

BEACHiN⁹

SPRING 2023

Your guide to
**springtime
festivals** on
the Gulf Coast

JD Swiger's
art is trash.
Literally.



THE SAND SHAPER

Janel Hawkins is making her home more beautiful, one castle at a time. Watch her build at **Hangout Music Festival!**

PLUS: 7 things that define Gulf Shores Beach Rescue's Kallie Byrd

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Publisher
Vince Johnson
vince@gulfcoastmedia.com

Executive Editor
Kayla Green
kayla@gulfcoastmedia.com

Design and Layout
Micah Green

Writing
Kayla Green
Melanie LeCroy
Allison Marlow
Kara Mautz

Photography
Micah Green

Ad Design
McKinzie Daniels
Jordan Dyess

Advertising
Frank Kustura
frank@gulfcoastmedia.com
251.923.8129

Shawna Stefankiewicz
shawna@gulfcoastmedia.com
660.676.2083

Bethany Summerlin
bethany@gulfcoastmedia.com
251.266.9982

Beachin' magazine is published quarterly by Gulf Coast Media, 901 N. McKenzie Street, Foley, AL 36535 251.943.2151

Distributed free by The Alabama Gulf Coast Convention & Visitor's Bureau and at locations across Gulf Shores, Orange Beach and Fort Morgan.

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about the cover



A massive sand sculpted sea turtle with Janel Hawkins for size. Hawkins, who is from Foley, is a professional sand sculptor who specializes in castles and sea creatures and also holds classes and creates individualized commissions from engagements to corporate logos. She will be creating one such commission on the beach in Gulf Shores during Hangout Music Festival, which is May 19-21. Festival goers will be able to watch her, but those who don't catch her in person can scroll her TikTok, @sand_castle_university, where she has gained viral fame. Photo by Micah Green.



cover story

Sand Castle University

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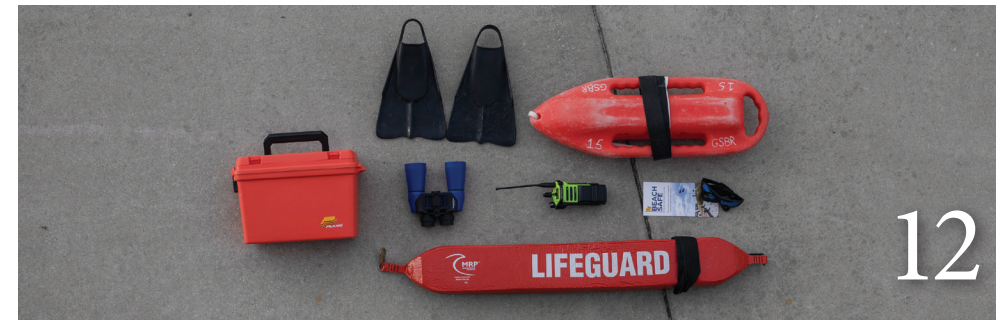
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Lunch Menu

HOME-STYLE LUNCH SPECIALS

(Served with your choice of two side dishes)

- Fried Shrimp - tail less
- Blackened Catfish
- Fried Catfish
- Broiled Flounder
- Fried Flounder
- Grilled Chicken
- Chicken Creole
- Fried Chicken Tenders
- Country Fried Steak
- Hamburger Steak
- Pork Chops
- Country Ham
- Vegetable Plate

SANDWICHES

(Served with french fries)

- Complimentary Ice Tea and Bread Served with All Dine in Lunch Entrees.
- Add House or Substitute Salad for side dish
- Po-Boy Sandwich
- Cheeseburger
- Crab Cake Po-Boy
- *Monte Cristo Sandwich

Dinner Menu

STARTERS

- Oysters on the Half Shell
1/2 dozen 1 dozen
- Southern Style Crab Cakes
- Crab, Spinach & Artichoke Dip
- Coconut Shrimp
- Stuffed Mushrooms
- Alligator Bites
- Fried Crab Claws

- Tuna Dip 1/2 lb
- Sweet Potato French Fry Basket 1 lb
- Fried Green Tomatoes

GUMBO & SOUP

- Seafood Gumbo cup
- Crab & Shrimp Bisque bowl
- cup
- bowl

FRIED SEAFOOD FAVORITES

(Served with your choice of two side dishes)

- Butterfly Shrimp
- Tail-less Shrimp
- Bon Secour Oysters
- Crab Claws
- Fried Fish of the Day
- Shrimp & Flounder
- Shrimp & Oysters
- Fried Catfish

SALADS

Dressings: Honey-Mustard, Ranch, Bleu Cheese, Italian, Thousand Island, French, Low-Fat Ranch, Raspberry Vinaigrette, Balsamic Vinegar, Balsamic Vinaigrette, Sesame Asian, Oil & Vinegar

Riviera Salad

- with pecan chicken tenders
- with chicken tenders
- with boiled shrimp
- with grilled or blackened chicken

Caesar Salad

- w/grilled or blackened chicken
- w/boiled shrimp

Gumbo & Salad - a cup of Seafood Gumbo and our

Bisque & Salad

SEAFOOD FAVORITES

(Served with your choice of two side dishes)

- Add House or Caesar Salad
- Substitute Salad for side dish
- Fried Butterfly Shrimp
- Fried Oysters
- Fried Crab Claws
- *Coconut Shrimp
- Grilled Shrimp
- Fried Seafood Platter

SEAFOOD PLATTERS

(Served with your choice of two side dishes)

- Shrimp Lover's Platter
- Fried Seafood Platter
- Broiled Seafood Platter
- Creole Platter
- Caribbean Platter
- Crab Platter

SEAFOOD SPECIALTIES

(Served with your choice of two side dishes)

- Stuffed Shrimp
- Shrimp Scampi
- Blackened Catfish
- Coconut Shrimp
- Grilled Shrimp
- Shrimp Creole
- Crawfish Etouffee
- Crab Cake Dinner

STEAMED SEAFOOD

(Served with new potatoes & one side)

- Snow Crab Legs - 2 lbs.
- Royal Red Shrimp - 1 lb.
- Combo - 1/2 pound Royal Reds & 1 pound Snow Crab

TONIGHT'S CATCH

(Served with your choice of two side dishes)

Choose from the following preparation styles:

- Fried Catch
- Blackened Catch
- Grilled Catch
- Broiled Catch

Broiled Seafood Platter

- Stuffed Shrimp
- Mahi-Mahi
- Yellow-Fin Tuna
- Tilapia
- Grouper
- Snow Crab Legs
- Royal Reds - 3/4 lb.
- Combo - 1/2 lb. Each
- Crab Cakes - 2 cakes

PASTA

- Fettuccini Alfredo - w/grilled or blackened chicken
- with shrimp or crawfish
- Basil Pesto Pasta - with Roma Tomatoes
- with grilled chicken
- with shrimp

