

BOOZE & BITES

Amelia Island Tasting Tours provide unique dining experiences for tourists and locals.

Story and photos by KAYLA LOKEINSKY

Amelia Island is full of amazing restaurants and bars serving up fresh, local cuisine. Cafes, bistros, beer gardens, pizzerias, seafood joints, brewpubs, the list goes on and on. All this and more is packed onto the 13-mile long island. So where do you start? How can you possibly experience all the best food and drinks that the island has to offer?

Amelia Island Downtown Tasting Tours takes you on a culinary journey around the island, giving you the chance to sample the best that its restaurants have to offer. Whether you're looking to experience the food, the drinks or a little bit of both, these tours make it easy for visitors to get a true taste of the island.

One of the best things about going to a new city is trying all the new restaurants and bars. However, you don't always have the time or the money to try out all the places you want to. The Tasting Tours offer a perfect solution. My Amelia Island Downtown Booze & Bites Tour gave me the chance to try a variety of different foods and drinks while also providing insight into the tight-knit island community. After my experience, I'm ready to go back for seconds.



Kicking Off with Cuban Food

Here's how it works: the Booze & Bites Tour takes you on a two-and-a-half hour walking tour through beautiful downtown Amelia Island while sampling food prepared by local chefs and cocktails made by local bartenders. Each tour stops at two restaurants, where you can meet the chefs and learn about them and their cuisine, and it also stops at two bars, where you can taste cocktails made specially for your tour.

Our first stop was Hola! Cuban Cafe, where chef and owner Marisol Triana greeted everyone with a warm smile. Marisol organizes the tasting tours, so starting off at her restaurant was the perfect kickoff for the tour. A small Cuban cafe with just a couple tables inside and some outdoor seating, the atmosphere made you immediately feel at home. The smell of Cuban coffee and spices filled the room, and I knew we were in store for some amazing, authentic Cuban food.

On the Booze & Bites Tour, you can hear from the chefs firsthand, making the dining experience all the more personal. Marisol explained everything on the menu, and it felt like we were dining at a friend's home rather than in a restaurant.

We started off with Cuban sodas, including Iron Beer (Cuba's national beverage), Materva, which tastes like sparkling tea soda, and Jupina, a sweet pineapple soda. Then each member of the tour group got a plate filled with samples of some of Hola!'s signature dishes.

The sampling included fried yuca, a cassava root fried for Cuba's version of french fries, and tostones,



which are fried green plantains. We also had the Media Noche pressed sandwich. This was by far the best Cuban sandwich I'd ever had. With slow-roasted pork packed with spice and flavor, sweet tavern ham, swiss cheese, pickles and mustard on sweet bread, it was a traditional Cuban sandwich taken to the next level. There were also Papa Rellenas, fried mashed potatoes stuffed with beef filling and served with their signature mojo dipping sauce.

Now, all of these dishes were served as appetizer-sized portions. This allowed us to taste all the different dishes without getting full. We finished the meal off with a Cortadito, which is a Cuban coffee infused with milk, and a homemade churro filled with sweet cream cheese. It was the perfect end to a meal that provided all the signature flavors of Cuban cuisine, and the best part was, this was just the first stop.

ABOVE: The first stop on the Amelia Island Downtown Booze and Bites Tour was Hola! Cuban Cafe, a local restaurant that serves authentic Cuban cuisine, including their Media Noche (The Midnight) pressed sandwich, which is tavern ham, roasted pork, swiss cheese, pickles and mustard on sweet bread. Hola! Cuban Cafe also served up a variety of Cuban sodas and desserts, including this Jupina pineapple soda and these Cortaditos, which is Cuban coffee infused with milk and churros.



Florida's Oldest Bar

Our next stop was Florida's oldest bar, Palace Saloon. Just down the street from Hola! Cuban Cafe, the Palace Saloon is a staple in Amelia Island. Constructed in 1878, the building was turned into the Palace Saloon in 1903 and has continuously operated ever since.

Walking into the bar was like taking a trip into the past. Patterned tile floors, the 40-foot long wooden bar and the display cases filled with memorabilia and history of both the bar and the island helps the Palace Saloon maintain its vintage vibe. A tourist attraction that also attracts the locals, I can't think of a better bar to visit in Amelia Island.

My favorite thing about our experience at the Palace Saloon was our bartender, Johnny Miller. A man who seemed to know everything about mixing drinks and the history of the bar, we soon found out that he was not just a bartender, but the former mayor of the city.

The excitement with which he told us about his bar and how it was his decision to paint the ceiling tiles garnet and gold in honor of the Florida State Seminoles made the experience so much more personal than if we had just walked into any old bar.

He then proceeded to make our group quite possibly the best drink I've ever had. He blended up fresh, locally-grown pineapple and mango than added in dark and light rum made at the Marlin & Barrel Distillery on Amelia Island and finished it off with some coconut milk and sliced fruit.

It was sweet, strong and tasted like something you could be sipping under an umbrella on a beach somewhere. It was the drink that brought our seven-person tour group together. A couple, two lifelong best friends, a pair of sisters and I soon transformed from nervous strangers to chatty friends. It was a great icebreaker and after finishing off our delicious drinks we headed off to our next restaurant.



