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The Culinary Landscape of Franklin County, FL

Franklin County, FL – For more than 10,000 years, the complex estuarine system and coastal environment of Florida’s Franklin County have offered up nature’s bounty in an unparalleled harvest. Oyster shell mounds give evidence that Apalachicola Bay oysters were first appreciated, valued and enjoyed by Native cultures. In contemporary times, the unique ecology of the Apalachicola Bay estuarine system has provided not only wholesome seafood and organic agricultural products, but also a cherished way of life for generations of local families.

Shellfish aficionados concur that the Apalachicola Bay oyster is like no other—often described as “sweet” and “non-gritty.” It is perhaps ironic that the oysters, while providing so much culinary enjoyment, also provide a natural water filter which is essential to maintaining the water quality of the Apalachicola

Bay estuarine system—one of the last pristine watersheds in the northern hemisphere.

Smokey Parrish, an Apalachicola native and fourth-generation seafood industry worker, notes that while Apalachicola Bay oysters taste distinctive and delicious, they also are both wholesome and nutritious. These oysters can be enjoyed guilt-free, as one dozen raw oysters contain only about 110 calories, are iron-rich and high in calcium and vitamin A.

Apalachicola has the only Oyster Industry Lab in the United States, maintained in affiliation with the University of Florida’s Food Science and Human Nutrition Department. The local lab ensures quick access to Apalachicola Bay for water quality monitoring, as well as the most advanced analytical testing of local oyster quality and safety.

Leavins Seafood, Inc., a seafood wholesale company located in Apalachicola for 39 years, has pioneered many industry innovations now accepted as industry standards, including plastic packaging buckets (which replaced the older metal buckets prone to rusting).

Owner Grady Leavins notes that their newest innovation is the patented Frosted™ Oyster, which uses nitrogen—an inert gas—to quickly freeze oysters with no alteration in flavor.

Though oysters have been commercially sold in Apalachicola for more than 175 years, cultivation of oysters by introducing oyster shells near natural beds to encourage juvenile oysters (commonly referred to as “spat”) to settle did not take place until around 1918. This process of active cultivation, coupled with the increasingly wide-spread use of pasteurization and arrival of the Apalachicola

Northern Railroad, were primary factors in the development of the oyster harvesting industry in Franklin County. Today, oystering is a way of life for an estimated 1300 area families—many third or fourth generation oystermen—whose harvesting traditions have not changed in 100 years.

Oysters may be “king” in Franklin County, but they are just one of many seafood species to thrive here. According to The Apalachicola National Estuarine Research Reserve, the Apalachicola River Basin is home to 186 species of fish, and the bay system serves as a critical nursery area for more than 95 percent of all species harvested commercially and 85 percent of all species harvested recreationally in the Gulf of Mexico, including shrimp, blue crab, stone crab and finfish.

This diversity and availability of seafood created a demand which fostered the growth of the county’s commercial seafood industry, now contributing a vital \$14 million annually to the local economy.

The productive Apalachicola Bay estuarine system also is home to the largest natural stand of tupelo trees on the planet. Several varieties of tupelo trees thrive here, but it is the White Ogeechee Tupelo which, under the careful supervision of skilled harvesters, produces a rare and unparalleled specialty product.

The process of achieving fine, unmixed Tupelo honey involves stripping the river-front bee colonies of all other honey stores prior to the brief, two-to-three-week White Ogeechee Tupelo bloom in April and May. When the bees have done their work, this pure Tupelo honey must be quickly collected to avoid mixing in other honey sources. Because producing a pure product is so involved

and labor-intensive, this honey is more expensive than the average bakery-grade honey.

Tupelo honey is a prime table grade honey with light golden amber color and greenish cast. Due to the high fructose/low glucose ratio of pure Tupelo honey, it will not granulate, and many diabetics have received permission from their physicians to consume it.

