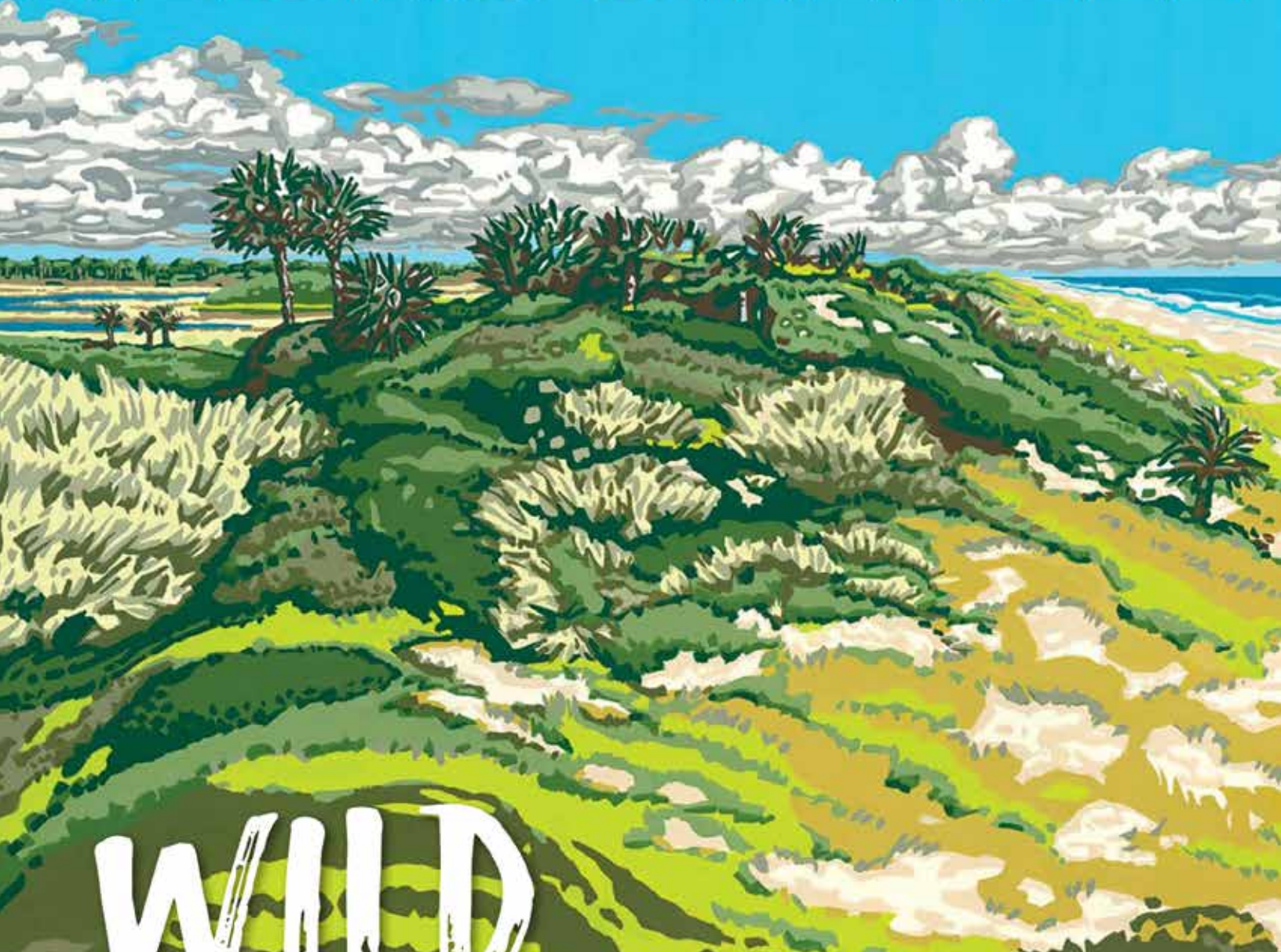


ONLY IN FLORIDA: Strange But True Stories from Across the Sunshine State

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Whiskey Cake -
Chicken and Waffles



Epik -
Smothered
French
Fries



MetroDiner -
Biscuits with Gravy

Smothered & Covered

COMFORT FOODS THAT LIFT YOUR SPIRITS AND NOURISH YOUR SOUL.

BY JEFFREY SPEAR

Whether it's the existential threats posed by nefarious weather, combative political climate, upheavals at work, or a relationship on the rocks, it's easy to understand that mood-boosting, high-fat and high-sugar comfort foods can be an effective remedy during stressful times. While some of the most popular are pizza, ice cream and chocolate, the early days of Spring may call for something considerably warmer and cozier. Whether you're working to overcome dramas, or simply want to bring a little warmth and sunshine into an otherwise dreary day, there are places in Jacksonville serving deliciously smothered and covered comfort foods.

