walk in off the street and just start raking in the tips. It's not quite that simple.

“There’s actually no bad positions (at Sunset Grille), but you have to put your time in,” Britten said. “The smart ones will hang in there. It takes a couple of years. In the meantime, you’re having a lot of fun, too.”

Zac Cole, director of Hospitality and Tourism Management at Flagler College, said the experience the Brittens have in the restaurant business is more typical than outsiders might think.

He said a market like St. Augustine has matured to the point that while there might be slower times, hospitality doesn’t really have an off-season. That helps workers stay in the industry, which makes it better for the customers and business owners.

“We have to continue to turn toward people to improve the quality of the product, and what that begets is this demand for professionals, people who have dedicated themselves to the craft versus someone who does it as a filler,” Cole said.

With that improved market comes better wages and benefits for the workers, allowing them to stay in the business.

Because hospitality workers can earn enough to make it a career, Cole said people can afford to make the lifestyle choice to work in that industry.

“The great thing about this profession is that (your schedule) can be whatever you want it to be,” he said. “It actually might be hard to find the 9-to-5, 40 hours a week, but that doesn’t mean you’re not going to find 40 hours a week. And ... (you) actually might be able to more freely choose your schedule just because the options are endless versus a lot of other professions.”

Among the county’s young adults looking to build on their careers in that lifestyle are Julie Swann and Eric Patterson. They both work for the Casa Monica Hotel and are students at First Coast Technical College.

Swann is hoping to work her way into becoming an executive chef somewhere and someday maybe even own her own restaurant. Already with five years of experience, Swann said she understands the pluses and minuses of the career path she’s chosen.

“I understand I’m not going to have my weekends off all the time,” she said. “For the most part it’s not too bad. Sometimes when there’s a concert (or event) I want to go to on the weekend it’s like: ‘Do I not let them not have an employee or do I work?’”

But with the right amount of commitment and ambition, Swann said the opportunities to do what you love outweigh the negatives.

Her co-worker, Patterson said he feels the same way.

“If you don’t want to have high stress or work (different) hours, this is the wrong work industry to be into,” he said. “If you’re willing to work, there’s ample spots for you. If you have a passion for it and are willing to keep going with it, yeah, it is a (good career).”

All of those interviewed said they have gone through periods when it’s been difficult to keep enough reliable employees on hand, especially as this destination continues to grow in popularity with both tourists and those choosing to relocate.

“We used to turn people away like crazy,” Nina Britten said of her restaurant. “Now, it’s ... it was a struggle. In March, if you were related to me or I knew you, I was asking you if you wanted to work there. It was really hard.”

The demand is likely to grow at the Sunset Grille and other St. Augustine Beach restaurants as the new beachfront Embassy Suites comes online. It’s a similar situation in downtown St. Augustine as more hotels and restaurants are on the way.

That could lead to some busier nights but also more lucrative shifts — and wage security — for workers like Britten, Swann and Patterson.

“Hospitality is something, and tourism development in general, that we’re going to be able to continue to kind of rely on,” Cole said.