SIDE DISHES

- Fried Green Tomatoes ~ Green Beans
- Turnip Greens ~ Sweet Potato Casserole Corn Fritters ~ French Fries
- Mashed Potatoes w/Gravy ~ Fried Okra
- Au Gratin Potatoes ~ Steamed Veggies
- Kernel Corn ~ Yellow Rice
- Black-Eyed Peas ~ Cole Slaw
- Lima Beans ~ Macaroni & Cheese

- New Orleans Catch
- Mediterranean Catch
- Caribbean Catch
- *Pecan Encrusted Catch
- *Paneed Catch

LAND LOVER'S FARE

(Served with your choice of two side dishes)

- Hawaiian Rib-eye - (12 oz.) - add jumbo grilled or fried shrimp
- Jamaica-Jerk Chicken
- Grilled Chicken Breasts
- Fried Chicken Tenders

PASTA

- Fettuccini Alfredo - with grilled or blackened chicken
- with shrimp or crawfish
- Scallops Alfredo
- Shrimp & Pasta Marsala
- Basil-Pesto Pasta - with grilled chicken
- with shrimp

SIDE DISHES

- Substitute House or Caesar Salad for a Side Dish
- Sweet Potato Casserole ~ Cole Slaw
- Baked Potato ~ Steamed Vegetables
- Yellow Rice ~ French Fries
- Fried Green Tomatoes

THIS WASN'T IN THE BROCHURE!

A series exploring nearby places off the beaten path.

Towering trees top records across Alabama

Words by Allison Marlow | Photos by Micah Green

There are giants in the forests here. They rise, sometimes unnoticed, above the forest canopy and wait. As years pass, their trunks grow wide and tall. Their branches stretch far above the tippy tops of their neighbors' highest boughs. And if the skies spare them a lightning strike and sheering winds, glory awaits them. That is, if a human happens to stumble across their majestic path. With a quick measurement, a few photos and some paperwork, they may be crowned a champion tree. The state of Alabama began recognizing the most colossal of its forest residents in 1970 to discover, recognize and preserve the largest of each native tree species across the state. Now, 136 trees in 46 counties hold the distinction of being the tallest, the roundest and the grandest in all the yellowhammer land.



Photo by Allison Marlow

THINK YOU FOUND A CHAMPION TREE?

This is the criteria for trees to be considered eligible:

- Have a **single woody stem** at least **13 feet tall**
- Have a circumference of at least **16 inches** when measured **4.5 feet** above the ground
 - Not poisonous or hazardous
- Be **native or naturalized** in Alabama

- **Not considered invasive** by the Alabama Invasive Plant Council

Baldwin County is currently home to 11 champion trees, a number that wiggles and shimmies like the branches of its honorees because the trees are remeasured every four years. Baldwin County-based botanist Fred Nation, who has discovered dozens of champion trees, said many are enormous because they are so far from humans, and thus, difficult to visit and measure.

For some, words like big and huge are far too trivial. Ancient. Mammoth. Not the stuff of legends. They are legend.

People talk about spotting them as if they've glimpsed Bigfoot. In Northern Baldwin County's Bayou Jessamine, whose waters, depending on the season, flood or barely move with the help of the Tensaw River, is hidden what was deemed the state's champion bald cypress. It reigns in a forest that was depleted by loggers several times since settlers arrived in Baldwin County. By sheer luck or by crews too tired to down the already massive trunk, the tree survived. Hikes to it usually require a kayak and a lot of luck.

In 2020, a Clarke County cypress bested its numbers, measuring 8 feet more than the Baldwin tree's 27 feet across.

An easier hike can be made to the bluff oak in Daphne, whose trunk reaches 97 feet into the sky and whose branches stretch 57 feet across. It casts a heavy shadow upon the gravestones at Village Point Park Preserve.

It is not to be confused with nearby Jackson's Oak whose legend claims Gen. Andrew Jackson stood atop one of its branches to speak to his troops. While that live oak, decked out with a photo-worthy observation deck that is a staple of tourist stops, measures 28 feet around, a Mobile County live oak reigns supreme at 2 feet wider.

Still, a visit to the Daphne park is to walk among giants. Nation said more trees have been nominated in that spot than in any in the state.

But with nearly 23 million acres covering 70% of the state, Nation said he is certain bigger trees are out there. And not necessarily in the deepest, darkest part of the woods.

"A lot of these trees are in places where people were living for a long time and cared for them. They didn't cut them down, and the trees had reduced competition," Nation said.

Are there more champion trees to be found?

"I am," Nation said, "quite certain of it."

...

A CHAMPION AMONG CHAMPIONS

There are 11 champion trees in Baldwin County, a record currently only bested by Madison County, home to Huntsville in the northern most reaches of the state, where 14 champion trees reside.

The champion trees in Baldwin County:

Atlantic White Cedar, 103-inch circumference, 81 feet tall, 32-foot crown spread

Cottonwood Swamp, 81-inch circumference, 69 feet tall, 44-foot crown spread

Water Hickory, 152-inch circumference, 136 feet tall, 78-foot crown spread

Dahoon Holly, 58-inch circumference, 55 feet tall, 37-foot crown spread

Bay Loblolly, 59-inch circumference, 74 feet tall, 29-foot crown spread

Mayhaw, 31-inch circumference, 24 feet tall, 29-foot crown spread

Bluff Oak, 101-inch circumference, 97 feet tall, 57-foot crown spread

Myrtle Oak, 30-inch circumference, 35 feet tall, 29-foot crown spread

Sand Live Oak, 222-inch circumference, 59 feet tall, 101-foot crown spread

Longleaf Pine, 103-inch circumference, 94 feet tall, 57-foot crown spread

Southern Red Cedar, 175-inch circumference, 59 feet tall, 76-foot crown spread

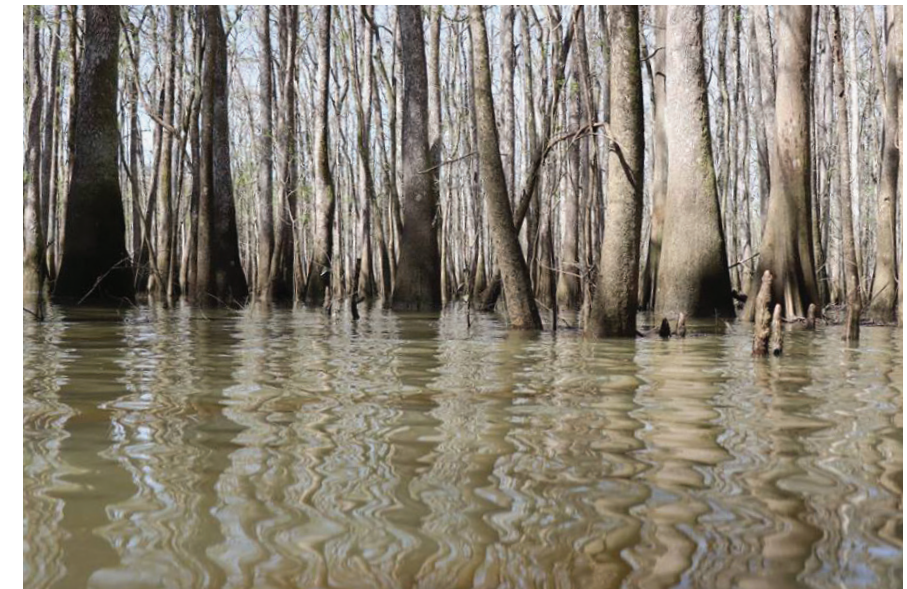


Photo by Allison Marlow



7 THINGS

with

KALLIE BYRD, GULF SHORES BEACH RESCUE

Words by Kara Mautz
Photos by Micah Green

Kallie Byrd, a full time lifeguard with Gulf Shores Beach Rescue, certainly has a lot on her hands come spring and summer.