George Watkins, a local naturalist and beekeeper, is the only tupelo honey producer currently harvesting from trees along the Apalachicola River. His product is sold in Apalachicola at the Piggly Wiggly store. Watkins served as technical advisor to train and advise actor Peter Fonda on the set of “Ulee’s Gold,” a movie filmed on location in and around Franklin County. In the film, Fonda’s character is a beekeeper.

With bounteous seafood and other locally grown, organic products so fresh and readily available, Franklin County visitors can experience first-hand a myriad of culinary interpretations at more than 30 area dining establishments.

From pure and simple “oysters on the half shell” at famed local eateries such as Boss Oyster in downtown Apalachicola, to fresh gulf coast grouper, shrimp and oyster entrees served with a Gulf view at The Blue Parrot Oceanfront Café on St. George Island, Franklin County’s casual seafood restaurants make a definitive, traditional statement.

Apalachicola oysters don’t sing a siren song, but the quality and availability of fresh, wholesome and nutritious local seafood has lured more than one chef to set up shop here. Gourmands have taken note, and bestowed culinary

accolades galore. In the fall of 2006, Saveur magazine named Apalachicola one of its “five favorite off-the-beaten-path food towns.”

Veranda’s is a locally owned and operated wine bar and bistro located upstairs on the corner of Hwy. 98 and Avenue D in Apalachicola. Chef Ian Williams oversees the lunch and dinner menu items, including fresh local seafood entrees, pastas, soups, salads, sandwiches and desserts. Daily specials are offered, and the menu changes frequently. Signature items, such as “Oysters Elyse,” (named for Chef Ian’s daughter) are always available. Patrons have the option to dine indoors or on the veranda overlooking historic downtown Apalachicola, and live music is featured every Saturday evening.

Veranda’s wine shop, which has been awarded the Wine Spectator Award of Excellence for five consecutive years, offers more than 1,000 bottles of wine which can be purchased to go, or enjoyed in the restaurant for a \$5.00 corkage fee. In addition, an extensive by-the-glass wine selection (and premium beers) also are available.

Located on Water Street with sweeping Scipio Creek and Apalachicola River views, Up the Creek Raw Bar invites patrons to “come as you are” and enjoy the casual atmosphere along with fresh raw, steamed and baked local seafood including Apalachicola bay oysters and Alligator Point clams. Also featured are fresh grouper, chicken and steak sandwiches; a selection of burgers and desserts. Patrons order from a “self-serve” window, and the restaurant is open daily from 12:00 noon until 9:00 p.m.

Another option in town is That Place off 98, serving innovative appetizers, fresh salads, classic sandwiches, signature seafood dishes and homemade

desserts. That Place off 98 is located at the corner of Commerce Street and Avenue E next to the Dixie Theatre, and serves lunch and dinner Monday through Saturday from 11:00 a.m. to 9:00 p.m.

Also located in downtown Apalachicola in a charming, historic setting is The Owl Café. Serving lunch and dinner Monday through Saturday and brunch on Sunday, The Owl Café's eclectic and extensive menu offerings include fresh local seafood, steaks, pastas and homemade desserts, breads, sauces and dressings. In addition, daily specials showcase the chef's creative culinary talents.

Menu highlights include soup of the day (always freshly prepared), deep fried oysters tossed with mixed greens and creamy horseradish dressing, blue crab cakes with spicy tartar and shrimp, chicken and sausage jambalaya over rice.

A favorite relaxation spot for locals and visitors alike is The Owl Café's wine room and full service bar. Complete with an expansive, dark-wood mirrored bar area, the wine room features a 3,000-bottle, temperature-controlled wine cellar with more than 180 wine selections from around the world. During weekend evenings, live entertainment enhances the ambience.

Another downtown Apalachicola favorite is Tamara's Café, located at 71 Market Street. Executive Chef Daniel Itzkovitz (formerly chef at The Soup Kitchen in Savannah, GA) and his wife, Marisa Getter, (restaurant founder Tamara Suarez's daughter) serve fresh local seafood with a South American/Caribbean flair.

