

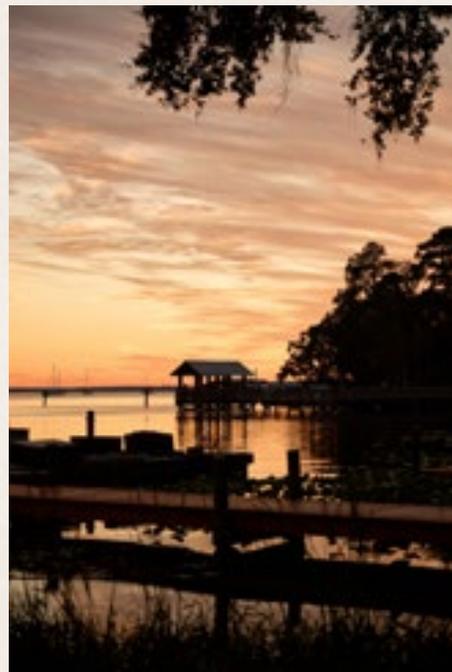
ALONG THE RIVER'S EDGE

A VARIETY OF CULINARY DELIGHTS AWAIT
BY THE BANKS OF NORTHEAST FLORIDA'S
INSHORE WATERWAYS

Words Jeffrey Spear | Photos Jesse Brantman

There are more than 80 waterways crisscrossing Northeast Florida, offering a cornucopia of opportunities to find solace in the timeless beauty and restorative influences that only nature can provide. In addition, locals will tell you that a few drinks and a well-prepared meal adds significantly to the overall experience.

When you consider the handful of restaurants that have endured along the edges of Northeast Florida's inshore waterways – some described as fish camps – these enchanting retreats, many accessible by boat, offer stunning views, occasional wildlife sightings, a little fresh air and an alluring selection of culinary delights. While the menus at riverfront dining establishments can seem a bit repetitive, frequently leaning heavily into fried seafood and pub grub, each has specialties worth exploring.



The St. Johns

The longest and most important waterway in Florida is the St. Johns River, providing significant ecological, recreational and economic benefits to the region. Along its length, especially between Mayport and Welaka, a handful of dining spots have taken root, providing an impressive variety of culinary experiences.

The stretch of the St. Johns that runs from Palatka through Jacksonville and out to the Atlantic, maintained by the Army Corps of Engineers, is the most navigable, used primarily for commercial purposes. At its northernmost end, there are several restaurants adjacent to the St. Johns River Ferry docks on both the Mayport and Ft. George sides of the river.

On the Mayport side, grab a seat on the deck at **Safe Harbor Seafood**. Bask in the sunshine and refreshing coastal breezes, all while following the passage of container ships, shrimping vessels and recreational boats in and out of port. With a cold beer or glass of wine, a plate of fish or shellfish, especially their highly recommended Mayport shrimp platter, one could chill here for hours. If you're on the Ft. George side of the river, **Palms Fish Camp Restaurant**, **Billy Jack's** and **Chowder Ted's** offer comparable riverfront experiences.

The southern reaches of the St. Johns River are considerably less developed. Along with undisturbed freshwater marshes, you'll find river banks

shaded by towering trees dripping with Spanish moss and plenty of wildlife, most notably herons, egrets and ospreys as well as marine creatures including turtles, alligators, dolphins and manatees. The area's rustic waterfront restaurants have endured the test of time. While **Corky Bell's** in Palatka and **Andersen's** in Welaka are enjoyable destinations, the **Boat Bar at Welaka Lodge** exudes old Florida charm. Don't be intimidated by its time-worn character. The restaurant has impressive offerings, from specialty cocktails made with freshly squeezed fruit and big ass wings (a house favorite) to jalapeño pepper fried wontons and ahi tuna.





Intracoastal Waterway

A 3,000 nautical mile inland waterway, the Intracoastal starts in Boston, runs parallel to the Atlantic coast and heads southward into Key West. In Northeast Florida, known locally as "The Ditch," it stretches for approximately 80 nautical miles, beginning at the St. Marys River to the north, then connecting with the Amelia River, St. Johns River, Tolomato River and Matanzas River. A haven for incredibly diverse flora and fauna, this route consists of protected salt marshes, pine islands, swamp and hammock communities and several nature preserves.