Unlike lifeguarding at a pool, the Gulf brings additional challenges, such as strong tides, wildlife and waves; making beach lifeguarding no easy feat.

Byrd was most recently named Lifeguard of the Month in August 2022 and will soon begin her fourth year as a lifeguard for the City of Gulf Shores.

Here are 7 Things Kallie Byrd carries with her to keep beach visitors safe amid the harsh elements and dangers of the water.



4



2



1



3



6

7



1. RESCUE CAN

According to Byrd, although the "rescue can" (floatation device) may seem like an obvious choice, it is the most important life-saving tool lifeguards use on the beach.

"Every lifeguard on duty is required to have one at all times, and for good reason," Byrd said. "Without the assistance of flotation, a swimmer cannot be rescued. In case you swim out too far or encounter currents that are too strong to fight, you can rely on your floatation and signal to shore for help."

2. FINS

Byrd said she is often asked by patrons of the beach how lifeguards are able to swim so fast during a rescue. The answer is quite simple: they utilize rubber fins to combat the surf and complete a save safely.

"Though we have rigorous physical standards to become a beach lifeguard, none of us are

superhuman swimmers," Byrd said. "The next most important piece of equipment are our hard rubber fins. These allow us to cut through the surf and quickly reach a victim."

3. RADIO

How do lifeguards communicate through strong winds and loud speakers? Byrd said they mostly rely on the use of radios to stay alert on the beach.

"With the press and hold of a button, everyone on the beach will hear the information you need to pass along," Byrd said. "Lifeguards are trained not only to communicate with each other but also to communicate with the fire department, police department and 911 dispatch."

Byrd urges anyone who may need help to not hesitate to go to a lifeguard tower. Even if they can't directly help, they can call someone who can.

4. MEDICAL BOX

"Every lifeguard is a trained Emergency Medical Responder (EMR), able to provide basic lifesaving

for any number of medical emergencies on the beach. In every manned tower is a small orange box with basic medical supplies that can be used for a situation as simple as a small cut or as serious as a drowning or a cardiac arrest," Byrd said.

However, there are also patrol units who monitor the beach, consisting of older, more experienced lifeguards who hold additional medical licenses.

"Most carry Basic EMT, Advanced EMT or even Paramedic licenses," Byrd said. "Patrols will carry a larger medical box and are able to further assess the patient as well as provide more care than a tower."

5. WATER

Summer days can be painfully long and excruciatingly hot, as any resident of southern Alabama could tell you.

Byrd said she makes sure to carry water with her during her shift, as hydration is key to a healthy and capable lifeguard.

"Dehydration is the biggest performance killer

we will face out here on the beach. It takes about three days to die from dehydration, however you feel the effects of dehydration as soon as you do not replenish water expelled from your body," Byrd said. "A hydrated lifeguard is focused and able to physically exert themselves at a moment's notice."

Byrd said it is also essential for the general public to stay hydrated, as overheating is one of the most common calls the lifeguards encounter.

"It is frequently due to people not drinking enough water. Patrols and Beach Rangers will have coolers with water to replenish lifeguards water supply as well as people of the general public who need it," Byrd said.

6. SUN PROTECTION

Getting a sunburn is painful, uncomfortable and taxing on the body, as many beachgoers have experienced, which is why Byrd makes sure to carry sunscreen with her daily.

"Continuously getting sunburns can damage your skin to the point that a melanoma is developed

and you have to see a doctor to get treatment," Byrd said.

However, according to Byrd, the most effective way to combat harsh rays is to use a combination of SPF and polarized sunglasses.

7. BEACHSAFE PAMPHLET

"Beach Safe is a program we are implementing to spread information and awareness about beach safety. These pamphlets contain useful information, such as a diagram of a rip current and how to escape, treatment for a jellyfish sting, the beach flag identification system, hurricane/storm evacuation routes and other general safety tips," Byrd said.

Although all lifeguards are proficient in this, Byrd says many vacationers and even locals are still not aware of it.

"Beachsafe has reached thousands of people since its inception last summer," Byrd said, "and has had a very positive impact on our beach safety."

...

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Fried Shrimp Platter - (Approx. 14-15)

Fried Gator Platter

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Find your fun

Things to do on the Gulf Coast
from Mobile to Pensacola

The weather is warming, the flowers are blooming, and the spring festival season is upon us. There are so many events and things to do on the Gulf Coast between April and May that you may have a hard time choosing. To aid in your planning, we put together a list of festivals from Pensacola to Mobile. Mark your annual favorite or step off your well-beaten path and discover something new.



APRIL

APRIL 1

Mudbugs and Margaritas

Heritage Park, Foley, tickets are \$5, www.beachlifeevents.com

Spring Fling Music Festival

The Grounds, Mobile. Tickets start at \$50, www.springflingmusicfestival.com

APRIL 15-16

Kites Over Mobile 2023

Brookley by the Bay, Mobile, free to attend, www.cityofmobile.org

APRIL 16

Fred Levin Way Fest 2023

Museum Plaza, Pensacola, free to attend, www.fredlevinfest.com

APRIL 21-22

Waterway Village Zydeco and Crawfish Festival

Waterway Village, Gulf Shores, free to attend, www.gulfshoresal.gov

APRIL 22

Mobile Bay Anime Festival

Daphne Civic Center, adult tickets are \$20, www.mobilebayanimetfest.com

Heritage Day Festival

Silverhill, free to attend, www.silverhillalabama.com

APRIL 23

Mud Bottom Revival Music Festival

Bender Point, Mobile, tickets are \$35, www.dogrivers.org

APRIL 28

Bama Coast Cruisin'

The Wharf, Orange Beach, free to attend, www.bamacoastcruisin.com

Pensacola Crawfish Festival

Seville Square and Fountain Park, Pensacola, tickets are \$5, www.fiestapensacola.org

Hangout Music Festival



MAY

MAY 4-6

Gulf Coast Hot Air Balloon Festival

OWA, Foley, free to attend, www.gulfcoastballoonfestival.com

MAY 12-1

Festival of Quilts

Abba Shrine Center, Mobile, tickets range from \$5 - \$10, www.mobilearts.org

MAY 13-14

Art in the Park

Heritage Park, Foley, free to attend, www.foleyartcenter.com

MAY 19-21

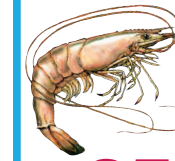
Hangout Music Festival

Gulf Shores, tickets start at \$349, www.hangoutmusicfest.com

List gathered by Melanie LeCroy, Gulf Coast Media lifestyle editor. Photos by Micah Green/GCM archives.

