



Ocean to Mouth EATING

Northwest Florida's native foods are bountiful, thanks to a few hardy souls

TEXT AND PHOTOS BY GRETCHEN VANESSELSTYN



"Down here, if it's not iceberg lettuce, it's a special order," Chef David Carrier of Avenue Sea at the Gibson Inn in Apalachicola, Florida, tells me. The supply dilemmas of a rural fine-dining restaurant should concern and intrigue me, but with a mouthful of sweet, firm "hopper" shrimp that slept last night in the Gulf of Mexico now dancing in my mouth, I

can only nod, smile and think "Boo hoo for you." These are some seriously succulent crustaceans, pickled lightly in champagne vinegar and garnished with preserved lemon, served in the shell with their distinctive black spots showing. "That's how you can tell they're hoppers," our guide Chris Hastings, chef-owner of Hot and Hot Fish Club in Birmingham, AL, explains. "There will be a quiz later." And he's not kidding.

Hastings is dead serious about teaching the lessons of local, seasonal, culturally rooted cuisine.

(Though he's downright goofy on other topics—I have never before seen a chef jump, fully dressed, into a swimming pool in broad daylight, or strut into a hotel lobby, dripping wet, to abuse the rest of us for not joining him for a midnight skinny-dip in the Gulf. Thanks, Chef, but I saw the jellyfish flag flying today.)



We move on to yellow-edged grouper wrapped in bacon and garnished with Swiss chard grown down the road at Crescent Moon Farm in Sopchoppy. Chef Carrier explains that yellow-edged grouper is a deep-water fish, and deeper, colder water means more fat on the fish. Mmm. Keep talking.

Northwest Florida fairly squirms with life, most of it delicious. Home to both the famed Apalachicola oyster and storied tupelo honey as well as shrimp, flounder, scallops, grouper, pompano and a number of black bears who try not to trouble anyone, it is a wonderful place to eat. Apalachicola Bay is among the cleanest in the country, and Franklin County seafood is an \$11 million industry. A good chunk of that is oysters: 90 percent of Florida's oysters come from here, and ten percent of the nation's oysters. Labeled by some "the forgotten coast" and by others "the redneck Riviera," you can decide for yourself about how the tourists and locals fit together. I'm here with a group of food journalists who are committed

to preserving local foodways, and we're here to eat.

It's my first night in Apalach (as the locals call it), and I am utterly sold. Find me a house by the John Gorrie Museum State Park (a town that claims the inventor of the ice machine has to have decent air conditioning, right?), buy a boat, sit down on one of those porch chairs and call it a life. But wait. It was the oysters that called me here, with their sweet and briny chanties.

Oysters and How I Ate Them

The first time I ever had an Apalachicola oyster, I was overlooking Rockefeller Center. Yes, in New York City. Chef Philip Krajek of Fish Out of Water restaurant had traveled from Florida to NYC to show off his local bounty, and I took the bait, hook, line and dipping sauce. I'm happy to say that they're even more delicious when eaten close to home.

Oh, I ate them steamed, I ate them broiled, I ate them fried, I ate them

with hot sauce, cocktail sauce, horseradish, I ate them slathered with parmesan and spinach (Rockafella, indeed), I ate them dressed with red and yellow flying fish roe and lashed with wasabi and seaweed, I ate them with Jack cheese and chipotle sauce. And best of all, I ate them raw, dripping with Gulf water from the knife of our boat captain, George Ward, alive, fresh, saline, impeccable. And then I ate some more.

Boss Oyster, situated on the banks of the Apalachicola River, brags that it serves oysters 17 ways. Special care is taken to delight the palates of raw oyster—and heat-lovers with options like ceviche (chilled with hot and spicy tomato, garlic, onion and peppers), sashimi (chives, ponzu, wasabi, seaweed and flying fish roe) and Japanoise (Sriracha, wasabi and two kinds of fish roe). With the Apalachicola River Inn just above, you can check into a reasonably priced room, head downstairs and spend your vacation eating oysters fresh from the drink.

