

SPECIAL
REPORT:

THE DOWNTOWN DIVIDE

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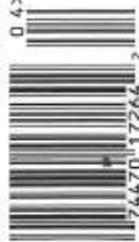


BOCA'S BEST FRIENDS

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A Foodie Weekend in Naples

Exit the East Coast fast lane and plan a delicious getaway to the West Coast.

Written by PAMELA FISHER



Top, The French exterior, mussels and fries from The French, short rib tortellini from Osteria Tulia; bottom right, octopus in crustacean sauce from Sea Salt



As off-season begins, foodie travelers can finally score a table at the best restaurants in this Florida town with a gentle Gulf Coast vibe. Hot new dining spots are plentiful in a place with the second-highest concentration of millionaires per capita in the U.S.—some 300 restaurants have opened in Naples in the last five years. Here's our take on a brand-new French restaurant and great Mediterranean and Sicilian spots to round out your weekend, plus a new downtown waterfront hotel and our favorite beach thrown in for good measure.

The French is a classic country French brasserie and latest venture by hipster chef Vincent Betulia, who opened the ever-crowded Osteria Tulia in 2012. Blink and you're on the boho Left Bank: bistro chairs and red banquettes flank marble-topped iron pedestal tables as 1920s vintage jazz plays. A rich, buttery onion soup served in a Gruyere-blanketed crock proved hearty and thick. My Scottish salmon resting on a bed of Swiss chard was dripping in Champagne beurre blanc, punctuated by the sweet tang of pink grapefruit. Steak frites boasted a nice char and crisply slender frites. Don't think of missing the 13-inch éclair, with a moist, nicely browned choux, creamy custard and dusted with pecans. 239/315-4019, thefrenchnaples.com

A taste of Betulia's Sicilian childhood can be found a few doors down at Osteria Tulia. Pan-fried baby artichokes in a lemony aioli were the prelude to exquisitely chewy tortellini drizzled in a Marsala reduction, which lent sweetness to their salty short rib stuffing. 239/213-2073, osteriatulia.com

Sea Salt features a granite waterscape, lush with potted succulents. Tropical foliage frames a patio and is a sweet spot for dining under the stars. A wall of nearly 130 salts—Hawaiian, smoky El Dorado, fleur de sel, black truffle salt—line the exhibition kitchen where Venetian chef Fabrizio Aielli seasons the Mediterranean-focused dishes. Try the lobster and burrata appetizer and a hefty, two-inch cut of swordfish putanesca for an entrée. The crunch of a caramel crème brûlée provided a perfect, custardy finish. 239/434-7258, sealsaltnaples.com

WHERE TO STAY

Try the new Hyatt House on Fifth Avenue. Sleek, angular rooms range from studios with kitchenettes to one and two bedroom apartments with kitchens—plus kayaks are parked outside your front door on the bayside. From \$109 off-season. Visit naples.house.hyatt.com

BEACH DAY

A good beach is hard to pass up. My favorite is Clam Pass. Shaded parking is plentiful (\$8 day), and a boardwalk tram ride through a strangler fig grove delivers you to powdery sand ringed by sea grape groves and the gently lapping gulf. Bonus: Rhode's End, a great Greek restaurant. Double bonus: I saw my first gator sunbathing in a pond.

