



UNIQUE EATS

These restaurants bring something deliciously different to the North-Central Florida.

By KAYLA LOKEINSKY

Our little corner of the country is made up of some of the best restaurants in North Central Florida. From gastro pubs to mom-and-pop shops, the area has something for everyone. But where can you find food that you won't be able to get anywhere else?

Not just something tasty, but something distinctly different from chain joints. Well, tucked away on back roads and in small shopping plazas are some of the most distinct flavors in the Suwannee River Valley. These restaurants are offering some unique eats that you need to try.

FACING PAGE: TOP: Farmers Market Salad, The Great Outdoors
LEFT: Tuna Bowl, Marion Street Deli
TOP RIGHT: Spinach Calzone, Italian Pizzeria
BOTTOM RIGHT: Squash Casserole, Chasteen's

Marion Street Deli & Pub

Marion Street has quickly become one of Lake City's most popular dining spots. Unlike many of the newer restaurants that have made their way to the area, Marion Street isn't a chain or corporate owned. It's a local spot. The exposed-brick walls are decorated with vintage pieces, old newspaper clippings and maps of the area. The live music and full bar combined with a low-key atmosphere make this place a dining destination in Lake City. However, what keeps people coming back is the food.

Marion Street Deli and Pub is not your typical restaurant. Its menu is full of dishes you would expect to find a fancy restaurant in a big city. Made with fresh ingredients and packed with flavor, the food is undeniably good, and also something you can't get anywhere else in the area.

It's not often you'll find a place in rural North Florida with ahi tuna poke or white truffle fries on the menu. Marion Street's selection is wide and full of variety. You can try the ahi tuna bowl, made with seared sashimi ahi tuna, jasmine rice, house-made soy Tamari ginger sauce, avocado, cucumber and green onions. Or, the Lake Isabella Tacos, named for one of Lake City's many lakes. These savory tacos come in either mahi mahi, shrimp or Hawaiian pulled pork and are piled high with cabbage, cilantro, pico de gallo, cash fresca cheese and spicy Marion sauce, plus homemade black-bean salsa on the side.

Even their traditional southern dishes offer a new twist. The honey sriracha chicken and waffles, backyard brisket sliders and meatloaf stacks take southern food to a new level. One thing is for sure: if you're looking to try something new, make your way to Marion Street.



The Power Bowl at Marion Street Deli & Pub is made with fresh, cubed sweet potatoes, black beans, fresh spinach, house salsa, two organic eggs and pepper jack cheese. You can add salmon, ahi tuna, chicken, tofu or avocado.

Chasteen's

Sometimes you want to go where everybody knows your name. For the people of Lake City, that place is Chasteen's. Walking into Chasteen's is like walking into your mama's kitchen. That warm, inviting feeling washes over you and you instantly feel like you're home, even if you've never been there before.

Chasteen's has been a Lake City staple for nearly 20 years. The owners, Robert and Emmie Chasteen, opened their first restaurant, Robert's Dock, in February 1978 then opened Chasteen's in downtown Lake City in 1999. The popular local lunch spot is only open from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. Monday - Friday, and the line can sometimes be all the way out the door.

What sets Chasteen's apart, besides the friendly faces, is the delicious food they serve up every day. Everything is homemade and prepared with love. You can literally taste it.

The food at Chasteen's is always fresh, and the menu is full of tasty salads, sandwiches and of course their signature Buffalo Bites, chunks of chicken that are covered in their sweet and spicy buffalo sauce. The side dishes, soups and desserts at Chasteen's are different throughout the week, and they always post on Facebook what those items will be each day. If you're a die-heart customer, you have the rotation memorized by heart.

For newcomers, they always have the list of today's sides at the counter, and their tantalizing desserts lined up along the side. You can expect a long line when their coveted squash casserole or chocolate delight is on the menu.

They also have a special sandwich each month, which you can always expect to be packed full of flavor. Make sure you try them when you can.

Chasteen's serves up comfort food at its finest. In fact, you can even bring Chasteen's home with you. They sell take-and-bake casseroles that you can bring home to your family and have a home-cooked meal.

Eating at Chasteen's is a right of passage for the people of Lake City. It's a down-home dining experience that you just can't get anywhere else.



Each month Chasteen's serves up a special sandwich, like this Buffalo Club Sandwich.

Italian Pizzeria

Tucked away in a small shopping plaza on US Highway 90 in Lake City is some of the best Italian food we've ever had. Italian Pizzeria is dishing out authentic Italian cuisine, family style.