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APRIL 29

Bald Eagle Bash

Tosmeire Weeks Bay Reserve Center, tickets are \$65, www.gulfshores.com

APRIL 28-30

Interstate Mullet Toss and Gulf Coast's Greatest Beach Party

Flora-Bama, Pensacola, tickets range from \$10 to \$15, www.florabama.com

LuLu's Paradise Boat Show at Homeport Marina

Gulf Shores, free to attend, www.lulusfunfoodmusic.com

Tall Ships Pensacola

Plaza De Luna, Pensacola, free to attend, www.visitpensacola.com

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Alabama Point East-A Gulf State Park Beach Area is located 0.3 miles east of Perdido Pass Bridge and offers over 6,000 feet of wide beach in addition to sand dunes, boardwalks, picnic areas, restrooms and outdoor showers.

Cotton Bayou is located at the intersection of Highway 182 and Highway 161 between some of the area's most popular condominiums. There are restrooms and showers on site.

Romar Beach-A Gulf State Park Beach Area is located 6.8 miles east of Highway 59 and has a limited amount of free parking (no facilities).

Gulf State Park Pavilion is located six miles east of Highway 59 and offers a beach pavilion with air-conditioned restrooms, private showers, a snack bar, shady spots to sit and eat, plus a large fireplace for chilly days. There is a \$5 fee to park for four hours and \$10 to park all day, but there are plenty of spaces and a lot of room for large vehicles and RVs.

Gulf Place (Gulf Shores Main Public Beach) is located where Highway

59 ends. There are beach attendants, three open-air pavilions, a picnic area, restrooms and showers. Parking is \$5 for four hours and \$10 to park all day between March 1 and Nov. 30. Arrive early to get a prime spot in this popular hangout.

Gulf Shores 2nd Street Public Beach is just two blocks west of Highway 59. Facilities include an accessible restrooms, outdoor shower and covered pavilion with picnic tables.

Gulf Shores 4th Street Public Beach offers only pedestrian crossing beach access, perfect for those staying at nearby properties.

Gulf Shores 5th Street Public Beach is located five blocks west of Highway 59 with parking on the north side where the boardwalk leads to the beach. Parking is also available on the south side beside Bahama Bob's.

Gulf Shores 6th Street Public Beach is located six blocks west of Highway 59. Walk the boardwalk to the beach. Facilities include an outdoor shower and accessible restroom.

Gulf Shores 10th Street Public Beach offers beach access only with parking across the street. Facilities include restrooms and showers.

Gulf Shores 12th Street Public Beach offers beach access but no parking. Facilities include restrooms and showers.

Gulf Shores 13th Street Public Beach has street-side parking with a dune walkover. Facilities include restrooms and showers.

Lagoon Pass Beach is 2.9 miles west of Highway 59 and has restrooms, outdoor shower and a water fountain. Parking is \$5 for four hours and \$10 to park all day and is located on the northeast side of the Lee Callaway Bridge.

Bon Secour National Wildlife Refuge Beach is located at 12295 State Highway 180 (Fort Morgan Road) in Gulf Shores. Park along Mobile Street for easy beach access. It is a wildlife refuge, so there are no facilities. There is a Refuge Office located nearby.

DON'T FORGET ABOUT THE NEW PARKING RULES!

If you're reading this, there's a chance you're a spring breaker, summer vacationer or local who doesn't live in Gulf Shores. If any of the above apply, it's important to know there has been a change to parking fees for beach access in Gulf Shores.

THE CHANGE

An increase to parking fees on city beaches to a flat rate of \$15 was approved at the end of 2022, and two locations will have \$5 passes available that will be good for four hours.

Gulf Place, which is the main public beach area in Gulf Shores by The Hangout, and West 5th Street have \$5 parking for four hours and \$15 all-day parking. Those locations as well as West Gulf Place, West 6th Street, West 10th Street, West 13th Street and Lagoon Pass offer parking for \$15 a day.

THE REASON

Grant Brown, city recreation and cultural affairs director, said the main reason for the increase is to help fund an increase in beach security, safety measures and cleanliness of the beaches.

"We got really aggressive with managing the beaches back in 2012 after the oil spill," Brown said. "We turned to an ordinance effort to keep the beaches clean, add additional lifeguards and more police presence on the beaches during the busy season."

The city has in recent years also transitioned from an in-person ticket booth to parking stations to alleviate the amount of parking traffic and keep cars from lining up on the highway. The parking stations generated at least \$750,000 last year. That money covered public works expenses for the season.

THE DETAILS

While most parking lots will only offer \$15 all-day parking, Brown said there are some that will offer hourly parking, and there will still be areas near the beach to park for free.

"The parking lot by the Pink Pony Pub and the Hangout will have hourly parking," Brown said. "Also, Bahama Bobs will have additional parking spots for \$5 for four hours or \$10 for the whole day."

The all-day pass runs from 7 a.m. to 2 a.m. and is good for the day of purchase, allowing patrons to move between different lots for no additional fees if there is an available space. Pay stations are in place from March 1 through Nov. 30 each year.

WHAT ABOUT LOCALS?

City residents with a Gulf Shores hurricane/re-entry decal can park at any of the paid city sites at no charge.

BEACH PARKING FEES FOR 2023 IN GULF SHORES

\$5 for 4 hours or \$15 all day

- Gulf Place (main public beach area)
- West 5th Street

\$15 all day

- West Gulf Place
- West 6th Street
- West 10th Street
- West 13th Street
- Lagoon Pass

Locations with free on-street parking

- East 1st Avenue
- East 1st Street
- East 2nd Street
- West 1st Avenue
- West 2nd Avenue
- West 1st Street
- West 2nd Street
- West 5th Street North of Beach Boulevard
- West 12th Street



20 MILLION AND SHUCKING

The **Alabama Coastal Foundation** and local restaurants are working to make the Alabama Gulf Coast a cleaner place

Words by Kara Mautz | Photo by Micah Green

Ever wondered where your oyster shells go once the bill comes and the restaurant server takes your plate?

The Alabama Coastal Foundation in Mobile established a recycling program in 2016 so restaurants that sell oysters on the half-shell can recycle them back into Alabama waters.

Mark Berte, executive director for ACF, said that for decades people had suggested the organization create such a program, but it wasn't until 2015 that that dream became reality.

"People had talked about it for years, but when I saw a grant pop up from the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, it seemed like the perfect fit," Berte said.

The Foundation quickly began educating local restaurants about the project and gauging interested

participants. Each of the restaurants who take part in the program pay the ACF to participate, which helps to fund the program.

"We ask the restaurants to recycle their shells into our carts, and then we send a contractor to collect them three times a week," Berte said. "Once we get the shells, we leave them outside for six months so they can get clean."

