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Flavors & more MAGAZINE

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GOURMET HIGHWAY: Natural Florida Clams and Adventure

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By Doc Lawrence -



A "Cracker wine" tasting in Cedar Key featuring wines from Florida's Dakotah Winery

(Cedar Key, FL.) Where to go for that bowl of award-winning clam chowder? Why, Cedar Key, of course. A surprise to many, and I count myself as one of the heretofore uniformed. Cedar Key, one of Florida's nearly perfectly preserved villages, is not only a place where you can regain your sanity after a year of brutal big city living, but enjoy local clams in just the same way they do in New England.

My journey to Cedar Key began at the uppermost reach of the Big Bend on Florida's Gulf Coast. Sporting rivers with fairyland names like Wakulla, Steinhatchee and Suwannee, this is Florida's Cracker nation where nature reigns along with folk

traditions. Cross Creek's Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings wrote about the indigenous culture that harkens back to ancient Spain. My culinary evolution started began here before I was old enough to vote: raw oysters, smoked mullet, fried grouper sandwiches and stone crabs.

Visiting the magnificent region combined fishing with food. Posey's Seafood, just south of Tallahassee in Crawfordville featured a lunch for the ages with fried Gulf mullet, mullet roe and raw oysters, a warm-up for dinner at Clay Lovel's Spring Creek restaurant where fresh fruits from the Gulf like mullet, crab, flounder and oysters, are piled on the dinner table. Between meals, we did some Mullet seining and worked the oyster beds at Panacea.

The next stop was Dean Fowler's renowned Steinhatchee Landing Resort that included seafood at Roy's restaurant followed by trout fishing expertly guided by Captain Charlie Norwood. Fiddler's, Chef Jim Hunt's acclaimed restaurant served a spectacular dinner, a cornucopia of local fish paired with



Cedar Key landmark Island Hotel pre-dates the Civil War and among its famous ghosts is a young Confederate soldier often appearing on the second floor

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exquisite wines, topped off by a virtuoso washtub bass performance by the ebullient chef. A good night's sleep at Steinhatchee Landing was rewarded with breakfast at Rachel's, a romantic Florida Cracker-style house that served hot biscuits with gravy and memorable conversation.



Drying out where the Suwannee pours into the Gulf

We traveled down to the community of Suwannee where the storied river empties into the Gulf. Salt Creek Restaurant became culinary headquarters. Lunch included a fried soft shell crab sandwich and oyster stew. The piece de resistance at dinner was baked grouper. An unforgettable wildlife cruise headed by Russ McCallister of Suwannee Guides included a visit to Dan May Island and photographing eagles, ospreys and even a few wild pigs.

Cedar Key, the heart and soul of what I call original Florida, is known for clams, artists, writers and expatriates. Novelist John D. MacDonald wrote about Cedar Key detective

Travis McGee, America's version of James Bond, who, on the author's pages, lived on a weathered boat named the "Busted Flush." The Cedar Key landmark Island Inn's courtyard featured a "Cracker Wine Tasting," hosted by Levy County's legendary tourism promoter, Carol McQueen. Florida wines from the Sunshine State's Dakotah Winery paired perfectly with Clams Athena and Hearts of Palm Salad.

Andy and Stanley Bair's acclaimed Island Hotel predates the Civil War. The hotel's, historic Neptune Bar is where a guest might share a drink with a stranger or a celebrity like Jimmy Buffett. A mid-day dine around included award –winning Clam Chowder at Tony's Seafood Restaurant and clams with pasta at The Island Room at Cedar Cove. Fully energized, I viewed clam harvesting in the Gulf and attended a "class" in Florida's clam aquaculture industry.

A Cedar Key sunset is nature's symphony, a harmonious blending of air, water and a blood-orange sinking sun. Rusty Rim Pub provided a view plus platters plus raw oysters, stuffed clams and myriad cocktails. This was a prelude to a leisurely paced gourmet dinner at the Blue Desert Café, with menu items like Ravioli Florentine with pesto accompanied by impressive wines.

This is the precious part of Florida where gentle people go to fish, hike, meditate, eat and drink. Peace and tranquility honor omnipresent natural beauty. The water, land, air and resilient people form an indispensable critical mass, the Sunshine State's cultural bedrock. Here, the Gulf of Mexico remains unspoiled, still producing the finest and healthiest seafood on our planet.

A visit promises spiritual renewal. Anywhere between St. Marks and Cedar Key, you can lose those cold weather blues.

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Stanley Bair talks about the legendary artists and writers frequenting her King Neptune Lounge in Cedar Key's landmark Island Hotel

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CedarKey Cindy

January 18, 2011 at 9:37 am

Cedar Key has a number of great restaurants that serve excellent fresh, local clams and seafood. Don't miss the Island Room's offerings. Chef Peter Stefani's artistry in the kitchen includes Clams Vongoli, a delicate dish with pasta and local Cedar Key Clams.

Visit Cedar Key!



Cedric Bedocs

January 24, 2011 at 8:28 am

Thanks for this. Really cool stuff you are sharing here.