



Orlando

WHERE ON EARTH

A Different Side of ORLANDO

by DIANA BALLON

WHEN PEOPLE THINK OF ORLANDO, THEY TEND TO think crowds, Disney, gagging children, long lines and overcrowded theme parks where not-so-healthy food is consumed on the run. What they don't necessarily think of are the gastronomic offerings of this Central Florida city. But with 5,300 restaurants in Orlando, the city is fast emerging as a culinary destination. Here you can dine high-brow or low-key casual. With Orlando's burgeoning farm-to-table movement, its growth of independent restaurants and more and more locally and organically sourced ingredients, many celebrity chefs are emerging.

In fact, the Orlando area garnered more nominations among the 2014 James Beard Foundation Restaurant and Chef Award semifinalists than anywhere else in Florida. Nominees included Hari Palupaka of Cress Restaurant; James and Julie Petrakis of The Ravenous Pig and Cask & Larder; and Henry Salgado of Spanish River Grill and Txokos Basque Kitchen in Orlando's East End Market, where the event was held.

The East End Market is essentially a permanent farmers' market and cultural hub showcasing some of Central Florida's best chefs, food entrepreneurs, tradespeople and artists, with a strong focus on sustainability. As well as Txokos, the two-storey building showcases the wares of a dozen merchants — selling everything from cheese to fresh bread and local beers. They also offer weekly classes in cooking and gardening on its second floor, with a demonstration and an incubator kitchen for vendors to use.

Other great restaurants in the city include K Restaurant and Wine Bar, where chef/owner Kevin Fonzo uses local ingredients from his organic garden out back.

...Explore
the head-
waters of
the
Everglades...

Other celebrity chefs are also to be found in the finer hotels in the city. So cast aside your reservations about hotel dining.

On a recent family trip to Orlando and neighbouring Kissimmee, we made the Ritz-Carlton Orlando, Grande Lakes and neighbouring JW Marriot Orlando Grande Lakes our home for several days. Grande Lakes Orlando is an impressive property. Set on 500 acres, it overlooks a beautiful lake, an 18-hole golf course and hidden beyond a thick forest of cypress trees, Shingle Creek, where kayakers, paddleboarders and fishermen can explore the headwaters of the Everglades in their own private space.

On our first night, we ate at celebrity chef Norman Van Aken's elegant Norman's at the Ritz-Carlton. Van Aken is 'the founding father of New World cuisine' who seamlessly fuses Latin, Caribbean and Asian cuisine with a classically European technique. Van Aken is known internationally for introducing the concept of fusion, which he describes as "taking a classical concept and welding it to cuisines more noted for their regional character." He's been nominated as a finalist for the James Beard Foundation's Best Restaurant in America, and has been described as 'the Walt Whitman of American cuisine.'

The restaurant is brightly lit in an octagonal room with a high ceiling and tall majestic windows overlooking the lake, white table cloths and solicitous waiters. For dinner, we start off with sweet and tangy fried green tomatoes cooked in a tempura batter, with a spicy escabeche mayo and *queso fresco*. We also have a delicious Key West shrimp ceviche offered up with a touch of tequila and avocado purée. We then move on to our first plates, following our server's recommendations to have the yuca-stuffed crispy shrimp and a house specialty, 'My Down Island French Toast,' — foie gras served with brioche French toast and savoury passionfruit caramel. Certainly, it's the most innovative dish on the menu, but very sweet. For mains, we share yellowtail snapper, pan seared with garlic mashed potatoes and truffle oil, which has been on the menu since Norman's opened 10 years ago. We also have Pork 'Havana,' Van Aken's take on a traditional roasted pork leg in sour orange marinade, but using pork tenderloin and serving it with other regional treats, such as stone-ground Haitian grits and a classic *mole poblano*. For dessert, the richness of the 'Havana' Banana Split with rum-sautéed bananas is perfectly offset with key lime cheesecake.