Many of Suarez's original menu items, such as pecan crusted grouper, remain on the new menu alongside Chef Itzkovitz's additions. Current menu selections include creamy black beans soup; paella with shrimp, scallops,

grouper, sausage and chicken in a race caccerola; salmon filet wrapped with prosciutto topped with a fresh mango-cilantro sauce; and seafood linguini with shrimp, scallops and clams in a light tomato sauce. Dishes of fresh seafood purchased daily from local fishermen are complemented with fresh herbs grown by Itzkovitz and Getter, and daily specials are featured.

With homemade dessert temptations such as rum flan and torta tres leches (three milk cake), patrons are wise to save room for dessert. Tamara's Café serves lunch and dinner daily from 8:00 a.m. – 10:00 p.m., and is closed on Mondays. A special tapas menu also is featured each Wednesday, beginning at 4:00 p.m.

The Apalachicola Seafood Grill has the distinction of operating under the same name, and in the same location at 100 Market Street, since 1903. The Grill serves lunch and dinner Monday through Saturday, and is closed on Sunday. Lunch menu highlights include the “world's largest fried fish sandwich” and daily specials. A separate dinner menu also offers local seafood, and includes several hearty pasta dishes with an Italian flair.

Waterfront dining in Apalachicola can be enjoyed at Boss Oyster, Caroline's River Dining and Papa Joe's Oyster Bar & Grill.

Boss Oyster and Caroline's River Dining are located on Water Street adjacent to the Apalachicola River Inn. Boss Oyster was ranked by Coastal Living Magazine as one of the “top 10 oyster bars in the United States,” and features indoor and outdoor dining in a casual setting favored by locals and visitors alike. Fresh oysters shucked to order, local seafood, pizzas and steaks round out the menu.

Caroline's River Dining serves breakfast, lunch and dinner seven days a week. The lunch menu features fresh local seafood preparations, sandwiches, soups and salads. Dinner includes all of the above and adds fresh pastas and steaks. Caroline's is particularly well-known for an extensive breakfast menu featuring signature dishes such as sautéed Apalachicola bay oysters, jumbo gulf shrimp or fresh, pan-fried fish of the day with two eggs any style and choice of bacon, ham or patty sausage, served with grits and home fries. "Outrageous" maple French toast with maple butter, breakfast Po-boy and Caroline's low-country Benedict are just a few more available selections –most served with choice of meat side and grits or grilled homefries. Orange juice is always fresh-squeezed.

Papa Joe's Oyster Bar & Grill is located at Scipio Creek Marina on Water Street, with excellent views of the Apalachicola River. Papa Joe's serves fresh local seafood in an unpretentious setting, and if oysters are on your agenda, they prepare them no fewer than 12 different ways—and that's just the baked oyster offerings! Diverse appetizers such as crab quesadillas, shrimp & scallop bisque and fried oyster wraps complement the large selection of seafood entrees, pasta dishes and certified Angus steaks. Six separate entrees are available just for kids under 12.

Apalachicola's newest restaurant additions are Hole in the Wall Seafood Market & Raw Bar and Renee's Café, both located downtown. Patrons of Hole in the Wall can enjoy fresh Apalachicola Bay oysters and drinks at the cozy bar, or pick up fresh local seafood to go. Renee's serves breakfast and lunch, and fresh fare includes salads, sandwiches, seafood entrees, pizza and daily specials.

Specialty food and beverage establishments in Apalachicola add to the culinary landscape.

Café con Leche on Water Street offers organic coffee beverages, homemade breakfast pastries and sandwiches. The Old Time Soda Fountain provides a dose of nostalgia for visitors craving hand-dipped shakes, malts, sodas, floats and ice cream cones.

That's A Moray is operated by Chef Jeanine Slagle, who served 10 years as executive chef to two Florida governors. That's A Moray features takeout options including salads, sandwiches, pastelitos, baked goods and desserts. Chef Slagle also offers custom gourmet catering services. The establishment is pet-friendly and features special gourmet doggie treats.

