



Jacksonville eateries target local growing population to launch franchises in St. Johns County

By Colleen Jones
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The company that modernized the concept of the southern fish camp with a chain of locations across Northeast Florida is bringing its successful brand to St. Augustine.

The St. Augustine Fish Camp will be the seventh opening for the Southern Table Hospitality restaurant group first begun by chef proprietor Ben Groshell and his wife, Liza, with Marker 32 in Jacksonville Beach.

There, the Groshells refined the vision for their fish camp concept: fresh seafood in an upscale but not stuffy atmosphere featuring expansive water views. The Palm Valley Fish Camp launched in 2009, and since then has added two more locations, in North Beach and Julington Creek (Southern Table Hospitality's portfolio also includes Valley Smoke BBQ, Safe Harbor Seafood Jacksonville and Marker 32).

The St. Augustine location, just south of The Ice Plant and St. Augustine Distillery on Iberia Street, is expected to open in mid-January, according to Eric Williams, director of operations for Southern Table Hospitality.

Why was St. Augustine targeted for the expansion?

Well, for one, it's a coastal town, and for another, many of their current customers have been asking for it, Williams said.

"It was just a matter of finding a great water location," Williams said.

The restaurant will overlook the San Sebastian River and include a dock where guests can walk down and see shrimping boats, a reminder of this area's past and present maritime industry.

Of course, recreational boaters will be able to tie up and visit the restaurant, too, which hearkens back to the traditional Florida fish camp where you could spend a day out on the water and then grab a table in a rustic cabin serving fried fish platters and exotic local specialties like alligator and frog.

The menus at each of the Groshells' fish camp locations are nearly identical, featuring favorites like spicy seafood linguine and grilled mahi over creamy grits, as well as landlubber options like steak and pork chops. One of the best-sellers, Williams said, is the fish special of the day, which highlights the daily catch in a unique way.

"We like to keep it simple and fresh," Williams said.

Southern classics like pimento cheese spread, fried green tomatoes and pan-fried chicken are elevated by artful preparation and presentation.

When fully built out, the St. Augustine Fish Camp will seat almost 200 people indoors and outdoors, as well as and two fully stocked bars. Williams said the majority of its staff and servers are drawn from the local area, and that will be the case with the St. Augustine restaurant as well. He expects to begin hiring about 50 employees beginning sometime in mid-December.

With new and interesting food concepts popping up in the Ancient City all the time, does Williams have any concerns about standing out in the local culinary scene?

"I think the fact that we are already known and established here [in the area] helps," Williams said. "And we don't really see ourselves as competitors but partners. There are a lot of restaurants, but there's enough to go around for everyone."

Not surprisingly, the company is looking to expand its brand even farther and is currently scouting out other potential fish camp locations. Williams said he could not reveal at this time where they might be.

When it came time to expand their brand, Jacksonville's Grumpy's Restaurant had to look no further than St. Johns County, its neighbor to the south.

"St. Johns County is growing at record numbers, it's an underserved market and it's up-and-coming but not yet on the national radar," Grumpy's president and CEO Daniel DeLeon said.

Grumpy's is part of a growing movement of Jacksonville-based independent restaurants with unique food concepts wanting to scale their growth beyond Duval's borders and set up shop in St. Johns County. It's not hard to see the appeal of the market, with its affluent average income, rising population and increasingly sophisticated palate.

DeLeon is bringing his "traditional Americana diner food with a twist"— think s'mores waffles, eggs Benedict and creative burgers — to The Fountains at St. Johns on County Road 210 by mid-to-late 2020. It's the first location DeLeon has targeted as part of a larger expansion plan, which could include more than half a dozen additional franchises in Northeast Florida over the year, including possibly one in St. Augustine Beach.

The formula has proven successful for the Salt Life Food Shack, which started in 2010 in Jacksonville Beach as an extension of a lifestyle brand focused on surfing, fishing and boating. The concept of a flip-flop friendly atmosphere, a cool coastal vibe and fresh seafood was wildly successful, and by 2014 Salt Life opened a restaurant in St. Augustine Beach.

The store has become the best performing of their three locations, which also include Fernandina Beach.

“Being a St. Augustine local, I can’t imagine a better fit — I mean, this historic, coastal, tourist town is a ‘Salt Life’ city,” said Greg Saig, founder and co-owner of Salt Life Food Shack. “It just resonates with people.”

The brand will continue its push into St. Augustine, opening another restaurant in the former American Legion building downtown in the fourth quarter of 2020, Saig said.

It’s the same story for Cantina Louie, which currently operates five locations across Northeast Florida: Jacksonville Beach, Atlantic Beach, Fernandina Beach, Southside Jax, Nocatee and St. Augustine.

The street Mexican eateries feature funky aesthetics and a fast-casual concept, and it’s caught on over the last several years, according to Cantina Louie president Ben Porter.

Porter said the Nocatee location is their most popular, largely because of the high volume of growth in northern St. Johns County, “and I think that population growth is outpacing the restaurant offerings.”

Porter added that the demographics of St. Johns County point to an “excellent customer base.”

Cantina Louie’s success is fueling even more expansion, with three other locations under construction in Palm Coast, Daytona Beach and another one in Jacksonville.

The franchising of Metro Diner is at whole other level, with stores in 13 other states besides Florida, backed by a corporate partner.

Still, when the company started scouting out locations outside its Jacksonville beginnings, St. Johns County — St. Augustine, in particular — was the first market it chose to move into next.

In a 2015 interview with The Record, shortly after adding dinner items to its menu, Metro Diner co-founder Mark Davoli said: “The market down there has been so amazing. The locals have embraced it. We thought it would be a great market to start in.”