Crispy French fries, especially those loaded with toppings, are at the top of the list never-fail foods. If you agree, **Epik** on Atlantic Boulevard has more than a dozen highly creative, fla-

vor-forward options that should not be missed. Of note is the Big Fatty Fries layered with bleu cheese, cheese sauce, gravy, sriracha aioli, sunny egg, chopped bacon, scallions and hot sauce (\$16). Well known for juicy burgers, Epik's J'ville Poutine pairs datil seasoned fries with cheese curds, gravy, bacon, datil sauce, hot sauce and scallions (\$12). If you prefer Asian flavors, its Korean barbecue fries are tossed in gochugaru red pepper flakes, then topped with gochujang aioli, sriracha aioli, scallions and kimchi (\$8).

If the one-two punch of potatoes and pulled pork lifts your spirits, head over to **Coop 303** for the Loaded Tots, dripping with barbecue pulled pork, queso, Fresno chiles and hot sauce aioli (\$13). Similarly, **Valley Smoke** in Palm Valley offers a brisket poutine, a hearty serving of barbecue brisket, white cheddar

cheese curds, smokey gravy and Alabama white sauce (\$14).

Foods smothered in an abundance of gravy are another way to beat the blues, warming you from the inside out. Head over to **Shut Em Down**, a classic Southern joint on the West-side, for the pork chops (\$16), fried chicken (\$12) or meatloaf (\$12), each generously coated in brown gravy, as well as oxtail in oxtail gravy (\$18). You may also enjoy some of the options at **Barbara Jeans** on the Water in Palm Valley. Whether it's the country-fried steak consisting of hand-battered cubed steak drenched in your choice of cream or brown gravy (\$19), chicken fried chicken with cream gravy (\$19), or meat loaf, proclaimed as "better than Mom's or Grandma's," served with either tomato sauce or brown gravy (\$19), one of these classics is sure to lift your spirits. Or at least fill your stomach.

Of course, one of the most soothing, satisfying and warming dishes to come out of the South is biscuits and gravy. **Metro Diner** (seven area locations) offers this classic, served with two eggs and hash browns (\$12). If you're feeling a bit more adventurous, try the chicken and waffles from the recently arrived **Whiskey Cake Kitchen and Bar**, a dish that tastefully marries malted waffles, crispy chicken tenders, sunny side eggs, maple syrup and house country gravy (\$20).

Another top contender in the world of comfort food, also a Southern classic, is mac-n-cheese. While frequently listed on menus as a side dish, the best ones are proudly served as a main course. This is certainly the case at **Spliff's Gastropub** in Riverside, where you can enjoy the String Cheese Incident, an incredibly cheesy presentation that blends cheddar, Swiss, provolone, mozzarella, smoked gouda and goat cheeses (\$15). If you like mac-n-cheese with a bit more flair, they have a long list of tasty options from which to choose.

While the world's turmoil can dampen one's outlook from time to time, there's plenty of tasty and soul-warming relief available all over town. Just pick a destination, grab a fork, dig in and smile. *

"This book isn't just a collection of cocktail recipes, it's a celebration of Southern culture and hospitality," says chef and author Belinda Smith-Sullivan. "Every drink and dish are crafted to bring people together, spark joy and create unforgettable moments." Those moments can be elevated with ideas from her new hardcover book, *Cocktails, Southern Style* (Gibbs Smith, \$22), featuring approximately 90 recipes for libations and small bites to pair with beverages. From brunch favorites to summertime porch sippers, Smith-Sullivan dives into all sorts of spritzes, shandies and effervescent creations. Following is a recipe for her Cider Sidecar, a cocktail that takes the traditional sidecar combination of cognac, Cointreau, and lemon and adds one of the South's favorite nonalcoholic beverages to the mix.

INGREDIENTS

2 oz. fresh apple cider

2 oz. cognac

1 oz. Cointreau

1 oz. freshly squeezed lemon juice

Lemon twists, for rimming and garnish

Granulated sugar, for rimming

Apple wheels (optional)

Glass: champagne coupe



METHOD

Pour the cider, cognac, Cointreau, and lemon juice into a shaker, and top with ice. Shake until very chilled. Rub the rim of the glass with a piece of lemon zest, then dip the rim of the glass into the sugar. Strain the cocktail into the coupe and garnish with lemon twist and apple wheels (if using). *

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