



SELLING MORE THAN SCENES

Culinary and medical tourism
opportunities to entice tourists

BY LORI JOHNSTON



Providing a stunning setting for folks to escape the cold is the bread and butter of the region's tourism industry. Now the region is warming up to the idea of promoting Southwest Florida in different ways to draw even more visitors.

Tourism officials are working up plans to devote more money and promotional efforts to growing culinary and medical tourism, which are sectors that supporters say are ripe with opportunity.

Just as people travel to New York City or Napa Valley for world-class meals and chef experiences, the region is seeking to tempt vacationers with our fresh seafood, citrus and restaurant gems. Our excellent medical facilities provide an opportunity for baby boomers and senior adults to receive quality joint replacements, plastic surgery and other procedures, and then recuperate within steps from our beautiful beaches.

"We're always looking for new ways and new reasons to consider our area, so it's important to be looking at fresh approaches," says Jack Wert, executive director of the Naples, Marco Island, Everglades Convention & Visitors Bureau.

Reaching out to new groups of tourists also can serve a greater purpose—diversifying the region's economy. Visitors may decide to stay for a while, spending more money on food, attractions and shopping, and even longer, by purchasing a vacation or retirement home here.



HANDS-ON EXPERIENCE:

Citrus' chef will make table visits to discuss the menu.

STEPHEN BARRIS/SAZ

HUNGRY FOR MORE

On a sweltering Sunday along Naples' Fifth Avenue South, local restaurants are opening their doors to dish out their own taste of paradise. Outside Citrus, which debuted in 2010 on this street, dubbed Florida's version of "Rodeo Drive" by some visitors, a menu posted near outdoor tables lists an array of fish, from grouper to red snapper to cobia to hogfish.

It's the middle of the summer, and there's no weekend lunch rush, causing Citrus' manager to greet potential diners scanning the outdoor menu and answer questions about the eatery. The appeal of fresh fish—even for a Southwest Florida standard like fish tacos—and the desire to escape the heat makes Citrus the noon-time choice.

Once inside, the chef arrives at the table, offering to create an off-the-menu fish appetizer, and describing his favorite dishes and the differences in options and preparations on the menu. It's a hands-on culinary experience, in a casual setting, and the special chef treatment that can be found at renowned eateries such as an Emeril's, which is far from our shores.

"Everybody is a foodie today," says Citrus co-owner Paula Powell. "The more quality that we can put out, the more we are going to get the discerning guests."

Restaurateurs, chefs and tourism officials are hoping to use Southwest Florida's natural resources—fresh fish and creative chefs—to plump up the region's tourism industry while filling visitors' bellies. From bringing people to Florida for food experiences to greater

"DINING SEEMS TO BE MORE AND MORE REASON FOR PEOPLE TO EVEN COME HERE BECAUSE OF SO MANY UNIQUE [RESTAURANTS]."

emphasis on promoting dining options—casual to upscale—some see culinary tourism as a way to entice visitors or extend stays.

"When I go on a vacation, I have to go to New York City to eat. When I go to Napa, same thing. When I go to Chicago, same thing," says Brian Roland, executive chef at M Waterfront Grille. "The big cities are known to be a culinary mecca, people are drawn to food and wine. I don't think Naples is there, but there definitely is potential."

Chefs and restaurateurs recognize that a good meal can generate buzz for the region. They see visitors taking photos of food and restaurants, and even before the check arrives, they're sharing those shots on Facebook, tweeting about them and posting reviews on TripAdvisor and other websites.

"When they share their pictures, you are part of their experience," Powell says. "It creates conversation."

FEEDING THE FOODIES

Stomachs seem to rumble more during vacation. Idle hours spent on the water, at spas, on the golf course, shopping and just pure relaxing, often lead to thoughts about the next meal. The region's mouth-watering options can help sell the region as a vacation destination, says Tamara Pigott, executive director of the Lee County Visitor & Convention Bureau.

"When you talk about your travel, food is such an integral part of the vacation experience. They talk about the best meal they've ever had and what was so special about it," she says. "In terms of our area, that's something we can really deliver because we have all this fresh seafood."

Visitors don't tend to stay in, at the hotel, or cook at the condo when they're here, either. Dining is, depending on the month of the year, either the No. 1 or No. 2 activity for travelers, Wert says.

"Dining seems to be more and more a reason for people to even come here because of so many one-of-a-kind restaurants," Wert says.

Fifth Avenue South is one of the dining districts the visitors bureau promotes online and in its guide, joining Third Street South, Crayton Cove and Mercato. In those and other areas, restaurateurs clamor to be among those recommended by hotel concierges.