Berte said the outside of an oyster shell is the best place for a new oyster to attach, so once the shells are properly cleaned they are safe to be returned to the water.

"We actually just hit a milestone a few weeks ago: we have officially collected 20 million shells since the start of the program," Berte said.

The program is currently taking shells from restaurants located in both Baldwin County and Mobile County.

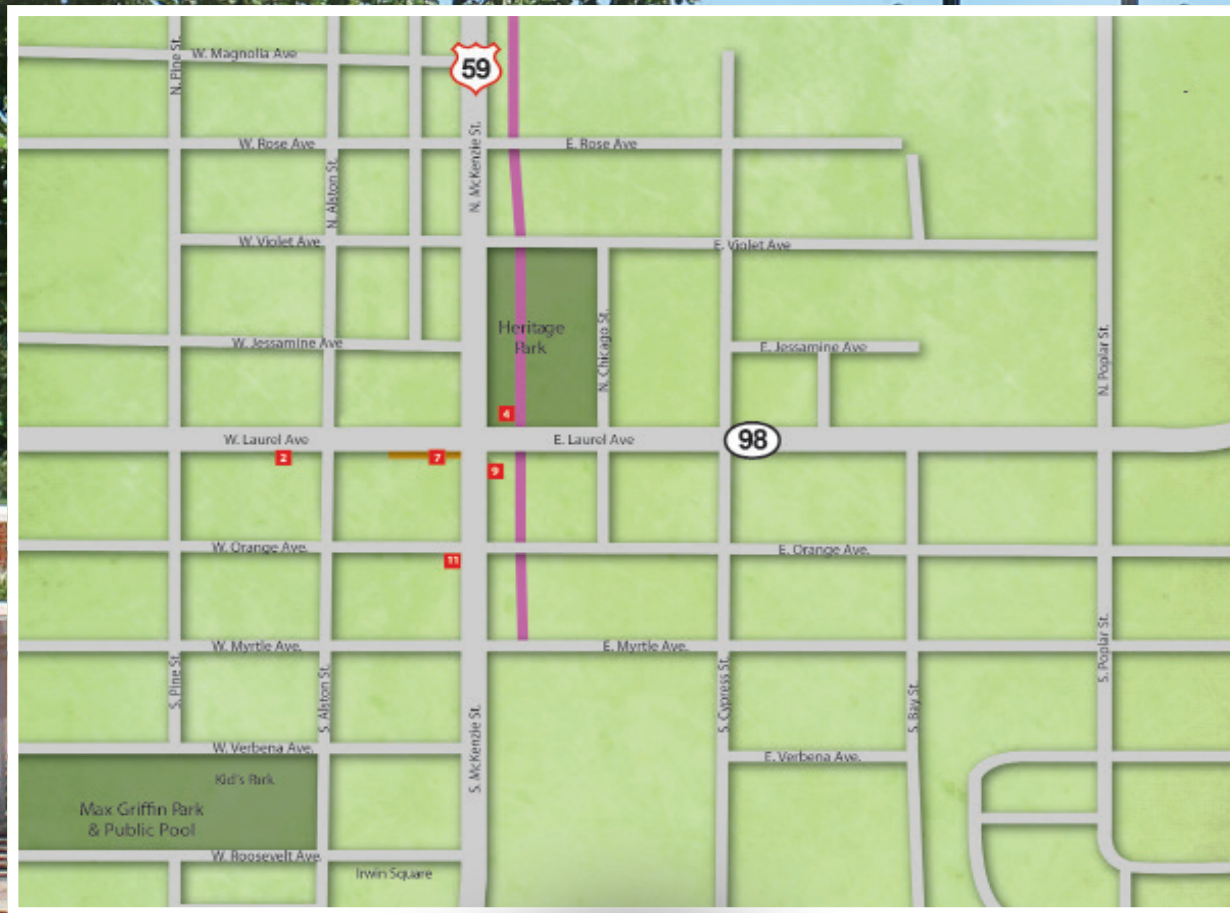
PARTICIPATING RESTAURANTS INCLUDE:

- Terry Thompson
- ACME Oyster House
- Bayside Grill at The Grand Hotel
- Bluegill Restaurant
- Cobalt, The Restaurant
- Felix's Fish Camp Restaurant
- Flora-Bama Lounge
- Flora-Bama Ole River Bar
- Flora-Bama Yacht Club
- Grand Weddings at the Grand Hotel
- Half Shell Oyster House (Mobile)
- Original Oyster House (Causeway)
- Original Oyster House (Gulf Shores)
- Sea-N-Suds Restaurant
- Southern Roots at The Grand Hotel
- Tacky Jacks (Gulf Shores)
- The Lodge at Gulf State Park
- Tin Top Restaurant and Oyster Bar
- Wintzell's (Downtown Mobile)



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REDUCE REUSE RECYCLE REIMAGINE

JD Swiger turns litter into works of art in Gulf Shores studio

Words by Melanie LeCroy
Photos by Micah Green

John David “JD” Swiger wasn’t brought home from the hospital to the white sandy beaches of Gulf Shores, but he is a local through and through. The Swiger family would pack up and leave their Hoover home as soon as school let out for the summer. He spent the break perfecting his tan and skimboard skills before heading back to school. Until it all changed.

The New Orleans-style snowball shop his parents opened and operated during the summer was doing well, his sister, Kristen, was getting ready to enter high school, and JD was entering middle school. It was a perfect time to transition. The next thing he knew, Swiger and his three siblings were bidding farewell to their Hoover friends and moving into a house in Gulf Shores.

“It was different. Going to Gulf Shores Middle School compared to Hoover Middle School was different. Everyone had crazy hair that was naturally long, and I had gel all over my hair spiked up everywhere. I was definitely not fitting into the look,” Swiger said with a laugh. “Thankfully, we were blessed to be talented enough to play sports and made a lot of friends through sports and made friends quick.”

Swiger found his place playing baseball, football and track and field. He and his brothers also formed a skimboard team and dreamed of opening a surf shop called Swiger Brothers Surf Shop.

Swiger wasn’t in art class in high school, but he did design his first logo in eighth grade for his skimboard





SWIGER STUDIO MURAL TRAIL

Hog Wild Beach BBQ
911 Gulf Shores Pkwy.

Printing Zone (interior)
3817 Gulf Shores Pkwy., Suite E

Swiger Studio Fence
1538 Gulf Shores Pkwy., Unit 6

Swiger Studio Art Gallery (exterior)
1538 Gulf Shores Pkwy., Unit 6

Our Lady of the Gulf Catholic Church (interior)
308 E. 22nd Ave.

The Royal Oyster
4159 County Road 6

Sea Paws Dog Resort
4193 Plash Road, Gulf Shores

Island Vape Company
901 Gulf Shores Pkwy.