Chef Slagle also is now offering a full dinner menu, including appetizers, entrees and desserts, served at That's A Moray, Too (The Gibson Inn's elegant dining room and restaurant), available from 6:00 – 10:00 p.m. on Friday and Saturday evenings. Signature entrees include fried Apalachicola oysters and cheesy grits, herbed chicken with prosciutto and aged provolone, steak au poivre and a daily seafood special.

Additionally, Chef Slagle provides The Gibson Inn's pub menu, served from 6:00 – 9:00 p.m. Tuesday through Saturday, including such items as cheeseburgers, crab cakes and reubens.

At Apalachicola Chocolate Company, handmade chocolates, fudge, caramels and candies are featured, and include such treats as almond rocky road clusters, French pudding truffles, hand dipped fruits and homemade gelato. They are open Monday – Sunday 8:00 a.m. – 6:00 p.m., and also are pet friendly.

Restaurants in Eastpoint and Carrabelle reflect the laid-back style of these coastal communities. Duffers and non-duffers alike appreciate the Crooked River Grill at St. James Bay Golf Resort, located between Carrabelle and Lanark Village. Open for lunch seven days a week and serving dinner on Friday and Saturday, the Crooked River Grill offers traditional fare including salads, sandwiches, pasta and ample fresh seafood selections. As a bonus, patrons enjoy sweeping views of the golf course and surrounding wetlands habitat.

With a nod to fifties-era diners, Carrabelle Junction is located in historic downtown Carrabelle and boasts the motto “real food for real people.” This charming eatery specializes in hearty, homemade sandwiches, soups, salads and freshly prepared breakfast items. It’s also the best place in town for a steaming espresso, latte or cappuccino, perfect complements to the homemade desserts, homemade milkshakes, malts and baked goods. Carrabelle Junction is open for breakfast and lunch Monday –Saturday from 8:00 a.m. until 4:00 p.m., and on Sundays from 9:00 a.m. – 3:00 p.m. during summer season.

At The Pit Stop, patrons enjoy casual indoor or outdoor dining from 11:00 a.m. – 11:00 p.m. every day except Wednesday. Appetizers, salads, sandwiches, seafood baskets, steaks, seafood entrees, and homemade desserts are served. A special kids menu also is featured. The Pit Stop also provides catering for private events and parties.

Carrabelle’s newest dining options include The Fish Camp Restaurant & Lounge and Fathoms Steam Room & Raw Bar. The Fish Camp is located on Timber Island along the Carrabelle River, and serves up great seafood along with great river views. Breakfast, lunch and dinner are offered. Lunch and dinner

menu items feature seafood appetizers, salads, baskets and entrees, in addition to sandwiches and raw bar options. The Fish Camp also will cook patrons fresh-caught and cleaned fish, serving it with three sides and drink for just \$9.99.

Restaurant hours are 11:00 a.m. – 10:00 p.m. Tuesday and Wednesday; 7:00 a.m. – 10:00 p.m. Thursday – Saturday, and Sunday from 9:00 a.m. – 3:00 p.m.

Fathom's Steam Room & Raw Bar is located in downtown Carrabelle on Highway 98 along the Carrabelle River. Patrons may dine indoors, or sit outside in a tiki-bar environment. Steamed fresh seafood and raw bar items including oysters, crab legs, scallops, shrimp and clams are the specialty. Fish sandwiches and hot dogs also are available.

In Eastpoint, where the majority of Franklin County's wholesale seafood vendors operate along the bay on Highway 98, Captain Snook's Seafood Restaurant is the place to go for fresh local seafood served up with sweeping bay views. Appetizers, soups and bisques, oysters, seafood baskets, sandwiches, salads, wraps and desserts are served, and patrons may dine inside or out on the deck to enjoy the waterfront location. Beer and wine are available, and a children's menu also is offered.