The bartender at the Palace Saloon created a special drink, which was made with dark and light rum from the Marlin & Barrel Distillery on Amelia Island, fresh pineapple, fresh mango and coconut milk.



New American Cuisine

Our tour guide, Cody, then walked us to our next destination. As we passed through the quiet streets of downtown Amelia Island, he showed us some of the local shops and other restaurants before we stopped at Joe's 2nd Street Bistro.

Serving up "new American cuisine," Joe's 2nd Street Bistro serves up American classics with a modern twist. The atmosphere was completely different from Hola!'s. With white linen tablecloths, cloth napkins and beautiful china, it was fancy without making you feel like you were underdressed. After sitting down we were imme-

diately met with a trio of plates containing different dishes and a glass of chardonnay. Now this was my kind of place.

From the plating to the taste, these dishes were unlike any American cuisine I had ever had before. First up was a Southern staple, shrimp and grits. Served in a martini glass, the "Amelia Island Shrimp and Grits" were given a elegant flair. The local shrimp, fresh veggies and creamy stone-ground grits were served with a white vermouth tasso ham sauce, giving you all the best tastes of the south in every bite.

Then there was the pan sautéed lump crab cake. This wasn't just your regular old crab cake. It was topped with a roasted red pepper jelly and a whole grain mustard hollandaise. The crab cake was caramelized on the outside, and was sweet with a little bit of heat, making it the perfect bite. Then we had chicken and andouille wontons. One of the appetizers on the menu, these fried wontons are stuffed with roasted chicken, andouille sausage and a rich leek cream cheese then driz-



zled in their homemade BBQ sauce.

As we ate, the chef/owner Ricky Pigg spoke to us about the history of the restaurant and described not only what the dishes were, but why he used the ingredients he did. He answered questions about the food and told us interesting stories about the island. As the only diners in the restaurant at the time (it closes between lunch and dinner, but opened up just for our group), it felt like we had our own private chef. The tasting tour offers that unique experience and one-on-one connection with the restaurant chefs that you would never get if you walked in during the middle of the lunch rush.

After we practically licked our plates clean, we headed out to our final destination: the Amelia Tavern.



Ending on a Sweet Note

After the one-of-a-kind experience we had at the Palace Saloon, we walked into the Amelia Tavern and were greeted with a completely different atmosphere. A newer restaurant and brewpub, the Amelia Tavern had a unique menu filled with fun bar bites and appetizers, but we were there to sample their drinks. With modern fixtures and a young crowd, it showed that the historic island was still growing and changing.

Sitting around the bar in the middle of the restaurant, we were served a ginger beer lemonade, made with ginger beer, lemonade vodka, fresh-squeezed lemons and a splash of cranberry juice. After we got our drinks we spent the next half hour sitting together, chatting about how amazing the food was and some members of our group were even planning when they would come back for another tour. Sharing a sweet drink over this sweet moment, we all left the bar with full stomachs and smiles on our faces.

From authentic Cuban food to fine American cuisine, we were able to get a taste of what Amelia Island has to offer. The Booze and Bites tour gives visitors a chance to try a sample of some of the island's best restaurants and bars without having to spend the whole day deciding where and when to eat. It takes the decision making out of deciding which new restaurants to try, and makes you crave another taste of the island life.

JOE'S 2nd STREET BISTRO: The pan sautéed lump crab cake (far left) at Joe's 2nd Street Bistro is made with jumbo lump crab and sautéed peppers and is served with a whole grain mustard hollandaise and topped with a roasted red pepper jelly. One of the most unique appetizer options at Joe's is the chicken and andouille wontons (left, center), which are fried wontons stuffed with roasted chicken, andouille sausage and a rich leek cream cheese and then drizzled with their homemade BBQ sauce. The shrimp and grits (far right) are made with local shrimp and fresh stone-ground grits and served with a white vermouth tasso ham sauce.

AMELIA TAVERN: At the Amelia Tavern the bartender prepared a spiked Ginger Beer Lemonade (right), made with ginger beer, lemonade vodka, fresh-squeezed lemons and a splash of cranberry juice.

BOOK YOUR OWN Tasting Tour!

Amelia Island Downtown Tasting Tours offers weekly tours on Thursdays and Fridays from 2:30 to 5 p.m. Each of the walking tours take you to two local restaurants and two bars.

When booking the tour you do not know which restaurants and bars you will be visiting, but that's part of the fun! If you want to know where you're going in advance, you can call or email the company and ask for that information.

The tours routinely change which restaurants they will stop at, so you can go several times and not see the same thing twice.

Cost: The tour costs \$59 per person plus tax, but that includes your two tastings specially prepared by the chef/owners of the restaurants, cocktails created specifically for the tour, the tour itself and gratuity for each restaurant and bar. It's worth it for the amount of food and drinks you're served at each place.

Cocktail Tour: Amelia Island Downtown Tasting Tours also offers a Cocktail Tour. These tours are \$45 and are available on Fridays and Saturdays from 5:30 to 7:30 p.m. and on Sundays from 2 to 4 p.m. These tours are like mobile cocktail parties where visitors will go to our local bars, learn about their histories, meet the bartenders and sample their drinks.

Contact: For more information or to book your own Amelia Island Downtown Tasting Tour, visit www.ameliaislanddowntowntastingtours.com. You can also call 904-330-5746 or email ameliatasting-tours@gmail.com.

