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Beachside Indulgence

By Mona L. Hayden Thu, Jan 28, 2016

Dining along the Mississippi Gulf Coast

About 50 miles from New Orleans, the epitome of culinary excellence, awaits a very pleasant surprise in Mississippi, starting in Bay St. Louis and following the shoreline to Ocean Springs. It seems the Mississippi Gulf Coast has added a bit more to their repertoire than miles of white sandy beaches and spectacular sunsets.

BAY ST. LOUIS

The first stop on this culinary excursion is the **Silver Slipper Casino** in Bay St. Louis, a land-based casino that has become a favorite for locals and those living and traveling along I-10. The 24/7 gaming and free live entertainment, not to mention beachfront views of the Gulf of Mexico, appeal to anyone seeking that perfect balance of relaxation and excitement. Best of all, tucked inside the Silver Slipper is the upscale **Blue Bayou Bar & Grill** where Chef Charlie Nieves prepares sophisticated fare to rival any fine dining. Well-traveled and well-versed in his executive style kitchen, Chef Nieves loves the hometown atmosphere of Bay St. Louis. "In this profession you can live in some of the most beautiful places anywhere," he says. "I'm home."

Most impressive are panoramic waterfront views from every table in the dining room with piano accompaniment during restaurant hours. Casual attire is acceptable and repeat customers are a testimony to the fine cuisine served by an exceptional wait staff. Blue Bayou specializes in steaks, although the fresh-from-the-Gulf seafood (Catch of the Day) and sides are just as appetizing. Personally, I've enjoyed some really good crab cakes in my Louisiana lifetime but these just might be the best ever! Their secret savory rub perfectly flavors the meats – certified hand-cut fillets and ribeye's. The perfect ending to a fabulous meal is Bailey's coffee with a Brownie Sunday or Bread Pudding for dessert. And plan around Sunday Brunch for just \$24.95.

Lunch at the **Starfish Café** is another adventure not to miss in Bay St. Louis. A non-profit outreach program to help young adults overcome life's adversities, the Starfish serves as a training ground for 18-30 year old students. The 20-week program teaches both life and business skills as they learn various aspects of the food and restaurant industry. So while you contribute to their education and future with tips and donations, you'll be rewarded with delicious meals prepared by the students using local garden fresh vegetables, herbs and even edible flowers. Choose from winter chili and seasonal soups to salads, sandwiches, and daily specials like Cajun Black Bean Soup, Veggie Pasta Primavera and Shrimp and Grits. The food combinations and flavors are as pleasing as the atmosphere and knowing you are helping others improve their lives. Also, as a proponent of healthy lifestyles, the Starfish Cafe also sponsors workshops and classes to improve one's overall well-being.

Bay St. Louis is one of the most charming southern towns to ramble, and Gulf-side views makes it that much sweeter. Take a leisurely drive and be sure to stop at the Alice Moseley Folk Art & Antique Museum in the Historic Depot where the nationally acclaimed artist and story-teller's work is displayed. It's as colorful and expressive as the artist herself! Just between us... her original home is across the street from the depot.

GULFPORT

Some 15 scenic miles east is where **Corks & Cleaver's** head chef and owner David Dickensauge has "redefined southern heritage" at his tables. The recently opened restaurant boasts 47 menu items that will change 5 times a year – that's 237 signature dishes at one location!

Gulfport is home to Dickensauge, named one of Top 5 Chefs in Louisiana in 2015. "The two best places I've worked were New Orleans and Chicago," he says, explaining why his eclectic tastes embrace Creole and Cajun influence. Now he focuses his expertise into creating a unique dining experience with panache. "Here, we cook with our heart, with finesse but not pretentious food. We care about what goes on the plate." An immediate favorite at Corks & Cleaver were the rabbit tamales, with pickled (fermented) crawfish bounding balls and Creole devils on horseback often requested. The chef strives for excellence, although he claims it can never be achieved, with inspired techniques such as cold smoked prime rib at 100 degrees and including microgreens and natural purees (carrots, parsnips and fennel) served on his distinctive style of plating.

Corks & Cleavers will satisfy not only your appetite but your thirst as well, with 70 wines available by the glass, 80 reserve wines and a selection of 42 beers with 18 on tap. They're open Mon-Sat 11am-2:30pm and 5:30pm til 9:30pm weekday and 11pm weekends. From drinks to a celebratory meal, this one is sure to please.