Things get hot on the island—St. George Island, that is—and seasonal summer heat encourages visitors to move at a laid-back pace, linger over fresh seafood meals and appreciate the lull of a continuous, cooling gulf breeze. Many of the islands' restaurants feature gulf or bay views.

Harry A's Restaurant and Bar is a long-time local favorite for casual dining and serves a hearty breakfast, lunch and dinner. Patrons have the option of indoor seating, cocktails at the bar or outdoor seating in the festive courtyard.

Oysters on the half shell, fish sandwiches, fried or grilled seafood baskets and salads all are available. Entrees include an “island low country boil” with shrimp, corn, new potatoes, sausage and a salad, and fresh seafood entrees such as shrimp, scallops and catch of the day can be prepared either fried, grilled or steamed. Anglers have the option of bringing in the day’s catch to be prepared by Harry A’s chef.

Serving lunch and dinner, Blue Parrot Ocean Front Café on West Gorrie Drive has the island’s largest deck for outdoor dining, and offers the only tiki bar on the beach. Fresh seafood salads, sandwiches and entrees are featured, along with steaks and signature Po-boys.

Eddie Teaches’ Raw Bar on East Pine Avenue is one of the island’s newest gathering places, and a place where sandy feet are not only welcome, but encouraged! Small and intimate, the open-air bar seats only around 20 patrons, where fresh oysters, seafood gumbo, chili and grilled hamburgers are served. Each Friday night, a traditional fish fry is offered. Wednesday is “game night,” and patrons can try their luck at a card game or traditional board game.

Fifteen years ago, Charlotte Bacher, owner of Sometimes It’s Hotter Seasoning Company, vacationed in the Caribbean and was so intrigued by a dried seasoning she enjoyed that she was inspired to recreate it upon returning home. Thus began Sometimes It’s Hotter Seasoning Company, located on St. George Island.

This specialty seasoning company offers a line of salsas and rubs that begin with fresh chili peppers which are processed on site. All of the company’s signature seasonings feature all-natural products, with no preservatives,

additives or MSG. An added benefit is a very low sodium content—only sea salt is used in the manufacturing process.

Visitors to the retail store on East Gulf Beach Drive will find award-winning seasonings, snacks, fresh dried herbs and custom herb blends. Gift baskets also are available and can be easily customized.

Franklin County celebrates its seafood heritage throughout the year with food festivals galore. For 30 years, the St. George Island Regional Charity Chili Cook-off & Auction (the largest regional chili cook-off in the nation) has benefitted the St. George Island Fire Department. Sanctioned by the International Chili Society, this event's winner moves on to the World Championship! With 60 contestants vying for top honors, this event is all about chili. Seafood lovers aren't left out, with many festival vendors offering fresh local seafood at individual food booths. The festival includes a 5K run, golf tournament, live bands and much more.

St. George Island also hosts the annual Franklin County Oyster Festival each October, a lively celebration of the beloved bi-valve. Tasty oysters and other seafood delicacies are readily available at the food court, and proceeds benefit pre-selected local charities. And for the "hands-on" visitors, oystermen participate with their boats to personally demonstrate the particulars of oyster harvesting. Live music, a 5k run, parade and fishing round out the festivities.

The first weekend in November is when Apalachicola celebrates The Florida Seafood Festival—the oldest festival of its kind statewide. For 48 years, seafood lovers have gathered here to enjoy two days filled with copious amounts of fresh seafood, the blessing of the fleet and the Miss Florida Seafood pageant.

Festivities include an oyster eating and shucking contest, arts and crafts vendors, a parade, music, the Redfish Run footrace and crowing of King Retsyo. To round out the celebration, the Apalachicola Chamber of Commerce hosts an oyster roast on Friday and oysters are the main attraction. Featured wines, microbrews, music and dancing help to ensure a good time is had by all.

From gourmet to down-home--whether you prefer to dress up or down—there is no shortage of memorable dining opportunities for everyone in Franklin County.

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