



Wines down South



Finding Natural Florida

small towns with BIG DREAMS

By Doc Lawrence

WHITE SPRINGS, FL-Nestled alongside the storied Suwannee, one of America's most romantic rivers, this little village is much like it was during the riverboat days decades ago when celebrities like Theodore Roosevelt and wealthy tycoons came here for spa enjoyment centered around the mineral water springs. Residents proudly showcase Victorian homes, live oak trees decorated with Spanish moss and Cabbage Palms, plus a blaze of flowers year round. Living is easy here.

White Springs is laidback but not asleep. In fact, the town is committed to a determined upward journey with a goal of prosperity from new tourism. Led by Dr. Helen Miller, the town's visionary mayor, good things are happening.

Dr. Miller is hardly a typical small town Southern mayor. Along with her husband, Dr. Miller came to White Springs to live and restore their Victorian home. After becoming mayor, she recognized potential and decided to lead a Herculean effort that could forever transform the town. The University of Florida produced a development plan based White Springs' human and natural resources that is now a work in progress. "Sure, it's challenging," says Dr. Miller, "but it is a realistic project that we can and will do."

The ambitious plan includes a cannery and a winery and pays homage to the impressive natural wonders of the area.

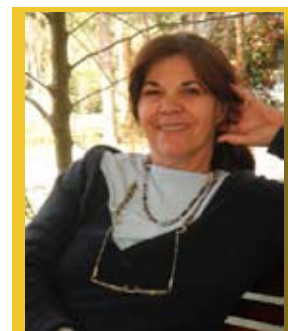


White Springs mayor Dr. Helen Miller and acclaimed celebrity chef Teddy Bear Marshall.

DOWN HOME TASTING

An afternoon of tea and delightful conversation with Judith McClure on the large wrap-around porch of her magnificent White Springs Bed 'n Breakfast remains a precious memory. A retired schoolteacher, artist and a published author, Ms. McClure's wonderfully comfortable 1905 home is listed on the National Registry of Historic Places. Her rates are reasonable and the conversation is free.

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Judith McClure offers hospitality and cerebral conversation at her heralded White Springs B & B.



The culinary heritage of North Central Florida is spiritually tied to the flow of the Suwannee River, a mighty stream that preserves and protects wildlife including the magnificent, ancient Florida Sturgeon



Late on this glorious afternoon beside the Suwannee, I walked over to a feast for the ages. Legendary cook Teddy Bear Marshall (*pictured top right*) manned his large grill, expertly barbecuing many items indigenous to White Springs and North Florida: deer ribs, grilled deer loin, wild boar Boston butt and grilled cabbage with nettles sausage were Teddy Bear's contributions to a dinner to remember.

The great cooks of White Springs set long tables with favorite homemade delicacies. A few of the many favorites included Mike Radel's sweet potato in an orange rind cup, Dorothy Brown's cheese biscuits and her tater bread, Mary Lou Bullard's strawberry cake and Zelda Hutcherson's key lime cake. The magnificent affair confirmed that wines of the world pair perfectly with traditional Southern cuisine, much like sweet tea and lemonade.

FESTIVALS AND RECREATION

Once a riverboat town, White Springs had 14 luxury hotels the late 1800s. Much of the original town still stands, including the 1865 Adams Brother General Merchandise Store, three churches, and scores of homes. The White Springs Historic District with 88 structures is listed in the National Register of Historic Places.

Surrounded by thousands of acres of public lands, White Springs offers multiple recreational activities. The Nature and Heritage Tourism Center provides information for heritage tours and recreation including river and trail activities from canoeing and kayaking to hiking. Here, the Suwannee River flows through areas of pristine river marshlands, bordered by low bluffs, wide sandy banks and ancient woodlands and is one of the last undisturbed areas of Florida where outdoors enthusiasts can visit and enjoy.