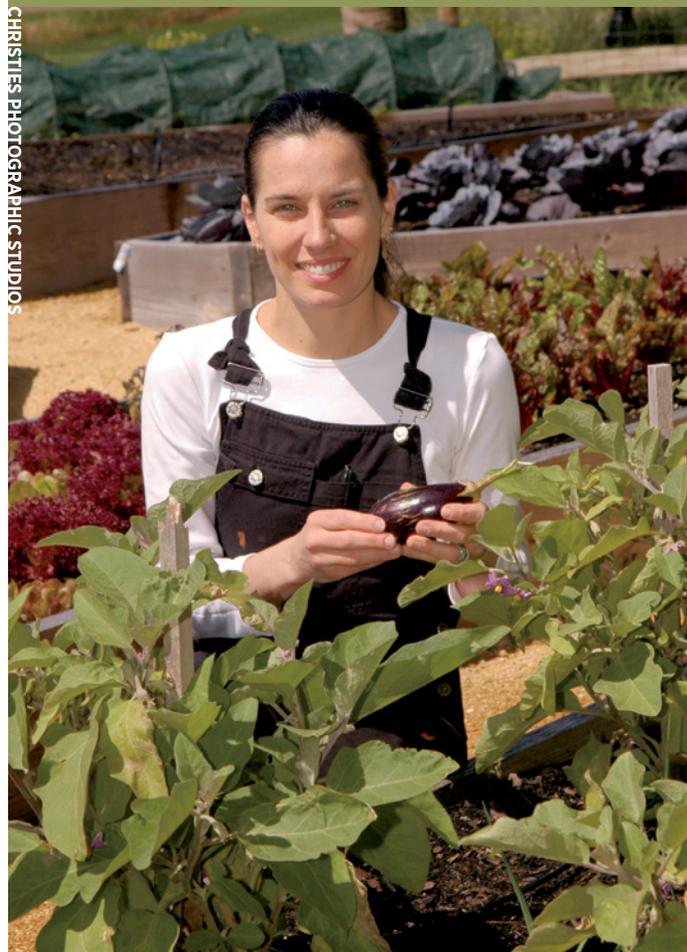
At nine the next morning, and on his day off, the charming executive chef at JW Marriott Orlando, Chris Brown, picks us up from the Ritz lobby and takes us in the hotel's Cadillac Escalade to a 7,000-square-foot fruit and vegetable garden. This is actually an Audubon sanctuary, and the site of Whisper Creek Farm and an event space used by the resort.

It's a peaceful clearing just off the golf course, with a wooden fence to prevent animals from eating the produce. "We sometimes see deer — there's a bunny right there," he says pointing, both for my benefit and my kids', who are also playing journalist for the day, with pen, notebook and camera in hand. »



AMY MIKIER

THIS SPREAD CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT Bird in the Everglades; Argentinian grill at Whisper Creek Farm; Chef Melissa Kelly from Primo restaurant.



CHRISTIE PHOTOGRAPHIC STUDIOS

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SERVES 4

CARIBBEAN SHRIMP with MANGO SALSA

PRIVATE CHEF LINDA PAGE shares her recipe for a zingy tropical appetizer.

Medium Shrimp

1 lb, heads and shells removed, tails intact

MARINADE

Cinnamon 1 tsp

Red Onion ½

Jalapeno ½

Vegetable Oil ¼ cup

Black Pepper 1 tsp

Green Onions 4

Sea Salt 1 tsp

Garlic 2 cloves

Soy Sauce 2 Tbs

1 **COMBINE** the marinade ingredients in a food processor and purée into a thick paste. Coat the shrimp with the marinade and let sit for at least 30 minutes and up to 8 hours.

2 **PLACE** 3 shrimp on a skewer and grill 2–4 minutes until cooked through. Serve warm with salsa.

MANGO SALSA

Ripe Mangoes 2

Cilantro 4 Tbs

Sugar 1 Tbs

Jalapeno ½

Zest and Juice of 1 lime

Red Onion ½

1 **CHOP** the mangoes, jalapeno and onion. Combine in a bowl and add the cilantro, lime zest, juice and sugar. Refrigerate until ready to serve.

Whether **DIANA BALLON** is travelling through the back roads of Guatemala, in the Mexican heartland that is Oaxaca or to nearby Montreal, food is central to her experience of place. While she enjoys five-star dining, she also relishes a quest for the best taco truck. **T&T**



AMY MIKLER

ABOVE Chef's table at Whisper Creek Farm.
BELOW Primo restaurant.