Top row, left to right: The porch at the Gibson Inn, Apalachicola; Boss Oyster's welcoming sign; oysters to be cuffed on George Ward's boat; the "shuga" sand beach of WaterColor resort. Bottom row, left to right: Boss Oyster's colorful entranceway; Japanoise oysters at Boss Oyster; the Coombs House Inn in Apalachicola; Chef Chris Hastings shows us how to determine the sex of a blue crab.



Clockwise, from top left: Used oyster containers have a second life; a pass through a strainer is all this honey needs; honeybees on one of Watkins' frames; George Watkins removes the frame as his helper, dressed for the job, blows smoke to calm the bees.

Zesty Apalach

Lest any unrepentant chileheads think that Apalach is a heat-free zone, take a stroll down to Tamara's Café Floridita. While Tamara subscribes to the local custom of buying fresh seafood daily from the local fishermen, she adds a zingy hit of spice to the local character. Hot finds like *patatas bravas* and spicy calamari from the tapas menu are delicious, and jalapeño sauce complements both the fried oysters and the house special pecan-crusted grouper. The tres leches cake and churros with ice cream are a delicious Latin-flavored end to the day.

After a soft bed at the Coombs House Inn, a Victorian mansion that dates to 1905, plus a hearty homemade breakfast the next morning, and I was ready for more. Oysters, adventure, whatever.

A Man of All Seasons and a Honey of a Beekeeper

George Watkins' life follows the seasons, the tide, the weather and the bees. Depending on all these factors, he may be a fisherman, shrimper or beekeeper at any given moment. If it's out there, he can find it, grab it, and

feed it to you. Sounds pretty romantic, doesn't it?

"Every year I say 'This is the last year,'" Watkins says of his honey harvest. "This is the hottest place in the world. And it'll break your back. Jimmy here even had to go to the chiropractor." He gestures to his companion and fellow parks specialist for the land management division of the state of Florida. (Bee management, I learn, is not simply a matter of ambling out to a row of hives and turning on a tap. To harvest the 10 to 20 55-gallon drums of honey Watkins brings in each year, he must know what's in bloom at any given moment, and what makes great honey—gallberry isn't so great, but can be sold as baker's honey. Also, goldenrod, orange blossom and even honeydew honey can be made

from Florida's bounty. When a new flower is in bloom, he must transport his bees—heavy boxes full of potentially irate wildlife—by night, so that they won't know they're being moved. Once settled, the bees travel one to two miles on each flight, so Watkins must monitor whether they will have enough of the right kind of food to produce honey. "Thirty, forty thousand bees. That's a lot of animals to take care of," Watkins says. Funny, I never thought of bees as animals, or beekeepers as ranchers before. As part of his husbandry practices, Watkins provides his hives with antibiotics and anti-mite medication. He protects them from bear invasions as best he can. And they produce for him. Boy, do they produce.

It's tupelo season, and the white-blossomed tupelo trees that grow wild on the banks of the Apalachicola River wear their distinctive balls full of pollen. "It's like the opening of hunting season," Watkins says. Tupelo honey is that famed product that can only be made in this and a few other small areas in northwest Florida and Georgia. (I can't help but wonder where Van Morrison got his hands on

Chef Chris Hastings will be hosting four "Foraging the Forgotten Coast" trips per year, one each season. Trips are limited to 10 people. Contact brownelltravel.com or joe.com for more information on how to sign up.



Clockwise, from top left: Oyster shell piles surround the parking lot at Buddy Ward's; blue crab in a net; a shellfish trio at Bud and Alley's; tuna poke, scallop ceviche and a stone crab claw; the view from the deck at Bud and Alley's.

some as inspiration for his beautiful song.) The magic properties of tupelo are debatable, but a few things are true: It does not crystallize like other honey. Because it's low in glucose, many diabetics, including George Watkins, find that it does not affect their sugar levels the way other honey does. And it is incredibly delicious.