A large variety of fish from catfish to bass and trout inhabit the upper Suwannee River and local guides say that an angler's best bet is to grab a canoe and a rod, then let the current take you down the river.

In late May, the Stephen Foster Folk Culture Center hosts the Florida Folk Festival where traditional art forms of are kept alive during the celebration of songs, artists and folk crafts and other forms of traditional expression.

Upcoming events include the Suwannee River Quilt Show in October when quilters gather to display their magnificent collectible creations. In November, Rural Folklife Days showcases Florida's unique pioneer past with Cracker farm traditions that remain part of family and community life including quilting, cane grinding, syrup making, lye soap making, hand-made cow whips.

Florida's pristine interior has no parallel in the country. This is original America, a land where nature opens nicely to strangers who dream of a lifestyle where harmony and beauty reign. It's a land of forests, pure water, wildlife, cultural heritage and friendly smiles.

And the food is abundant, fresh and delicious. Everything combines in White Springs to mirror the goodness of the people and the wonders of nature.



Local grown vegetables make a colorful centerpiece in White Springs.



Top Right Photo to Bottom Right: Legendary cook Teddy Bear Marshall at his grill.

Suwannee River Rendezvous near Mayo, Florida is on the banks of the river. Canoes, lodging and food are tops and the escape from city pollution is guaranteed.

Alpacas adapt to Florida's climate and are profitable for their wool.

Florida is a major cattle and dairy producer. Here, the huge herd of Holsteins comes in from the pastures for one of two daily milkings.



A Florida breakfast before we head out for the day.

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OTHER DESTINATIONS

Trenton and Mayo are two small cities that represent original Florida (the best of Florida remains these lovely towns and their counterparts). Food comes from local farms, a premium is placed on freshness and the attention to genuine Southern hospitality is unwavering. Just before driving over to Gustafson Dairy Farm, there was time to have lunch at Mayo Café. The collard greens and fried chicken brought back memories of my mother, a peerless cook who never owned a recipe book.

The Suwannee River meanderings became a guide of sorts, leading me to Suwannee River Rendezvous and Grandma Susie's Cooking' Shack. This step back in time was loaded with fishing opportunities on the river. Jimmy Jacobs, the fishing columnist for the Atlanta-Journal Constitution caught a bass and told me that the Suwannee bass is a distinct variety and makes a mighty good meal when filleted and fried in a skillet.

The journey ended in Gainesville, a city where culinary traditions are being preserved, absorbed and blended, emerging as part of the new Florida cuisine. Satchel's Restaurant, a local pizza favorite has the Lightnin' Salvage Museum attached, an outdoor spectacle that reminded me of Reverend Howard Finster's Paradise Garden in North Georgia.

Great restaurants look for great fresh food. Ti Amo, a downtown Gainesville gourmet restaurant, served up braised oxtail, smoked duck and tuna loin and the vegetables and herbs came from the impressive Hammock Hollow Herb and Vegetable Farm near the city. Flavors are enhanced with these additions and it did not go unnoticed that wine, particularly the Rioja from Spain-selected from glorious wine list offering-blended well with the subtle flavors infused into each dish enjoyed.

Florida is unlike all other states. The history is different and interesting. The first wines of Europe came into America at St. Augustine and St. Marks. The Cracker culture, still obscure, is a crucial part of Florida's unique culinary heritage. Look for it and, like Majorie Kinnan Rawlings, you'll find it. Here in the upper part of the Sunshine State, the food gets better by the day and the enviably relaxed lifestyle proves that you don't need a beach to thrive in joys of this Southern paradise.

RESOURCES:

Gilchristclub.com

Tiamogainesville.com

Whitespringsbnb.com

Suwanneeriverrendezvous.com



Trenton's Depot and Queen Bees at Thomas Honey in Trenton.



Touring the vegetable rows at Hammock Hollow Herb and Vegetable Farm near Gainesville, Florida.

Students working at Gainesville's Eastside High School Culinary Arts Institute.