MARK WIELAND

«The idea for an on-site farm first was conceived a few years ago. “Back in 2011, we participated in a farm-to-fork event several miles away,” he explains. “We wanted to be able to offer this experience to our guests on a regular basis, but we needed something closer, since there are no farms within a half hour of the property.”

Guests can go on a tour of the farm every Saturday, and — come this spring — Whisper Creek Kitchen will open off the JW Marriott’s main lobby, using many of the farm’s products, and craft beer brewed on-site by Brown, who is a Certified Cicerone. Another restaurant, Highball & Harvest, opened last fall at the Ritz-Carlton Orlando, offering crafted cocktails and southern-inspired cuisine with ingredients from the farm. The produce — everything from 18 varieties of citrus to squash, plantains, zucchini flowers and Surinam cherries — is already used in the resort’s restaurants. Argentinian grills and four smokers are used on the farm to cook pork, chicken and other meat for family-style dining at a chef’s table that sits under the shelter of an oak tree, as well as ‘Feast of the Fire’ events for up to 400 people.

A small bat box on top of an 18-foot wooden pole next to the garden can accommodate 600 bats, with each bat able to eat 4,000 bugs in an hour, so it’s a good protection for the harvest — not to mention the guests. There are also beehives a way’s away from the site, in what looks like a stack of white drawers. The honey used in a variety of ways, including spa treatments and for a honey citrus pale ale, one of two regular house beers, the second featuring pumpkin in the fall.

That night we try Primo, the two time James Beard Award-winning chef Melissa Kelly’s contemporary Italian restaurant that Brown oversees. Although Kelly also has two other restaurants, one in an old farmhouse in Rockland, Maine and the other in Tucson, Arizona — all three named Primo after her grandfather, this is the first I have visited. We are hardly disappointed. The meal is sublime. Kelly’s Farmer Salad is the best salad I’ve ever eaten, the bread for its crispy croutons made from a 22-year-old sourdough starter, with house-cured bacon lardons and a poached egg on top. Her brisket is charred to a sugary sweetness. The ricotta cavatelli (lovingly hand-rolled that afternoon) with rabbit and Brussels sprouts is mouthwateringly delicious. A main of scallops in a sweet garlic crema glaze on a bed of corn is perfectly cooked. The sautéed scallopine of pork saltimbocca — although a signature dish and still delicious — did not have the complexity of Kelly’s other dishes.

For dessert, we sample house-made cannoli with amarena cherries and *zeppole* — warm, freshly cooked doughnuts — along with a selection of gelatos — espresso, salted sesame, avocado to name just a few flavours. It was a meal that we can’t easily forget. 

FOR A VERY DIFFERENT GASTRONOMIC experience, we spent a few days in nearby Kissimmee, where we stayed in one of the more than 9,000 vacation rental homes in the area. At our Global Resort home, we had not only the convenience of being near Disney and other amusement parks, we stayed in our own five-bedroom house, with its own pool, games room, five bathrooms and seven flatscreen TVs! As part of a resort, we also had access to the large resort pool and facilities at the clubhouse. Our dinner and breakfast were cooked by personal chef Linda Page. For 20 years, Page has been cooking up a storm in people’s homes — for family reunions, large groups, and people who just want to come home to a full fridge and supper on the table. She made our family a delicious Caribbean shrimp with mango salsa, beef tenderloin with twice-baked potatoes and asparagus, a citrus salad with baby greens and zabaglione for dessert. After cleaning up, and before leaving, she put baked French toast with bacon in the fridge with instructions for heating up the next morning. Perfect! 



Cress Restaurant
www.cressrestaurant.com

The Ravenous Pig
www.theravenouspig.com

Cask & Larder
www.caskandlarder.com

Spanish River Grill
www.thespanishrivergrill.com

Txokos Basque Kitchen
www.txokoskitchen.com

Ritz-Carlton Orlando, Grande Lakes
www.ritzcarlton.com/en/Properties/Orlando

JW Marriot Orlando Grande Lakes
www.jw-marriott.grandelakes.com

Global Resort Homes
www.globalresorthomes.com

Chef Linda Page
www.orlandovacationchef.com