

# What's Cooking.?

**These hands-on Gulf Coast destinations set the table for foodies and cooks.**

BY BARBARA & JIM TWARDOWSKI



Whether you are masterful in the kitchen or can only use the microwave, cooking classes are a delightful way to experience the local cuisine when traveling along the Gulf Coast. And there's no better place to begin this coastal culinary tour than in New Orleans, La.

At the New Orleans School of Cooking in the historical French Quarter, instructor Michael DeVidts patiently stirs a roux, the foundation of a gumbo. Explaining to his audience that a darker color can be achieved by pouring all the flour in at once, he cautions them to never, ever cease stirring or the roux will be ruined.

The audience laughs as DeVidts weaves history lessons with



**Above: Chef Michael DeVidts is among the instructors at the New Orleans School of Cooking.** New Orleans School of Cooking

**Right: Visitors learn how to cook, along with a helping of culinary history, at the Rouses Culinary Innovation Center by Jenn-Air at the Southern Food and Beverage Museum in New Orleans.** Southern Food and Beverage Museum





cooking tips. While mixing the ingredients for bread pudding, a dessert that is a staple on Louisiana menus, DeVids says frugal cooks who wanted to use stale French bread created the dish. To his interested onlookers, he suggests using whatever they have on hand, from wheat bread to croissants. Partial to bread puddings made with fruit, DeVids pours pineapple into the mixing bowl and a few fistfuls of coconut. The class is eager to taste his piña colada bread pudding topped with rum sauce.

During the 2 ½-hour demonstration class, DeVids cooks gumbo, jambalaya, bread pudding, and pralines. Guests sample each dish and ask dozens of questions of the experienced chef. What makes the earthy flavor of the jambalaya? The answer is pecan oil, which can be purchased at the front of the school in the Louisiana General Store. As they munch on warm pralines, the audience leaves with recipes to re-create at home, as well as a better understanding of Louisiana's rich culinary history.



**Above: At So Gourmet & Kitchenry in Pensacola, Fla., visitors can learn how to make seafood, pasta, and more.** Jim Twardowski



**Right: Chef Bill Thompson instructs classes at the Amelia Island Culinary Academy after leading them through the local market to pick out fresh ingredients.** Jenny Alvarado Photography

Here are six additional places along the Gulf that can help sharpen your culinary skills and indulge your palette.

### POINT CLEAR, ALA.

On the eastern shore of Mobile Bay and adjacent to Fairhope, Ala., the Grand Hotel Marriott Resort, Golf Club & Spa (AAA Three Diamonds) is a gracious retreat boasting luxury amenities. On the third weekend of each month, the hotel offers an informal cocktail lesson on Friday night and a cooking class on Saturday morning. Students 21 and older expand their mixology skills by observing and sipping the alchemic preparations of classic cocktails. The one-hour “spirited” session might introduce attendees to tequila or share tips on creating the perfect party punch.

The demonstration cooking classes taught by the resort's chef are designed to enhance basic culinary skills. The two hours of instruction have covered decadent desserts, homemade pasta, and tapas. Participants receive samples, recipes, and a diploma from the Beverage & Culinary Academy. You do not need to be a resort guest to attend the lessons, but registration is required.

### NEW ORLEANS, LA.

Twice a week, the Southern Food and Beverage Museum (also known as SoFAB) gives visitors a taste of Louisiana with two-hour cooking demonstrations in the Rouses Culinary Innovation Center by Jenn-Air. On Mondays, a traditional New Orleans meal featuring jambalaya, French bread, tomato salad with Creole remoulade, and Bananas Foster is prepared. On Thursdays, a Creole-Italian menu includes olive salad, Creole red gravy with sweet Italian sausage, and pasta, garlic bread, and made-to-order sno-balls.

As instructors cook the authentic meals, they give the audience tips on simplifying the process, along with a heaping serving of culinary history and a tour of the nonprofit museum that focuses on foods in Southern states.







