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## Great Eats at the Beach

There is something almost spiritual about crossing the Destin Bridge and heading east towards the Barrier Island of Okaloosa and Walton County. It's a majestic feeling to see the emerald green waters below the bridge, fishing boats traveling through the pass, while locals and tourists share weekend fun with family, friends, and those they've just met, on Crab Island.

Keep traveling down Highway 98 and you will come to Miramar Beach, Sandestin, and a treasure trove of wonderful finds along South Walton's famous county road 30-A. Whether you make the trip to paradise on a regular basis, own a vacation home nearby, or are a first time visitor to our sugar white beaches, you are probably looking for the best dining choices you can find and the freshest Northwest Florida Gulf Coast seafood available.

By Susan Benton



## Harbor Docks

Peppered along Highway 98 and 30-A lie some of the best restaurants in the entire south with menus that are as diverse and eclectic as the chefs that create them. One such restaurant providing the freshest catch of the day is Harbor Docks, located on the Destin Harbor. Open seven days a week, it is a perfect choice when looking for succulent seafood and dining with a view. Harbor Docks is one of the oldest and most successful establishments in the area, mainly because it is where the fishing fleets return each day with their catches, that are then sold to area markets and restaurants. If you go late in the afternoon, you can see the weigh-ins taking place. Harbor Docks serves some of the best sushi in town, and though Charles Morgan, the owner, has made many changes over the years, the motto stays the same: Local Color, Local Flavor. And that it is!

## Marlin Grill

The Marlin Grill is located in the heart of The Village of Baytowne Wharf in Sandestin Golf and Beach Resort, and is a very popular fine dining establishment for steak and seafood lovers. Owner Tom Rice says, Marlin Grill's position since inception has been "to serve comfortable food in an upscale environment." Executive Chef Michael McAnulla has been creating culinary masterpieces at Marlin Grill since 2005, and he sources his locally caught fish daily from Destin Ice and Seafood. Chef McAnulla spent time working at Commanders Palace, and shares that spirit in some of his creations, such as his fresh sautéed grouper with jumbo lump crab, shrimp, and Bienville sauce topped with lemon butter. The steaks at Marlin Grill are 28-day dry aged Certified Angus Beef, and are perfectly seared on Marlin's wood-burning grill. Chef McAnulla challenges himself to ensure that the absolute highest quality ingredients are used each day, right down to the firewood on which he cooks the steaks.

You will find yourself wanting to linger here.

## Vintij Wine Boutique and Bistro

Nestled quietly in a strip mall on Highway 98 in Miramar Beach is where you will find this jewel, Vintij Wine Boutique and Bistro. Executive Chef John Jacob is known on the Gulf Coast for his high-end cuisine with a laid back approach. After opening in 1998, Vintij has been selected for numerous food and wine awards, and part of the urban-chic bistro is dedicated to a wine cellar that is managed by partner Todd Reber. Wine dinners are often celebrated at Vintij, and on any given day diners can select a bottle to pair with their meal, or have one selected for them. Chef Jacob prides himself on serving eclectic cuisine, with food that he is passionate about and loves. Fish is always on the menu, and the dishes are seasonal, unpretentious, and the freshest ingredients will be in each and every bite. You will be making plans to return before you even leave.



## Beach Walk Café

Beach Walk Café at the infamous Henderson Park Inn boasts one of the most beautiful and romantic settings for fine dining anywhere on the Florida gulf. Located next to Henderson Beach State Park, the sunset views are panoramic and breathtaking, offering a mile of unspoiled beach for you to absorb while taking in some of the best cuisine you will ever find. ...no matter how many quaint beach inns or top notch restaurants you visit. The Inn is a nostalgic reflection of coastal charm for adults only and dining at Beach Walk Café is deliciously impressive, but isn't limited to guest of Henderson Park Inn. Executive Chef John Sallman of Beach Walk Café prefers to cook with French techniques, sticking to simple seasonal ingredients. He reinterprets gulf coast cuisine with his signature savvy, fresh and flavorful additions. He says he is visually inspired on a daily basis to create the perfect meal for all guests to enjoy, and prides himself on providing exceptional service with a great experience.