When the region hosts travel writers, we are "exposing them to our culinary assets," Pigott says. "We think we have some innovative chefs and some things we can share. It may be a way to attract people to our community or to stay a little bit longer," she says. Meanwhile, the Naples CVB is planning a New York City media event for this fall, and Roland is overseeing the food, which will represent the character and flavors of this coast.

On a daily basis, a major challenge for chefs and restaurant owners, Roland admits, is providing inventive dishes for foodies while appealing to the taste of meat-and-potatoes Midwesterners or flip-flops-wearing vacationers content with the ubiquitous crab cakes and mango salsa.

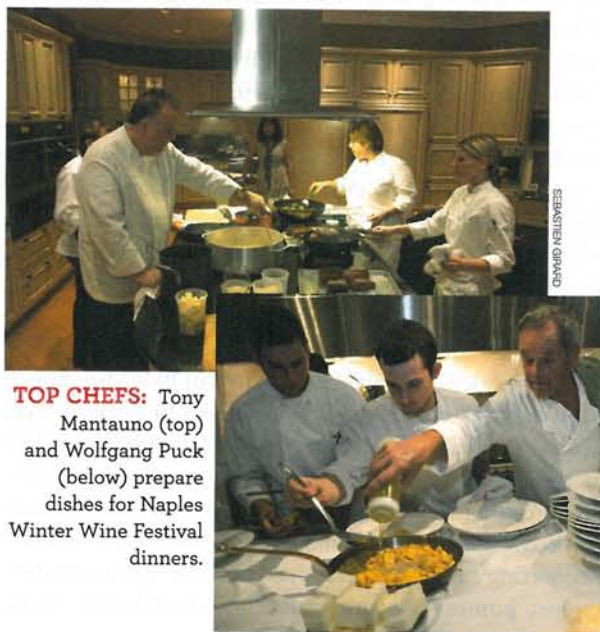
Hosting signature events can nurture and grow the region's culinary appeal, making it a significant destination, Wert says. Naples Originals, comprising 35 local, independent restaurants, has organized events

such as a cocktail contest featuring celebrity mixologist David Ortiz and restaurant weeks, and it also created a dining guide for hotels. Events such as a restaurant week are opportunities the Lee County VCB is considering during the off-season.

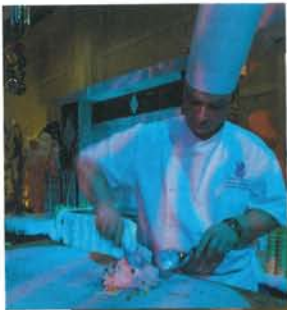
The region's most high-profile event—the **Naples Winter Wine Festival**—has a strong culinary connection, but not for an emphasis on local restaurants and chefs. The gala—the nation's most successful charity wine auction (according to *Wine Spectator*) and a top arts and entertainment event for wealthy Americans—brings in famed chefs for vintner dinners in private homes. Wolfgang Puck, Spiaggia's Tony Mantauno and Michy's Michelle Bernstein were among the 2012 lineup, joining others who brought their culinary talents here in past years.

Bringing in celebrity chefs to create memorable meals at exclusive events can spread the word about their culinary experiences here. Roland remembers a chance meeting in Los Angeles (he was visiting a friend who handles the catering for *American Idol*) with acclaimed chef Thomas Keller, who has restaurants in Napa Valley, New York, Las Vegas and Beverly Hills.

"When I told him where I'm from, he said, 'I did the Naples Winter Wine Festival.' He recognized the



TOP CHEFS: Tony Mantauno (top) and Wolfgang Puck (below) prepare dishes for Naples Winter Wine Festival dinners.



SWEET SUCCESS:
The Ritz-Carlton Naples attracts big crowds at its Willy Wonka Chocolate Factory event.



COURTESY OF THE RITZ-CARLTON

“WHEN YOU TALK ABOUT YOUR TRAVEL, FOOD IS SUCH AN INTEGRAL PART OF THE VACATION EXPERIENCE.”

area and remembered it, and hopefully speaks highly of it,” Roland says. “If someone says, ‘Hey, I’m going to go down to Florida. Thomas, where should I go?’ Hopefully his answer is go to Naples.”

Attracting a celebrated chef to invest in a restaurant in Naples could go far in creating a successful culinary tourism effort, Roland says. The challenge is the seasonal slowdown, which can be daunting to any restaurateur, even a celebrity chef. “What I’d like to see is a couple of big-name chefs come, to not only bring a following with them and make it more of a destination spot, but to show them that we have the capability of producing this type of a restaurant,” he says.

