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NORTHEAST FLORIDA

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EXPERIENCES

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FOOD AND MUSIC PAIRINGS

WORDS JEFFREY SPEAR | PHOTO MELISSA MARCARELLI

It's well known that music can lift your spirits and put a little spring in your step. When embraced by restaurants, music creates experiences that keep guests coming back for more. Of course, serving up the winning combination of good food, good drinks, good tunes and good times requires a clear vision for how everything comes together.

For J.C. Demetree, owner of The Local in Neptune Beach, "live music was not part of our original concept," he says. "Plus, having live performances inside the restaurant tended to get a bit too loud." Things changed when Demetree decided to add an outdoor bar, including a bandshell for live performances. Since then this casual beachside destination has been winning over guests with their eclectic menu and equally diverse calendar of live performances. Their roster includes local artists who perform everything from country and pop to swing and Latin.

Outdoor performances are equally vital to Marina Munch, located alongside the San Sebastian River in St. Augustine. Described as a waterfront food truck park, guests can experience local and international cuisines from a variety of operators. While the fresh air and passing boats are certainly enjoyable, it's the music, never too loud and always dinner friendly, that makes the place come alive. Managing partner Nico Recore is a big supporter of local musicians. "Acoustic jam nights on Thursdays are always fun," she says. "We also wanted to serve a range of alcoholic and non-alcoholic beverages, and our cantina serves everything our guests may want, boasting one of the largest selections of beer in town."

Another St Augustine destination is Chez L'amour, a high-end restaurant and jazz house offering a glamorous and sexy ambiance. The menu features an eclectic blend of everything from beignets and baba ganoush to caviar and carpaccio while guests enjoy a totally immersive sensory experience. "Everything about Chez L'amour is designed to be 'fun dining,' not fine dining," says owner Jeanetta Cebollero, an accomplished jazz musician in her own right.

"Along with our exceptional food, we seek out the best jazz musicians we can find, both local and touring. Plus, we go out of our way to make Chez L'amour one of their favorite places to play so they'll keep on coming back."

If blues, classic rock and a come-as-you-are setting are more your style, head over to Voo Swar, located just off Mayport Road in Atlantic Beach. Opened in 1963 as a nightlife venue for African-Americans excluded from other Beaches venues, this bar, restaurant and music venue is steeped in history and full of character. While their menu includes barbeque, fried chicken and a few late-night bites, the place is renowned for its wings and pork chop sandwich. Along with a full bar, this place is well attended, especially on the weekends when bands hit the stage. "We have the capacity for a large number of guests and make sure to book bands with obvious crowd-appeal," says longtime owner Lewis Davis. "Some of the most recent performers we've hosted that fit this description include The Debt, Disco Cowboy, Penelope Road and Hulagans."

Coop 303, a popular beachside steakhouse and grill in Atlantic Beach, revamped the space on their second floor as the Living Room Lounge, which features DJ-driven music, mostly EDM and house music, responding to the mood of the room and patron requests. "We wanted to bring the sophisticated experience of Miami to Atlantic Beach," says manager Jennah Edwards. The space is richly decorated, replete with comfortable couches and somewhat sultry lighting. "The Lounge is especially popular on the weekends," says Edwards. "With limited space, it's not unusual to find a line to get in."

Without a doubt, music adds an appealing and entertaining flavor to a broad spectrum of dining experiences, and there's no shortage of destinations around town offering great music along with great food. If you're visiting one of these places and the mood strikes after an enjoyable meal, get up and dance. Let the good times roll!

Left: An evening at Chez L'amour in St. Augustine features sharable plates and musicians, including Jeanetta and Alberto Cebollero.