Once you eat at Beach Walk you'll understand it all.

## Stinky's Fish Camp

Turning onto famous county road 30-A you will arrive at Stinky's Fish Camp in Dune Allen Beach where longtime resident and Chef-Owner Jim Richard presides in the kitchen. Right away Chef Richard will tell you about Chef Todd Misener and Chef Brannon Janca who are part of the Stinky's team, and credits the success of Stinky's as being a team effort. Chef Richard's menu is built around Gulf Coast Seafood, "because that is what Stinky's is about!"

He goes on to say that he is inspired sometimes out of necessity, but often by his palette. He can just look at food and know what will taste good together, and I for one am a believer. Stinky's smokes their own andouille in house, as well as the boudin for their boudin balls, grouper cheeks for the chowder, tomatoes for sauces and soups, their own Boston butts for their BBQ, and their own short ribs. Though truly a unique restaurant, the motto at Stinky's is, "It is what it is, and it ain't what it ain't!"

## Smiling Fish Café

Heading East on 30-A you will reach Gulf Place where Chef George Barnes will be waiting with a smile at Smiling Fish Cafe. Located on the corner of Highway 30-A and County Road 393, Smiling Fish is the perfect location for al fresco dining on a beautiful day or for a romantic evening. If weather does not permit, there is seating inside the restaurant as well. Chef Barnes is from Louisiana, was raised in the restaurant business, and is an avid hunter and fisherman. His menu reflects the seasons, and he changes it at least five times a year. If it is Pompano, Cobia or Soft Shell-Crab that is in season, then that is what you will find on his menu. I pride myself on my crawfish etouffee', but Chef Barnes brought me a bowl of his Lafayette style, and with a tear in my eye, I admitted that his was better than mine. Chef Barnes believes if you begin to put more than 4 ingredients with the star of the dish you are losing the star, so he keeps his dishes classic and simple. Chef Barnes is also known as Captain George, and he loves to travel, keeps current on food trends, and runs a local Charter Boat Fishing Service called Smiling Fish Charters.

All you need to do is to make an appointment and show up! Now that is my kind of fishing!



## Great Southern Café

Farther down 30-A you will come to the famous little beach town of Seaside and more than one great place to eat. This is the town where The Truman Show was filmed and one where numerous celebrities regularly visit, dine, and play when they're not on set. In Seaside you will find Chef Owner Jim Shirley of Great Southern Café. Chef Jim Shirley is part of The Southern Foodways Alliance, and takes a similar view as I do of the importance that history plays in food. He feels that Great Southern Café is a reflection of his personal food story, and wants to connect his life experiences with the dishes that he presents in the café. Chef Shirley spent most of his childhood traveling as the son of a Navy pilot, and it opened his eyes to many new foods and cultures. Great Southern Café prides itself on using the freshest local ingredients, sourcing goods from nearby farms including their own small venture, and serves fresh fish from the Gulf of Mexico. Though the organic burgers are a favorite at Great Southern Café, as are the succulent Apalachicola oysters, the dish that put Chef Jim Shirley on the map was his famous Grits a Ya-Ya. A Southern specialty of smoked Gouda cheese grits, smothered in cream, with sautéed Gulf Shrimp, spinach, Portobello mushrooms, apple-wood smoked bacon, garlic and shallots. Jim Shirley cooked last year at the famed James Beard House, taking part in The Pensacola Celebrity Chef Tour, and will return again this spring.

## Bud & Alley's

Now if you've been to Seaside, and even if you haven't, you've probably heard of Bud & Alley's. This well known establishment owned by local restaurateur and surf fanatic, Dave Rauschkolb has been a staple of Seaside for over 25 years and is home to what many, including this magazine's publisher, describe as being a winning combination of great food coupled with spectacular views and some of the friendliest staff and patrons anywhere. Bud & Alley's offers something for everyone. From their quaint downstairs fine dining to the fun and socially appealing Roof Deck Bar with its four directional views across the beautiful beach, homes, and town of Seaside this is a place everyone should experience. In addition to the original Bud & Alley's you can also enjoy their nearby Taco Bar and Bud & Alley's Pizza Bar. Whether you crave fresh crab cakes, their awesome fish tacos, a handmade farmer's market brick oven pizza, or just a night of fun with friends, Bud & Alley's has you covered.