Back at a secret location in the swamp, George and Jimmy show us how they fire up a handheld smoke device to calm the bees. They extract two frames from the bee box and carry them over to a hand-cranked centrifuge; we all take turns, just to feel how much our arms hurt after only a few cranks. Once the honey has spun out, Watkins drains it into a recycled plastic oyster container, and we dig in with crackers, spoons and fingers. We finish off with a taste of Watkins' homemade honey wine, comparing the sweet and dry varieties and finding both clean, luscious and powerful. "With honey, everything is hot, heavy and sticky," Watkins says. Easy, no. Delicious, yes.

Tonging the Gulf

Sugared and liquored up, we head out to Buddy Ward's 13 Mile, where

Apalachicola oysters are born, live their lives and are eaten, their shells tossed onto giant reefs that frame the parking lot. This spot isn't open to the public, but Tommy Ward has put on an oyster roast and we're invited. As we pull in, I smell the aromas kicking up and reflect: it's good to have friends in the business. Simple boiled shrimp, grilled and raw oysters, garlic bread and pie are the finger-licking delights of the day and, stuffed, I jump on board George Ward's boat and head out to see where oysters come from.

Motoring out a few miles to where a simple skiff is moored, we met Kendall Schoelles, a quiet, bearded oysterman, who spends six to eight hours a day tonging and culling oysters. Simply put, he picks them up with a set of tongs (a contraption that looks like two metal rakes with long wooden handles), lifts them onto the boat, drops them and does it again. And again. Once they're on the boat, the oysters need to be broken apart and sized—a process called culling—and the shells and small oysters are returned to the Gulf.

As a tonger, I lasted about twelve seconds, preferring to sit on George's boat and eat oysters, one by one, from

the shell, admiring their firm flesh and briny liquor all the more when I pictured the tab at a New York oyster bar. That two-buck-a-piece price tag seems much more reasonable when I consider the work these men put into it—though surely most of that doesn't make it into their pockets.

When, as I massaged my sore arm muscles, I mused to Chris Hastings about inventing high-tech tongs out of fiberglass or perhaps titanium, he answered, "Sure. And you can sell them to the five guys who still do it this way." In an era when most oysters are dredged with heavy machinery (despite all the environmental implications thereof), this is as back to basics as it gets.

To the Table

Heading out of the Apalachicola area, we go on to Santa Rosa Beach, home of the 499-acre WaterColor resort and community. The only four-diamond hotel in northwest Florida, WaterColor was the perfect place to wash off the accumulated honey and oyster mess in clear, green Gulf water, climb up the pure white "shuga sand" (that's sugar for any Northerners) beach, and clean up for a fabulous meal.



Clockwise, from top left: Pan-roasted cobia at Bud and Alley's; Chef Chris Hastings plates dinner in an open-air kitchen; a sandpiper forages on the beach; Frost Bites shave ice stand across from Bud and Alley's.

Fish out of Water is the resort's fine-dining restaurant with a casual flair. Chef Philip Krajek had lured me here in the first place, and again he set the hook and reeled me in with a feast of local bounty: Gulf tuna, served raw with a lightly spiced sofrito; line-caught pompano with local ramps, favas and tomatoes; just-picked squash blossoms stuffed with panhandle crab. A beautifully simple salad of local goat cheese, arugula and heirloom beets.

Fresh, perfect products, skillfully cooked and combined—this is the hallmark of Krajek's food.

Bud & Alley's

Another take on local cuisine. This one's been around a bit longer—since 1986. The longest-established restaurant in South Walton, this gulf-side eatery is owned by Dave Rauschkolb, a surfer, fisherman and great host. He knows this area, knew it before everyone else did,

and he has made an oasis of real in the midst of an area that can seem a little too manicured. In the Tarpon Club upstairs, the bell rings at sunset, the smoked tuna dip demands second helpings, and the beer is colder than ice. Downstairs, in the restaurant, haute cuisine is presented with special care taken to highlight local ingredients. Dave caught a cobia—we ate it pan-roasted with fried squash blossoms and blue crab relish. One of the cooks picked dewberries—they com-