While **Dockside Seafood**, **Marker 32**, **Palm Valley Fish Camp**, **Valley Smoke** and **Barbara Jean's** can be found along the length of the Intracoastal between Jacksonville Beach and Ponte Vedra Beach, **Palm Valley Outdoors Bar & Grill** is slightly off the beaten path. Along with the menu's broad selection of coastal classics, their lobster ravioli is not to be missed.



Waterways to the South

Inaccurately named, Doctors Lake is actually an inlet that feeds off the St. Johns River. Along its banks are numerous recreational parks, marinas, residential piers and **Whitey's Fish Camp**. The restaurant, originally a tackle shop serving beer and sandwiches, has become an enduring favorite. Its ties to Lynyrd Skynyrd and the local music scene are celebrated, explaining the many guitars and rock memorabilia on its walls. Come for the gator tail and stuffed flounder, stay for a few drinks and enjoy live music on Saturdays.

Julington Creek Fish Camp resides at the mouth of Julington Creek, just off the St. Johns River. It is one of several Fish Camps operated by Southern Table Hospitality, offering plenty of seafood and traditional Southern favorites. The broiled scallops (topped with bacon, sun-dried tomato and spinach cream) and Fish Camp shrimp & grits are both popular menu items.

Another wetland feeding into the St. Johns River is Six-mile Creek, known for its quiet surroundings and rich ecosystem. Although somewhat off the beaten path, **Outback Crab Shack** is a well known and highly popular waterfront destination. There's plenty of room outside to enjoy drinks while indulging in deviled bacon oysters and their famous Outback boil. For those who prefer to arrive by boat, there's a quarter-mile-long pier that ensures a place to tie up.

Heading south from the Intracoastal, flowing into the Tolomato River, the landscape is rich with salt marshes, mangrove wetlands and unique maritime hammocks. When it comes to waterside dining, look no further than **Beaches at Vilano**. Located alongside the Vilano Fishing Pier, visitors have an unobstructed view of St. Augustine while enjoying grouper tacos (a local favorite) or island jambalaya. There are other popular riverfront dining destinations upstream, including **Caps** and **Aunt Kates**, albeit without the view of the city, where you can enjoy the quiet serenity and sunsets along the water's edge.

While you're in St. Augustine, head over to the **Conch House Restaurant** along Salt Run. Popular for its views of the St. Augustine Lighthouse, the menu has its own appeal, including lots of creative cocktails (ask about their Goombay Smash), the ever-popular Salt Run catch and many other specialties.





Waterways to the North

The Amelia River runs from the Florida-Georgia border, alongside Amelia Island and Fernandina Beach, a community renowned for its rich history. **The Salty Pelican**, adjacent to the active rail line that feeds nearby shrimping and wood processing operations, provides a glimpse into all of the activities the river supports. Ask for a ringside table on the second floor, stock up on handcrafted cocktails, order some broiled Pelican original oysters and enjoy the show.

Kingsley Creek is a neighboring, somewhat smaller waterway that feeds into the Amelia River. Located on the southern edge of Fernandina Beach, it is considerably quieter than the center of town and home to **Shucker's Oyster Bar & Grill**. Serving an abundance of fresh oysters and seafood favorites, their bang bang shrimp and seared tuna nachos are proven crowd pleasers. On the other side of the road, the **Down Under Restaurant** offers similar fare from a different view.

Whether it's on the Amelia River in Fernandina Beach, somewhere along the 310-mile stretch of the St. Johns River and its tributaries or a destination along the Intracoastal Waterway, one can find an assortment of charming restaurants and fish camps. Plus, there's nothing like gathering with friends to shuck oysters, peel shrimp and enjoy a few cold drinks, from a riverfront patio on a clear sunny day.

For a full list of North Florida fish camp experiences, visit ediblenefflorida.com