## V Seagrove

The V Seagrove located on the corner of 30-A and Highway 395 is one of the newest additions to our local restaurant scene, with Chef David Cunningham at the helm. Chef Cunningham comes to V Seagrove from Commander's Palace, and he has raised the bar on local food. Chef Cunningham definitely cooks seasonally, has an excellent relationship with local farmers and vendors, often driving to meet them if they do not come all the way to 30-A. Customer favorites on the menu include his ever popular Shrimp and Grits, as well as his Crispy Fish, recipe he brought from New Orleans, and the Key Lime Ice Cream Pie. Cunningham says, much of his inspiration comes from "Stuff I've done in the past that I bring along with me and stuff I'm always thinking about."

Chef Cunningham has his entire kitchen staff taste everything prior to opening each day, and sets the tone for an

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exceptional meal. Chef Cunningham describes the V Seagrove as "open and airy with a beautiful view of the Gulf of Mexico, and a great vibe when the restaurant is busy." He loves the open kitchen and how he can see all of the tables and diners. Try for a seat at the chef table, which is bar seating along the open kitchen where you can take in all of the action, as your meal is prepared.

## George's at Alys Beach

Continuing East on 30-A you will find the picturesque town of Alys Beach, and the "Froggie-Friendly" bungalow-style restaurant, George's at Alys Beach. Owned by Ann and George Hartley George's is an interesting place to eat that will keep you returning for more. Executive Chef Gregory Smith is on site to take you on a culinary journey where you can "Behave" or "Misbehave" as highlighted on the menu. The dishes are decadent, flavor filled, and the fresh black and red grouper are popular menu items. The Fried Grouper Sandwich became famous at The Seagrove Village Market, the Hartley's sister restaurant, when it was given kudos by another wonderful southern magazine, Garden & Gun, by making the magazine's list of 100 Things You Must Eat Before You Die. I personally love Senior Ann's fish tacos with roasted poblano-lime tartar sauce, but certainly look forward to Chef Smith's spring creations, which he says will have a Mediterranean influence. You can choose to dine inside or outside on the patio, knowing wherever you sit your meal will contain the freshest locally grown Gulf Coast ingredients.

We are so fortunate to have such an abundance of superior food choices and culinary genius on the Gulf Coast, especially in the Destin and 30-A areas. The suggestions here are just a small offering of our local flavor, and I hope you enjoy the good eating, great scenery and fun times that make our culinary scene so spectacular for the millions of people from all over the world, just like yourself, who choose to vacation in this beautiful area each year.

*Susan Benton is a freelance writer who loves the beach and calls Northwest Florida home. Susan spent much of her childhood traveling the world as the daughter of a naval officer, and found her passion for cooking while living in New Orleans. In addition to being a writer Susan is also a recipe developer and cook with a commitment to promoting the farmers, chefs, artisans and businesses along Florida's gulf coast. She believes food heals the spirit, inspires conversation, and nourishes relationships. Susan shares her love of local food on her blog, 30Aeats.com, where you will find more great dining advice.*



**Harbor Docks**  
www.harbordocks.com  
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**Beach Walk Henderson Park**  
www.beachwalkhendersonpark.com  
850-650-7100

**Vintij Wine Boutique**  
www.vintij.com  
850-650-9820

**Marlin Grill**  
www.marlingrill.com  
850-351-1990

**Stinky's Fish Camp**  
www.stinkysfishcamp.com  
850-267-3053

**Smiling Fish Café**  
www.smilingfishcafe.com  
850-622-3021

**Great Sothern Cafe**  
www.thegreatsoutherncafe.com  
850-2317327

**Bud & Alley's**  
www.budandalleys.com  
850-231-5900

**V Seagrove**  
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