

WORTH THE DRIVE: Some of St. Johns County's hidden gems are a bit off the beaten path



By Colleen Jones
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If you blink, you could miss it.

But at the corner of County Road 13 and State Route 16A is a small red barbecue stand with several picnic tables alongside it. Inside, the smell of smoked meats and down-home sides hits the senses right away.

Woodpecker's Backyard BBQ is the kind of place that piques the interest of passersby and welcomes legions of dedicated regulars by name all day long.

"Dan, he eats with me every day we're open," said owner Lisa Maston. "And he's usually got a posse with him."

Marston opened the establishment a little over four years ago, renovating a 1955 building she's told once served as a brothel and pub.

Now, she can barely keep up with the crowds, some of whom travel from just down the road and others who stop in on day trips out to the western end of St. Johns County.

“We’re super busy, and when the food’s gone I close the door,” said Marston. “Some call ahead to reserve their order.”

The menu is simple: barbecue meats like brisket and turkey by the pound, plate or sandwich, and a variety of side dishes like corn on the cob, baked beans and coleslaw, all of which can be ordered with a pinch of local datil pepper spice.

Marston said they continually rate as one of the best BBQ places around. The restaurant’s country atmosphere serves to legitimize that even more.

Less than 20 miles from St. Augustine proper (even though, Woodpecker’s address is actually St. Augustine) the world is different out here.

Along the pastoral back roads of the county’s northwest, there are several small businesses like Woodpeckers, places that might be described as a little off the beaten path but known for their quality and service and well worth the drive.

Travel down C.R. 13 and you’ll make your way through a canopy of dripping Spanish moss, stately homes and the lazy St. Johns River to the west. Signs of smaller hamlets like “Bass Haven” and “Colee’s Cove” dot the path.

Maggie’s Herb Farm, at 11400 C.R. 13, has built a loyal patronage over almost 40 years. Dora Barker took over the property in 2007 but paid homage to her predecessor by naming her talking Amazon parrot “Maggie.” The parrot and a host of free-range roosters and chickens whose eggs are sold at the farm are just part of the experience at the greenhouse.

Hundreds of herbs — even rare ones like skullcap and mugwort — can be found here, as well as vegetables and plants for butterfly and hummingbird gardens. They are all pesticide free. Barker, a trained medicinal herbalist, and her partner, Mike Major, are skilled in helping customers pick out exactly what they might need for a culinary dish or a soothing elixir.

A little cottage off to the side sells locally sourced honey, soaps, teas and herbal remedies, as well as Barker’s own artwork and hand-designed T-shirts. Special classes offer yoga, soap making and other areas of interest.

“We have people who find out about us and come from all over the state,” said Barker. “Lately, we’ve also been getting a lot more traffic from the development at World Golf Village. ... But it still is kind of off the beaten path.”

Phil Chandler is the first to admit that if you were not looking for his business, you probably wouldn’t find it.

“We don’t do any advertising, it’s just social media and word-of-mouth,” Chandler said.

Chandler and his wife, an interior designer, launched Chandler Oaks Barn in 2016. Since then, the wedding/special occasion venue has hosted hundreds of events.

“We did 80 in the first year alone, which was actually too many. About 50 is our sweet spot,” said Chandler during a recent tour of his property off C.R. 13.

The long winding driveway and its huge old-growth trees set the tone for the southern plantation feel of the site. Livestock graze in pens, and Yack the Donkey has been in more wedding photos than anyone else.

Chandler built the barn by hand with the goal of making it look rustically vintage. The interiors are decorated in a farmhouse chic style and several spots on the acreage are suitable for ceremony backdrops. Outbuildings, like a faux general store and a candy and donut shop decorated with antique signage, were also built by Chandler and are used as novelty staging areas for the bridal couple and their guests.

While the business does a lot of weddings for couples from St. Johns County, Chandler Oaks also attracts folks from southern parts of Florida, Georgia and beyond.

“They’ll make it a destination wedding,” Chandler said, and encourage guests to take in all the rest the area has to offer, including visits to historic St. Augustine.

Chandler Oaks also hosts special farm days for kids throughout the summer, where children can pet animals, take a hay ride or go fishing.

“We want to promote agricultural tourism,” said Chandler. “People do still like to get out in the country.”

IF YOU GO ...

Woodpecker’s Backyard BBQ

4930 S.R. 16A (at intersection of C.R. 13), St. Augustine; 904-531-5670

Hours: Daily, 11 a.m. to 7 p.m. (depending on inventory of food)

Maggie’s Herb Garden

11400 C.R. 13 N., St. Augustine; 904-829-0722

Hours: 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. daily except Monday

Chandler Oaks Barn

9600 C.R. 13 N., St. Augustine; 904-339-4129; chandleroaksbarn.com (tours by appointment)