Another aspect of culinary tourism connects with the region’s high-end hotels, which employ chefs and offer on-property food experiences for visitors and groups. The Ritz-Carlton Resorts of Naples see an increase in room bookings around culinary events, such as holiday brunches, children’s teas and Willy Wonka Chocolate Factory, says Erwin Pals, director of food and beverage. The first Chocolate Factory event, hosted at the beach resort in 2007, had about 150 attendees. High demand caused the event, with its recreation of the chocolate waterfalls and other scenes from the movie, as well as gingerbread-man cookie decorating and a “dirt pie” station with crushed Oreos, gummy worms and other ingredients, to be

moved to the resort’s 14,000-square-foot event pavilion, with 900 attendees in 2012.

Roland recognizes that special culinary events can lure visitors to Southwest Florida. A few minutes after posting on Facebook details about his June one-night dinner featuring local chefs and a modern farm-to-table theme, he got a phone call from the general manager of a restaurant in Key Largo. She had been planning a trip to Orlando for that week, but decided to postpone her arrival a couple of days so she could visit Naples and attend the special dinner.



OREG BERTZA

A PRESCRIPTION FOR GROWTH

Medical tourism, with folks coming to the region for elective surgeries and healthcare education, may seem the opposite of traditional tourism. Allen Weiss, chief executive officer and president of NCH Health System explains: Normally people go on vacation and they hit the beach or go to a theme park. But with the aging of America, more people are concerned about their health.

For their elective surgeries—from joint replacements and orthopedics to heart surgery—Weiss wants Southwest Florida to be a destination offering excellent medical care and the opportunity to convalesce in paradise. This summer, NCH was finalizing plans to partner with a “luminary organization with worldwide health care expertise,” which will broaden the attractiveness of Southwest Florida in healthcare decisions, Weiss says. (He declined in June to provide specifics.)

“What we’re good at right now is healthcare. We’ve got to make other people know how good we are

in healthcare,” he says, “how nice it is to recover in January in Naples, Florida, versus a northern state.”

NCH already attracts one out of eight of its patients for elective procedures from outside the five-county region, hailing from areas such as Miami-Dade, states along the East Coast and from the Midwest, such as Michigan and Minnesota (NCH does not advertise in any of those areas).

Medical tourism—touted as a \$40 billion industry worldwide—is a niche the Naples CVB is exploring, Wert says. A committee of hospital officials, medical specialists, hoteliers and others are looking at this sector. “Medical tourism is a natural fit for our area. We have a good deal of it going without a lot of promotion,” Wert says.

Getting the region’s name out as an option for orthopedic, heart, plastic surgery and other procedures can attract wealthy patients who may be considering other countries where hospitals look like Ritz-Carltons and prices are lower, says Dr. Hermes Koop, a member of the NCH Board of Trustees.

As Medicare and Medicaid reimbursements decline, hospitals and physicians are seeking ways to grow revenue. Koop, an internal-medicine physician, says the offseason could be boosted by medical tourism. “If we can increase some of that capacity during the summertime, that would also benefit everybody, not only the hospital but hotels,” he says.

A graduate medical education program at NCH also could boost the area’s appeal, Koop says. Tourism for



**“WE’VE GOT TO
MAKE OTHER
PEOPLE KNOW...
HOW NICE IT IS TO
RECOVER IN JANUARY
IN NAPLES VERSUS A
NORTHERN STATE.”**



A JOINT EFFORT:

Surgical-device developer Arthrex does its part to influence medical tourism.

medical education or medical treatment is not season dependent and can attract affluent visitors year round to further stimulate our economy, says Reinhold Schmieding, founder and CEO of Arthrex, the Naples-based developer of surgical devices. The efforts can lead to reduced dependency on traditional vacation tourism, agriculture and real estate that can be significantly impacted by economic recessions, he adds.

Arthrex invested \$1 million in 2011 to renovate and expand its medical education facility at the corporate headquarters in Naples. Arthrex medical education programs will bring a projected 10,000 surgeons, physician assistants, distributors, employees, faculty and other medical visitors to Naples and contribute and estimated \$10 million in tourism spending to the local economy in 2012, Arthrex officials say.

The Lee County VCB has asked Lee Memorial Health System to help it identify areas and procedures that may attract patients. Kevin Newingham, vice president of strategic services for Lee Memorial Health System, says medical tourism is on its radar, and many other health systems too, because it is a rapidly growing niche of tourism. He expects the focus will likely be on patients from North and South America and Europe who are seeking highly specialized services in neurosurgery, or cardiology, and possibly other specialties, too.

But to be successful, Schmieding says medical-device companies and healthcare providers, supported by state and local government, must formulate and market innovative programs to attract healthcare providers and medical societies from around the world. Another factor is the value of the dollar, which plays a significant role in the global competition among medical education and medical treatment destinations.

The Arthrex facility is a great opportunity for Southwest Florida Pigott says. “They’re going to put heads in beds, there’s no question,” she says. “The great thing about hosting those people in your community ... they go, ‘That’s a great place to vacation. I want to come back.’”