Where to Eat

Avenue Sea at the Gibson Inn
51 Avenue C
Apalachicola, FL
850-653-2191
gibsoninn.com

Boss Oyster
123 Water Street
Apalachicola, FL
850-653-9364
apalachicolariverinn.com

Tamara's Café Floridita
17 Avenue E
Apalachicola, FL
850-653-4111
tamarascafe.com

Fish out of Water
34 Goldenrod Circle
Santa Rosa Beach, FL
850-534-5050

Bud & Alley's/Taco Bar
2236 East County Road 30-A
Seaside Florida
850-231-5900
budandalleys.com

Where to Stay

Coombs House Inn
80 Sixth Street
Apalachicola, FL
850-653-9199
coombshouseinn.com

WaterColor Inn and Resort
34 Goldenrod Circle
Santa Rosa Beach, FL
850-534-5000
watercolorinn.com

What to Do

John Gorrie Museum State Park
Sixth Street
Apalachicola, FL
850-653-9347



Clockwise from top left: Fish tacos at Taco Bar; a monument at the John Gorrie memorial in Apalachicola; WaterColor resort; tonging for oysters with Kendall Schoelles.

plement a brown butter financier. This is honest, delicious food, prepared with care. And thank God for the South, for it's the only place where you can hear a sommelier say something like, "We thought this here malolactic chardonnay would go well with that there grilled asparagus you're fixin' to have."

On my visit, Bud & Alley's taco bar, adjacent to the restaurant, had just opened. Dubbing it "Taco Bar," Dave's leaving the opportunity open to change the name if he has a stroke of inspiration. Certainly the cooks behind the bar are inspired, especially Jose Chanis, from Tijuana, who worked in Bud and Alley's kitchen previously. The grilled shrimp and fried fish tacos are superb, and a condiment bar of hot fixings keeps the flame burning on.

Crabbing with Chris

The more crabs we catch, the more we'll have to eat tonight. Yet Chef Chris Hastings is cheering on the competition—that's just how he is. A young Cajun man and woman with a pair of small nets have clearly done this before, unlike most of our group. Rather than be piqued that the two have discovered our "honey hole," Hastings

vocally admires her technique. "She's gettin' after 'em! Get 'em!"

This from a self-described "creek boy" who grew up in Charlotte and summered in Pawley's Island, SC. "It was my job to bring in seafood for the family dinner," he explained. He knows how to "get after 'em." On this trip, he is a long way from his home in Birmingham. Chris is employed as Culinary Advisor by the St. Joe Company, formerly the St. Joe Paper Company, which owns a huge portion of the real estate on this coast and in Florida, including WaterColor. By happenstance, Chris got involved with St. Joe's efforts to provide a background on using food that is local, seasonal, regionally appropriate and reflective of local culture. Rather than serving barramundi flown in from Australia and New Zealand, Hastings helps source fishermen, oystermen, farmers and other providers who use traditional methods, working in the ways their families always have. "St. Joe could mow over culture if they chose to," Hastings says. "But they don't."

Back at home in his restaurant kitchen, Hastings uses local products as well. "My restaurant is all about

sourcing. Chefs just do the cooking—the real heroes are the providers, the purveyors." But enough about me, I see him thinking. "Okay, now I'm going to show y'all how to tell a male crab from a female. The male has this prominent pointy part." Chuckles from the gathered group. Chris is back in his element, catching and talking about food.

Stew on the Beach

On our last night, Chris shucks off his crabbing shorts and puts on his chef's whites. We gather on the beach for a quick lesson in crab boiling: Chris uses a combination of Zatarain's, beer, onions and sea salt. His grandmother used a locally sourced ingredient known as seawater—and he was sent out to swim or raft out past the breakers to get it—part of the roots of his passion for foraging, no doubt. He concocted a bouillabaisse of local fish and shrimp which, when served, caused our chatty group to get very quiet. Eating, slurping, reaching for another crouton covered with spicy rouille. More *wipe*? Yes, please. A blackberry cobbler cooked in a cast iron skillet topped with frozen custard was an outrageously delicious end to an unforgettable trip. 