Souvenir City
217 Gulf Shores Pkwy.

team, UNO Skim Boarding Team, and started making and editing videos. He said he was inspired by the television show Jackass. Art and graphic design were not on his radar when it was time to head to college. He went to Huntingdon College on a football scholarship and opted to study business. He always knew he wanted to be his own boss and own a business, and he felt that major would give him the basics he needed. He excelled on the football field but not in the classroom. "I went to school for business and immediately began flunking everything," he said. "It was all macro and microeconomics and quantitative methods. I am not a numbers guy, and it was way over my head. I just started failing school, and I

wasn't going to be able to play if I didn't get my grades up. It wasn't something I was into, but in the back of my mind I thought I needed to go to business school to own my own business one day." One thing he was excelling at was creating T-shirts. He was underwhelmed by the school's branded merchandise available in the bookstore and wanted a cooler design, so he started making his own using simple supplies in his dorm room. The shirts caught on. Soon, he had intermural teams coming to him for custom team shirts, and his football teammates wanted shirts. Even the coaches got on board. Soon, he was ordering bulk T-shirt blanks and upgrading his equipment to keep up with demand.



“I remember going to class on the first day of graphic design, and I had never been more excited to be in a classroom. I was so stoked.”

Just before it was time to register for classes his junior year, his position coach called him into his office. Swiger was doing OK in school since switching to sports management. He was doing good on the gridiron, but he was crushing the T-shirt business. The coach asked if he ever thought of studying graphic design and helped Swiger see he was already doing some of the coursework with his T-shirts. Huntingdon had just created their graphic design program, and Swiger signed up. "I remember going to class on the first day of graphic design, and I had never been more excited to be in a classroom. I was so stoked," Swiger said. "When he pulled up Photoshop and all the Adobe software, I was so eager to learn how to manipulate photos and get out of Paint. I had been using this rip-off program for years. I was like, 'Let's professionalize this, and this is going to make my life easier.'" Swiger learned how to use Adobe, about different painting styles and photography and was exposed to a wide variety of artists. Soon, his spare room in his off-campus housing became an art studio where he experimented.

His trials with spray paint and graffiti even chased out his neighbor who couldn't tolerate the noise or smells. He soon found an artist, Shepard Fairey, whose work he was inspired by and began to emulate. He liked his rouge nature and large-form work. Fairey was the inspiration for Swiger's senior capstone project in which he had to create an art exhibit of his work to display in the Seay Twins Art Gallery. He had a whole wall to fill and knew he wanted his project to have a message and a meaning. During his time as a bartender at the end of Commerce Street in Montgomery, Swiger made friends with a homeless man who would ask for money in exchange for taking out the garbage at the end of the night. Swiger would give him rides to the abandoned building he called home and let him sleep on his couch when the weather was too cold. He said he found all the homeless people sleeping on a place called Commerce Street ironic. He titled his project Commerce Street Refugees. Swiger went out with a bag full of McDonald's cheeseburgers and a blank

cardboard sign. He asked the men of Commerce Street if he could photograph them with the sign. He was cussed out and chased off by some but found six willing to participate. Swiger said his friend helped him gain trust and access. "The sign was blank because I wanted to type my own message into what they were holding," Swiger said. "One sign said, 'Keep your money I want change.' Another said, 'God picks favorites.' Another said, 'Be all you can be,' and the man holding the sign had an Army hat on. They were all saying very heartfelt things that were making you think and were kind of ironic." He printed the photos in large format and created a mixed-media background. The photos were also hung high so people had to look up to the subjects. It went over so well that the library purchased some of his work from the show, one of which is a self-portrait that still hangs there today. After graduating, Swiger landed a job working as a digital marketing manager and graphic designer for a construction company. The money was good, but it wasn't what he saw as a long-term situation. He dreamed of traveling and exploring his art abroad, so he saved and made plans to take a year off in Australia. His parents begged him not to go, but he took off and worked and enjoyed being creative again. While in Australia, Swiger honed his videography skills documenting his adventures. When he returned home in 2016, his parents saw a way to use those skills in their real estate venture. His parents purchased a drone, and he got certified to fly it. He created listing videos at a time when real estate companies in the area were not use much video. His videos doubled the real estate company's sales in one year. His brother Michael graduated from Flagler College with a degree in graphic design and spent a year working in Hilton Head, South Carolina, before returning to Gulf Shores. He was pulled into Swiger & Company Realtors, too. JD focused on photography and videography while Michael took on more of the graphic design work. The money was good, but they were still working for someone else. The duo branched off on their own and created Swiger Creation Studio. They were painting, filming weddings, shooting commercials for a local business and making commissioned artwork, business logos and websites. He laughed when he said they would do anything if people were paying. The experience was vital because it helped them learn what they didn't find creatively fulfilling, like creating websites. Over time, they decided to rebrand and focus on their fine art and became Swiger Studio. Over the years, Swiger has explored different mediums and styles and found artists whose work he liked enough to emulate. He and Michael started creating more art and hosting art shows

out of their house. He created his first mural in his bedroom and worked to get out in the community. It didn't happen overnight.

The first local break came in 2017 when they brought a load of their work to the Gulf Coast Arts Alliance and asked if they could display it. It was their first time being accepted into a gallery.

"Being able to post on social media 'come see our artwork at the Gulf Coast Arts Alliance' gave us a huge boost," he said. "Then we became sponsors and volunteers for Ballyhoo Festival, and we did all their design and promotion throughout the year. We also shot a highlight film during the festival. Then, the Gulf Coast Arts Alliance was introducing us as their new marketing managers and graphic designers."

Swiger said the experience with GCAA, showing yearly at the Ballyhoo Festival and being in the gallery was giving him more credibility as an artist. His art improved every year.

But by 2019, he felt his art had lost its message. He spent the car ride home from a family trip in Key West thinking of what his message would be, should be.

"I realized if I ever wanted to be known for something, I needed to have a meaning to what I am doing," Swiger said.

"The day I got back to Gulf Shores, I hit the ground running. I knew in my head I wanted to use trash because that is something I have always been passionate about. I was a lifeguard on the beach. I started being a Captain Planet-type guy. It would be nothing for me to just walk on the beach and pick up a bunch of crap and throw it away."

He grabbed a bag and headed to the beach near his house. There was no plan, no vision of what he would make. He just felt a need to collect materials. He started working in abstract, taking a canvas he built and hot gluing pieces of colored plastic to it. His first piece was completed Jan. 10, 2019, just days after returning from Key West.

His work continued to evolve and pick up steam on social media. He gave them titles like "War on Plastic" and "Plastic Invasion." Keeping the beaches clean was the motivation behind it, and he had found again in his art found joy.

In the first year, he came out with 20 large-scale pieces that were well-received because the community could latch on to the message. But a pinnacle for him was finally having his work recognized by the Orange Beach Coastal Art Center.

"For the first time in my life, I walked into Big Beach (Brewery) and someone was like, 'I love your art.' I was being recognized for the first time in my life as an artist, and I was ecstatic," he said.



"I realized if I ever wanted to be known for something, I needed to have a meaning to what I am doing."



