



Apalachicola

A Taste of Florida's History

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How could a little thing like an oyster change history?

A visit to the Panhandle town of Apalachicola is all it takes to understand how Florida's seafood industry and subsequent economic development boomed because of an invention by the town's physician.

It's only fitting that the first ice machine — and forerunner to refrigeration and air conditioning — was invented in Apalachicola by John Gorrie, who wanted a way to keep his yellow fever patients cool. Once the third largest shipping port on the Gulf Coast (behind Mobile and New Orleans), Apalachicola was originally founded as a customs district in 1821 to keep an eye on moonshine smugglers. Then cotton became king, and the town had as many as 48 warehouses on the waterfront by 1837. Oyster harvesters wanted a way to expand their markets, and Gorrie's invention, which was patented in 1851, paved the way. Apalachicola became world-renowned for its sweet oysters and the rest, as they say, is history.

A healthy respect for the past is a major part of Apalachicola's charm. The picture-perfect view from the Highway 98 Bridge that crosses the Apalachicola River reflects a time when downtown streets were wide, and metal roofs and white shutters dominated the architecture. With more than 900 historic homes and

buildings in the National Historic District of Apalachicola, the waterfront town has been recognized as one of America's Distinctive Destinations by the National Trust for Historic Preservation.

The first building you see upon entering Apalachicola from the east is the blue and white Gibson Inn, built in 1907 and once the only luxury hotel between Pensacola and Jacksonville. The large wrap-around porch offers a chance to sit a spell and relax after eating fried oysters or seafood gumbo prepared by Chef Jeanine Slagle, a graduate of both the Culinary Institute of America and Johnson & Wales College. And consider yourself extremely lucky if her simple oyster casserole is a special on the day you visit.



The John Gorrie Museum State Park, where a replica of the first ice-making machine is displayed, is a great place to begin a downtown tour. The small, yet informative museum has several exhibits chronicling the area's colorful history and because it's part of Florida's State Park system, a ranger is usually on hand to share even more Apalachicola trivia. Each August, the town pays homage to Gorrie with an ice festival where sculptors carve intricate statues that melt not quite as quickly as the flavored snow cones and margaritas disappear.

Next to the park is Trinity Episcopal Church, where Gorrie was a member. The Greek Revival building was shipped in sections on

schooner ships and assembled with wooden pegs in 1838. Still an active parish, the church will host its 20th Annual Apalachicola Historic Home & Garden Tour on May 5, which is a wonderful opportunity to see many homes usually not open to the public.

Just around the corner from the church is the Coombs House Inn, considered the town's most beautiful residence when lumber magnate James Coombs built it in 1905. The ornate staircase and verandas look like movie sets, but they are part of the amazing renovation completed by former Miami interior decorator Lynn Wilson, who was appalled at the mansion's deterioration after it sat vacant from 1911 to 1990. She and her husband restored the original house and opened one of Florida's most elegant bed and breakfast inns in 1992.

In addition to the historic homes and buildings, Apalachicola has several delightful galleries and shops. The Grady Street Market is reminiscent of an old-time mercantile store with its eclectic assortment of clothing, décor items, jewelry and more. You will not see any fast-food chains in the area, but you will find more than 30 locally-owned restaurants offering simple-to-exquisite menus. Oysters, however, are the cuisine kings.

Visiting Apalachicola without tasting the local oysters is much like going to Maine and not ordering lobster. When it comes to eating oysters, I am usually not much of a fan; however, Apalachicola is the one place where I will gulp the sweet, non-gritty delicacies with pleasure. Maybe it's the taste of history that makes me believe Apalachicola indeed serves the best oysters in the world.

Before you go:

Download the free Apalachicola Historic Walking Tour Map from the Chamber of Commerce at apalachicolabay.org. For more information, visit Franklin County's website at anaturalescape.com.