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Pop Brothers, Gulfport

2015 was obviously a good year in Gulfport for foodies as Octavio Arzola introduced **Pop Brothers**, with frozen concoctions that have created quite a stir among adults and children. Originally from Spain, Octavio left behind his career in corporate restaurant management in Chicago to pursue this venture. With less than 70 calories and 13 carbs, the \$3 pops are made without refined sugars, preservatives or artificial coloring, making them fat, lactose and gluten free. Pop Brother's machines register at -25 degrees to retain 100% of the nutritional value of the pops and make them creamy instead of icy. And if you order yours dipped in dark or white chocolate, then the menu dramatically increases!

Octavio's boisterous enthusiasm is hard to resist. With selections like Vietnamese Coffee, Satsuma Orange and Cream and Pistachio, Milk and Honey, you may be inclined to order more than just one. A secret to their success is obviously Octavio's accommodating manner. "I have actually had cancer patients bring in supplements that we made into pop for easier consumption." His business acumen is another factor. "We decorated this entire place with recycled products, including wooden pallets. It looks great and people are comfortable here."

Pop Brothers sell from their brightly painted location at 1501 25th Avenue but also have 6 mobile carts for events, outlets, and social gatherings. To share these divine pops, gift certificates are available.

BILOXI

This city on the Gulf is just a mere 7 or 8 miles east of Gulfport and is a prime destination for beach lovers, gamers and golfers at the grand **IP Casino Resort Spa**. Guests drive in from neighboring states just to visit the exclusive Senses Spa for their full-service menu including European Stone Massages, makeup and specialty treatments.

The 32-story hotel claims the AAA Four Diamond restaurant, **thirty-two**, the ultimate in fine dining. Head chef Matt Kallinikos shares his philosophy, "Stay true, seasonal and

local.” Offerings include prime USDA steaks and seafood as well as an impressive vegan menu, with features updated weekly to accommodate new trends and fresh local fare. The in-house pastry shop prepares breads and pastries for the restaurant. Recognized for the last 7 years on the Best of Wine Spectator list, thirty-two boasts over 750 labels personally selected by Sommelier Harry Hall as well as blends unique cocktails and pours up a beautifully selected house Bourbon.

“For the complete dining experience – service to food – we offer interactive tableside service for salads, sauces and desserts,” says Chef Kallinikos, who has also worked in Louisiana. Price point averages \$65 per person for a complete and memorable meal. The elite thirty-two not only offers first-class dining but recently added theatre style seating and expansive windows for a breathtaking panoramic view of the Back Bay of Biloxi. The kitchen has just been updated as well. On weekends from 5-10pm, live music flows from the lounge, enhancing the ambiance of thirty-two.

Another onsite AAA Four Diamond rated restaurant is **Tien**, serving superior Asian cuisine in an engaging environment. **Costa Cucina**, also award-winning, rounds out the international restaurants at IP with authentic Italian cuisine. The elegant dining area is located just inside the IP Casino Resort Spa’s main lobby, making it easily accessible to locals who soon become regulars. With an impressive wine list, excellent service and a reasonably priced menu, Costa Cucina serves up generous portions of delicious rustic Italian food.

OCEAN SPRINGS

To complete our Mississippi Gulf Coast culinary roundup, head east 10 miles towards Ocean Springs where you’ll delight in the architecture and charming downtown shops. Make your way to **Greenhouse on Porter** where owners Kait and Jessie have perfected an array of drop biscuits slathered with whipped goat cheese and topping. Totally unexpected and insanely charming, the Greenhouse on Porter is the unique result of two young professionals with a vision. Although it’s billed as a coffee, biscuit and beer shop, the actual greenhouse serves as an incubator specializing in art, creativity and invention. “We have no idea what magical moments are about to transpire in the greenhouse,” says Kait. From yoga and exercise classes to local wine, cheese and beer tastings, movie screenings, lectures and musical performances and more, their philosophy is that helping others in the community is in itself a successful and profitable business model. This environment is conducive to creativity and invention.

You'll want to tour the **Walter Anderson Museum of Art** in Ocean Springs to view an outstanding collection by this eclectic artist whose work was instrumental in the progression of the arts in the southern U.S. **Shearwater Pottery**, with a strong family connection to Walter Anderson, should also be on your radar while in Ocean Springs.

So there you have it, roughly 30 miles of delectable dining options that continue seamlessly along the beautiful Mississippi Gulf Coast. In between are great local coffee houses, museums and galleries, and plenty of entertainment. Whether you're vacationing, just passing through, or looking for a place to put down roots, this stretch of coastal paradise is definitely a contender!

*Find itineraries, lodging options, attraction information and more by visiting gulfcoast.org or call **Visit Mississippi Gulf Coast at 1-888-467-4853**.*