Much of what he creates now are 3D sculptures made with found objects, AKA litter. In his studio, you can see a knight covered in Swisher Sweet wrappers, a life-sized pelican made of plastic found on the beach and a life-sized alligator head made of plastic. There is also a shark that will soon be headed to the University of Southern Mississippi Marine Education Center in Ocean Springs, Mississippi.

"I knew if I could beat people in the head with another piece every single week people would be like, 'damn, this is who he is and this is what he is known for now,'" he said.

He has found a medium and a meaning, but that doesn't mean he has his next project pre-destined.

"I am excited myself. I truly don't know," he said. "Every year, I wonder how I am going to top last year. I don't even stress about it because I have full faith that the creativity is going to hit me one day."

...



MEET THE SWIGER FAMILY

David and Angie Swiger founded Swiger & Company Realtors LLC in 2008 and rehabilitate commercial properties like The Square and the old Frith's Bait Shop building.

Kristen Swiger is their oldest and works with her parents as a real estate agent.

Michael Swiger is the second youngest. He is a graphic designer and an artist in his own right. He and JD work together on projects, including murals that can be found around town.

Joseph Swiger is the youngest and lives in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, where he runs Swiger Studio Baton Rouge, a music production and audio engineering studio. He has earned three Billboard plaques.



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STARTERS

3 AMIGOS CHEESE DIP

Large bowl of our delicious cheese dip with grilled shrimp, steak* and chicken. Served with pico de gallo on the side and warm flour tortillas. 10.99

NEW! CARNITA FRIES

French fries piled high with slow roasted pork, jalapeño, cilantro and raw onion, topped with cheese dip and sour cream. 9.99

CACTUS GUACAMOLE

Fresh chunks of avocado mixed with tomatoes, onions, light jalapeños, lime juice and cilantro. LARGE 9.99 | SMALL 5.99

CANTINA SAMPLER

A trio of our famous cheese dip, pico de gallo and guacamole. 10.99 (no substitutions please)

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LARGE 8.49 | SMALL 5.49

BEEF + CHEESE DIP

LARGE 8.49 | SMALL 5.49

CHORIZO SAUSAGE + CHEESE DIP

LARGE 8.99 | SMALL 5.99

JALAPEÑO + CHEESE DIP

LARGE 8.49 | SMALL 5.49

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FAJITA NACHOS

Grilled steak* or chicken on a bed of tortilla chips with onions and bell peppers. Topped with cheese dip and sour cream. 13.99

GRANDE SUPREME NACHOS

Tortilla chips topped with black or refried beans, seasoned shredded chicken or ground beef, lettuce, tomatoes, sour cream, jalapeños and topped with cheese dip. 12.99
Sub steak* or grilled chicken + 2.99

TEXAS FAJITA NACHOS

Grilled steak*, chicken and shrimp on a bed of tortilla chips with onions and bell peppers. Topped with cheese dip and sour cream. 14.99

NACHOS

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CHEESE & BEAN 8.49

CHEESE & BEEF 9.49

CHEESE & SHREDDED CHICKEN 9.99

CHEESE, BEEF & BEAN 8.99

QUESADILLAS

Served with lettuce, tomatoes, sour cream and cheese.
Add rice and beans + 2.99
Top with cheese dip +2.25

SHRIMP QUESADILLA

Grilled shrimp served inside a flour tortilla with melted cheese. Served with lettuce, sour cream and tomatoes. 13.99

TEXAS FAJITA QUESADILLA

Grilled steak*, chicken and shrimp with sautéed onions and peppers served inside a flour tortilla with melted cheese. 13.99

GRILLED CHICKEN OR STEAK QUESADILLA

Grilled chicken or steak* served inside a flour tortilla with melted cheese. Served with lettuce, sour cream and tomatoes. CHICKEN 12.49 STEAK 13.99

FAJITA QUESADILLA

Grilled steak* or chicken with sautéed onions and peppers. Served inside a flour tortilla with melted cheese. CHICKEN 13.99 STEAK 14.49

CHEESE QUESADILLA

7.99

SHREDDED CHICKEN QUESADILLA

8.99

GROUND BEEF QUESADILLA

8.99

VEGETARIAN

VEGGIE FAJITAS

Grilled tomatoes, spinach, broccoli, mushrooms, green and red bell peppers and onions. Served with Mexican rice, beans, lettuce, sour cream, guacamole and pico de gallo accompanied with flour tortillas. 12.49

SPINACH AND MUSHROOM QUESADILLA

Flour tortilla stuffed with melted cheese, sautéed spinach and mushrooms with sour cream, lettuce and tomatoes served on the side. 10.99
Add rice and / or beans + 2.99

CACTUS VEGGIE BURRITO

Seasoned mixed veggies wrapped in a large flour tortilla, topped with sour cream and avocado. Served with your choice of two (2): Mexican rice, black beans, Cactus grits or refried beans. 12.99

SPINACH ENCHILADAS

Two enchiladas filled with sautéed spinach and tomatoes and topped with enchilada sauce. Served with your choice of two (2): Mexican rice, black beans, Cactus grits or refried beans. 12.49

FAJITAS

A sizzling platter of bell peppers and onions with your choice of meat. All fajitas are served with lettuce, pico de gallo, sour cream, guacamole and choice of two (2) sides: Mexican rice, black beans, cactus grits or refried beans.

CHICKEN 14.99

SHRIMP 15.99

STEAK 16.99

PIÑA FAJITAS

A grilled half pineapple stuffed with chicken, sautéed bell peppers and onion. 17.99 Substitute: Steak* + 3.00 Shrimp + 2.00.

TEXAS FAJITAS

A sizzling platter of bell peppers and onions with grilled steak*, chicken and shrimp. 16.99

SEAFOOD

GULF FISH TACOS

Served two different ways: Grilled or Fried.

CANTINA STYLE: Tossed in Boom Boom sauce and topped with pineapple black bean pico, cilantro-lime cabbage.

TRADITIONAL STYLE: Topped with lettuce, pico de gallo and honey habanero sauce. Served with your choice of two sides. TWO TACOS 13.99 THREE TACOS 15.99

NEW! BOOM-BOOM SHRIMP TACOS

Fried shrimp tossed in our Boom-Boom sauce topped with cilantro-lime cabbage, pineapple-black beans and pico de gallo. Served with two sides. TWO TACOS 13.99 THREE TACOS 15.99

SHRIMP + GRITS

A bowl of our delicious Cactus-style grits mixed with our seasoned jumbo shrimp. 10.49

SHRIMP DIABLO

Grilled shrimp cooked with our spicy cheese sauce served with two sides. 14.99

GRILLED SHRIMP TACOS

TRADITIONAL STYLE: Topped with lettuce, pico de gallo, an avocado slice and our honey habanero sauce. CANTINA STYLE: Tossed in Boom Boom sauce and topped with pineapple black bean pico, cilantro-lime cabbage. TWO TACOS 12.99 THREE TACOS 14.99

SEAFOOD QUESADILLA

Grilled shrimp and grilled gulf fish with fresh pico de gallo, sautéed onions and bell peppers. Served with sour cream, lettuce and tomato on the side. 13.49
Add rice and/or beans + 2.49
Top with cheese dip + 1.99

GULF COAST SEAFOOD BURRITO

A blend of grilled gulf fish and shrimp mixed with fresh pico de gallo, house spices and tomato salsa, then topped with cheese dip and red burrito sauce. Served with your choice of two (2): Mexican rice, black beans, Cactus grits or refried beans 15.49

BURRITOS

Burritos are served with your choice of two (2): Mexican rice, black or refried beans or cactus grits.