Owner Jose Cruz opened Italian Pizzeria three years ago and runs it with his family by his side. Originally from El Salvador, Cruz has been working in Italian restaurants since 1997, and decided to open up his own shop right here in Columbia County.

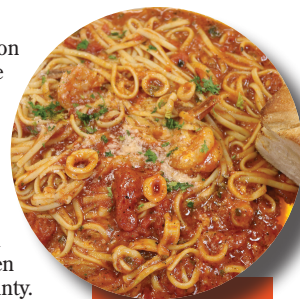
Italian Pizzeria offers a variety of authentic Italian dishes that range from the traditional slice of cheese pizza to upscale European dining, all at an affordable price. Usually if you want to get Italian food of this caliber you end up paying a pretty penny. But at Italian Pizzeria, everything on the menu is under \$20, including their delicious large pizzas.

Italian Pizzeria is mostly known for its pizza (hence the name) and they have a number of pizzas you won't be able to get anywhere else in the area. Their veggie primavera, eggplant parmigiana and rio rancho pizzas are just a few of their many delicious pizza options that are not only unique, but extremely tasty.

Italian Pizzeria has all the traditional Italian fare, including calzones, strombolis, pasta dishes, subs and salads. However, it's their pasta specialty dinners and daily specials that really set them apart.

Pasta dishes such as their calamari marinara, made with squid, tomatoes and garlic over linguini, and specialty dinners like their veal saltimbocca, which is veal topped with spinach, prosciutto and mozzarella in a light wine sauce with plum tomatoes, make Italian Pizzeria one of the most authentic Italian restaurants in the area. And even better, not only is the food packed with that traditional Italian flavor, it's also extremely affordable and served up in a comfortable atmosphere.

It's difficult to make Italian food both well and fast. At Italian Pizzeria, they have mastered that feat. It's the perfect place to go and grab lunch or have a casual dinner with family and friends, but the food is five-star quality.



The Calamari Marinara at Italian Pizzeria is made with fresh squid and shrimp, cooked and tossed with marinara sauce, fresh herbs and a sprinkle of parmesan cheese.

Great Outdoors Restaurant

An upscale restaurant where you least expect it, Great Outdoors Restaurant is a true hidden gem of High Springs. This restaurant is by far one of the nicest in the Suwannee River Valley, with stunning rustic decor and amazing food that is not only tasty, but different from anything else you can get in the area.

The Great Outdoors Restaurant has been open for 10 years and has since become a dining destination in North Central Florida.

Serving up lunch, dinner and delicious drinks, this American eatery is home to five-star chefs who have won Golden Spoon Awards six years in a row.

Their menu is full of dishes made with the freshest ingredients and packed with flavor. Their menu is full of southern favorites with a fine-dining twist. Like their root beer pork chop, made with twin center cut six-ounce chops, marinated in bourbon and draft root beer and smothered in bacon gravy. Or their farmers market salad, made with organic greens, baby spinach, toasted almonds, seasonal fruit, chopped mango, golden raisins, goat cheese and a strawberry mint vinaigrette.

High Spring is surrounded by some of North-Central Florida's most beautiful waterways, so its no surprise that the Great Outdoors Restaurant has delicious seafood dishes. Shrimp bruschetta, "Florida Cracker Calmari", beignet fish tacos and shrimp and grits are just some of the many seafood dishes Great Outdoors Restaurant is serving up.

The Great Outdoors Restaurant has spectacular food and the atmosphere to match. The inside of Great Outdoors Restaurant is filled with rustic decor that makes it warm and inviting. You can also dine outside on the patio or under the boathouse, where you can enjoy your meals under the stars and live music. They also have the Opera House upstairs, which can be reserved for events.

Great Outdoors Restaurant also has a fully-stocked bar, the Spring House Tavern, which serves up some specialty drinks that are unlike anything else. Wet your whistle with a caramel apple, chocolate macadamia nut or key lime pie martini.

They also have weekly specials like Tuesday Hamburger Heaven (1/2 off burgers), Thursday Half Price Wine Night and live music under the stars Wednesday through Sunday.

If you're in the area, Great Outdoors Restaurant is a dining destination you don't want to miss.



One of the Great Outdoors Restaurant's most popular dishes is the Root Beer Pork Chops, made with twin center-cut 6-oz chops, marinated in bourbon and draft root beer and smothered in bacon gravy.