**Above:** Guests get to sample each dish during the 2 ½-hour demonstration classes at the New Orleans School of Cooking. New Orleans School of Cooking

## FOODIES IN FLORIDA

Located on a corner in Pensacola's charming revitalized downtown is So Gourmet & Kitchenry, a treasure trove for foodies. There's a coffee shop, the Bodacious Brew; an olive oil and vinegar shop, the Bodacious Olive; and a salad bar and bistro, So Chopped. The second floor is home to a wine shop, cheese counter, and kitchen store that's stocked with cookware, linens, bakeware, glasses, dinnerware, and an abundance of cooking tools.

In the bright and modern Culinary Instruction Kitchen, 90-minute cooking demonstrations showcase local seafood or show how to make fresh pasta. Order a glass of wine and allow plenty of time to shop after class.

For many years, the **Kitchenique Cooking School** in Miramar Beach, Fla., spread the joy of food through classes and a retail shop. In January, its location was destroyed by fire. Owner Vicki McCain said a new facility would be opening soon in Miramar Beach, but a date was not available at press time. Visit [kitchenique.com](http://kitchenique.com) or call (850) 837-0432 for updates.

Liza's Kitchen Café, a gourmet sandwich shop in Panama City, is across the street from the snow-white sandy beach. Owned by Cat and Mike Meek, the professionally trained team makes everything from scratch and is best known for oregano focaccia bread. Participants indulge in a



**Left and below:** The Epicurean Theatre in the Epicurean Hotel in Tampa, Fla., offers classes on international cuisine, as well as on cocktails, wine, champagne, and dessert. Epicurean Hotel



four-course meal prepared by Mike Meek; for an added fee, they can sip perfectly paired wines selected by sommelier Cat Meek.

On Amelia Island, some 30 vendors gather on Saturdays beside Spanish moss-draped cedars and oaks at the Fernandina's Farmers Market. Chef Bill Thompson leads a class through the open-air market on North Seventh Street to select the finest ingredients that will be prepared at the Amelia Island Culinary Academy, which is several blocks away. Variety is his mantra, so the menu is never the same. He might take grilled eggplant, splash it with olive oil, and create a Moroccan dish, or macerate berries with free-range chicken eggs and locally made rum to make a dessert. Whatever is cooked, his students leave with a greater appreciation for locally sourced foods.

Set in Tampa's trendy Hyde Park neighborhood, the Epicurean Hotel (AAA Four Diamonds) hosts a variety of culinary presentations and cooking demos in its finely equipped Epicurean Theatre. The audience watches the experts on two large televisions. Classes on wine, champagne, cocktails, dessert, and international dinners are among the offerings. ●

*Barbara and Jim Twardowski are contributors from Mandeville, La.*

## BEFORE YOU GO

For more information, contact:

- New Orleans School of Cooking, (800) 237-4841, [NOSOC.com](http://NOSOC.com) (Ask about the AAA discount.)
- Marriott's Grand Hotel Resort & Spa, (251) 928-9201, [marriottgrand.com](http://marriottgrand.com)
- Southern Food and Beverage Museum, (504) 267-7490, [natfab.org/southern-food-and-beverage](http://natfab.org/southern-food-and-beverage)
- So Gourmet & Kitchenry, (850) 438-7857, [sogourmetpensacola.com](http://sogourmetpensacola.com)
- Liza's Kitchen Café & Catering, (850) 233-9000, [love.lizas.com](http://love.lizas.com)
- Amelia Island Culinary Academy, (904) 515-6863, [www.ameliacooking.com](http://www.ameliacooking.com)

- Epicurean Hotel, (813) 999-8700, [EpicureanHotel.com](http://EpicureanHotel.com)

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## Correction

In another article about food tours that ran in the March/April issue of the AAA *Southern Traveler*, we misidentified the island of Hawaii as the only place in the United States that arabica coffee beans are grown. We regret the error.