



Growing gastronomical landscape of St. Augustine attracts top chefs, food concepts

By Colleen Jones
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There was a time when St. Augustine was known more for southern comfort food than white-tablecloth dining — not particularly cosmopolitan or trendy and certainly not topping any “best of” lists.

“The best five restaurants were those serving the best fried seafood,” said Kyle Forson, a St. Augustine native who serves as an instructor at First Coast Technical College’s culinary arts program.

But while places like Schooner’s and O’Steen’s still pack in the crowds, the Ancient City’s food scene has matured and expanded greatly in recent years, even landing the No. 1 spot as the best “foodie” town south of the Mason-Dixon line by Southern Living magazine.

With its growing reputation as a food-centric destination, St. Augustine now attracts top chefs and unique dining concepts to town.

From non-fussy but interesting options like Osprey Tacos to Harvest & Reel, the new high-profile restaurant inside the Embassy Suites led by highly credentialed executive chef John Botkin, there is no shortage of taste-bud tantalizers across the region.

Forson sees a lot of cool experimentation going in with fusion concepts rooted in classical French technique, from the Peruvian twist delivered at Llama Restaurant to the “elevated seafood” experience at Black Fly. Another trend seen locally is the farm-to-table movement focusing on fresh, locally sourced or in-house ingredients, like Preserved, which has its own butchery producing sausages and other meats for its charcuterie.

Brian Whittington, executive chef and founder of Preserved, believes the growing number of newcomers moving to the county has also played a part in catering to more sophisticated palates.

“It’s brought more people, more money and more money to invest,” Whittington said in a recent interview with *The Record*. “That has allowed us [restaurants] to push forward with new concepts and make sure the workforce and talent is there to be able to put out more refined food and know there’s support for it.”

In addition to being cited by *Southern Living* as an example of the kind of dining St. Augustine has to offer, Preserved’s Whittington was a 2015 nominee for the prestigious James Beard award.

Edible Northeast Florida editor Lauren Titus sees Whittington’s own career as paralleling the expanding gastronomical landscape of the area. Whittington first built his name as a top chef in the kitchen of Jacksonville’s Restaurant Orsay. As St. Johns County began to grow, he returned to his hometown and opened Preserved in historic Lincolnville.

“He recognized the town has a lot of potential and certainly higher-end demographics,” Titus said.

Forson said FCTC’s culinary program has been successful in feeding a pipeline of talent who are increasingly choosing to use those talents locally. Recent graduates are working in top-tier restaurants like Cap’s on the Water, Casa Monica, Michael’s and Purple Olive.

And as word of St. Augustine’s culinary evolution spreads, it only helps to market the city as a whole.

“People who travel really want to eat where the locals eat, and they tell others,” said Nicole Chapman, the Northeast Florida director of the Florida Restaurant & Lodging Association.

Titus also believes effective marketing has helped “propel some of the growth in the culinary scene.”

And with that, investment has followed. Titus named several restaurant and cocktail concepts that started in Jacksonville and now have locations in St. Augustine, including Dos Gatos and Metro Diner.

“I think the integrity of the food is at a whole other level and that we have the kind of talent to support that,” Forson said.