CALIFORNIA BURRITO

Grilled steak or chicken with your choice of two sides all rolled into one large flour tortilla topped with cheese dip, avocados, sour cream and your choice of hot or mild salsa 15.99

TEXAS BURRITO

Large flour tortilla stuffed with grilled steak*, chicken, shrimp, grilled onions and bell peppers. Covered in our cheese dip and salsa. 15.99

BURRITO MEXICANA

Shredded chicken, carnitas or ground beef rolled in a flour tortilla, covered with cheese dip and topped with lettuce and sour cream. 12.99

CACTUS GRILLED BURRITO

Large flour tortilla with grilled steak* or chicken and covered with our cheese dip. CHICKEN 12.49 STEAK 13.99

BURRITO RANCHERO

Large flour tortilla filled with grilled steak* or chicken, grilled onions, peppers and topped with our zesty ranchero salsa and cheese dip. 13.99

DESSERTS

SOPAPILLA 2.99

With ice cream 4.79

CHURROS 4.99

CHEESECAKE CHIMICHANGA

With strawberry sauce. 4.99

FRIED ICE CREAM 4.99

BEVERAGES



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TEA | DR PEPPER | SPRITE
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+ SALSAS

TACO SALAD

A large crispy tortilla shell on a bed of refried beans, filled with lettuce, tomato, sour cream and your choice of shredded chicken or ground beef with a side of our cheese dip. 10.99

CACTUS GRILLED CHICKEN SALAD

Grilled chicken over lettuce, spinach, avocado and diced tomatoes, topped with pico de gallo. 10.49
Sub grilled steak* + 2.49

NEW! BOOM-BOOM SHRIMP SALAD

Mixed greens with onion, tomato, shredded cheese and fried shrimp tossed in a Boom-Boom sauce. 12.99

TEXAS FAJITA SALAD

Grilled steak, chicken or shrimp with sautéed onions and bell peppers on a bed of refried beans in a crispy tortilla shell with lettuce, tomatoes and sour cream, drizzled with cheese. CHICKEN 11.49 STEAK 12.99 TEXAS 13.49

CALDO DE CAMARON

A traditional soup with shrimp, Mexican rice, onions, spinach, red bell peppers, mushrooms and cilantro, topped with sliced avocado. 9.99

CALDO DE POLLO

Authentic Mexican-style chicken soup with Mexican rice, onions, red bell peppers and cilantro, topped with sliced avocado. 7.99

TACOS

All taco entrees are served with your choice of two sides: Mexican rice, black beans, Cactus grits or refried beans. Tortilla choice of soft flour, soft corn or hard corn shell.

GRINGO TACOS
Juicy grilled chicken tacos with fresh grilled pineapple and chorizo. Topped with raw onion and cilantro. TWO TACOS 13.99 THREE TACOS 15.99

CACTUS TACOS

Seasoned ground beef or shredded chicken tacos with fresh pico de gallo, lettuce and cheese. TWO TACOS 12.49 THREE TACOS 13.49

TACOS DE POLLO

Juicy grilled chicken tacos with fresh pico de gallo, lettuce and cheese. TWO TACOS 13.99 THREE TACOS 14.99

NEW! CARNITAS TACOS

Authentic slow-roasted pork on soft corn tortillas with cilantro and raw onion, and a side of cilantro-lime cabbage and salsa verde. TWO TACOS 12.99 THREE TACOS 13.49

STEAK TACOS

Grilled marinated steak* tacos with pico de gallo, lettuce and cheese. TWO TACOS 14.99 THREE TACOS 15.99

TRADITIONAL plates

Traditional plates are served with your choice of two (2): Mexican rice, black or refried beans or cactus grits

NEW! FLAUTAS

Three flour tortillas fried with your choice of shredded chicken, carnitas, or ground beef. Served with pico de gallo, lettuce, sour cream, and a side of cheese dip. 13.99

CACTUS BOWL

All bowls are served with Mexican rice, black beans, broccoli, pico de gallo, and choice of guacamole or sour cream.

GRILLED CHICKEN 11.99

GRILLED STEAK 14.99

GRILLED SHRIMP 12.99

CARNITAS 12.99

VEGGIES 11.99

CHICKEN DIABLO

Grilled chicken cooked with our spicy cheese sauce. 14.99

POLLO CACTUS MELT

Chicken breast smothered in bell peppers, onions and our cheese sauce. 14.49

ARROZ CON POLLO

Grilled chicken served on a bed of rice topped with cheese dip. 10.99 (no sides)

ENCHILADA SUPREME

One shredded chicken, one beef and one cheese enchilada topped with lettuce, tomato and sour cream. 13.99

CARNITAS

Slow-simmered pork tips cooked with sautéed onions. Served with fresh tortillas, lettuce, guacamole, pico de gallo and sour cream. 14.99

CARNE ASADA

A grilled 9-oz skirt steak served on a sizzling bed of onions and bell peppers 15.99

TADQUITOS

Three corn tortillas fried with your choice of shredded chicken, carnitas, or ground beef. Served with pico de gallo, lettuce, sour cream and cheese dip. 13.99

CHIMICHANGA PLATE

A large flour tortilla stuffed with beef or shredded chicken, then lightly fried and topped with cheese dip. 12.99
Add steak* or grilled chicken + 1.99

COMBOS

All combos are served with your choice of two sides: Mexican rice, black or refried beans or Cactus grits. Additional charges for steak*, grilled chicken or shrimp.

BURRITO - CHILE RELLENO ENCHILADA - TAMALE TACO - CHALUPA - TOSTADA

ANY ONE 10.49
ANY TWO 11.99
ANY THREE 13.99

*THESE ITEMS ARE COOKED TO ORDER. Consuming raw or undercooked meats, poultry, seafood, shellfish or eggs may increase your risk of foodborne illness, especially if you have a medical condition.

KIDS' MENU

For children 12 years and younger, includes soft drink or tea (dine-in only), add 2.00 for adults.

TACO

Chicken or beef taco served with your choice of two (2): Mexican rice, black beans, Cactus grits or refried beans. 6.99

ENCHILADA MEAL

Cheese, chicken or beef enchilada served with your choice of two (2): Mexican rice, beans, Cactus grits or fries. 6.99

CACTUS MINI BURRITO

Beef or shredded chicken burrito served with your choice of two (2): Mexican rice, beans, Cactus grits or fries. 6.99 Substitute steak* or grilled chicken + 1.50

CACTUS FINGERS

Chicken fingers with fries. 6.99

Disclaimer - price subject to change.

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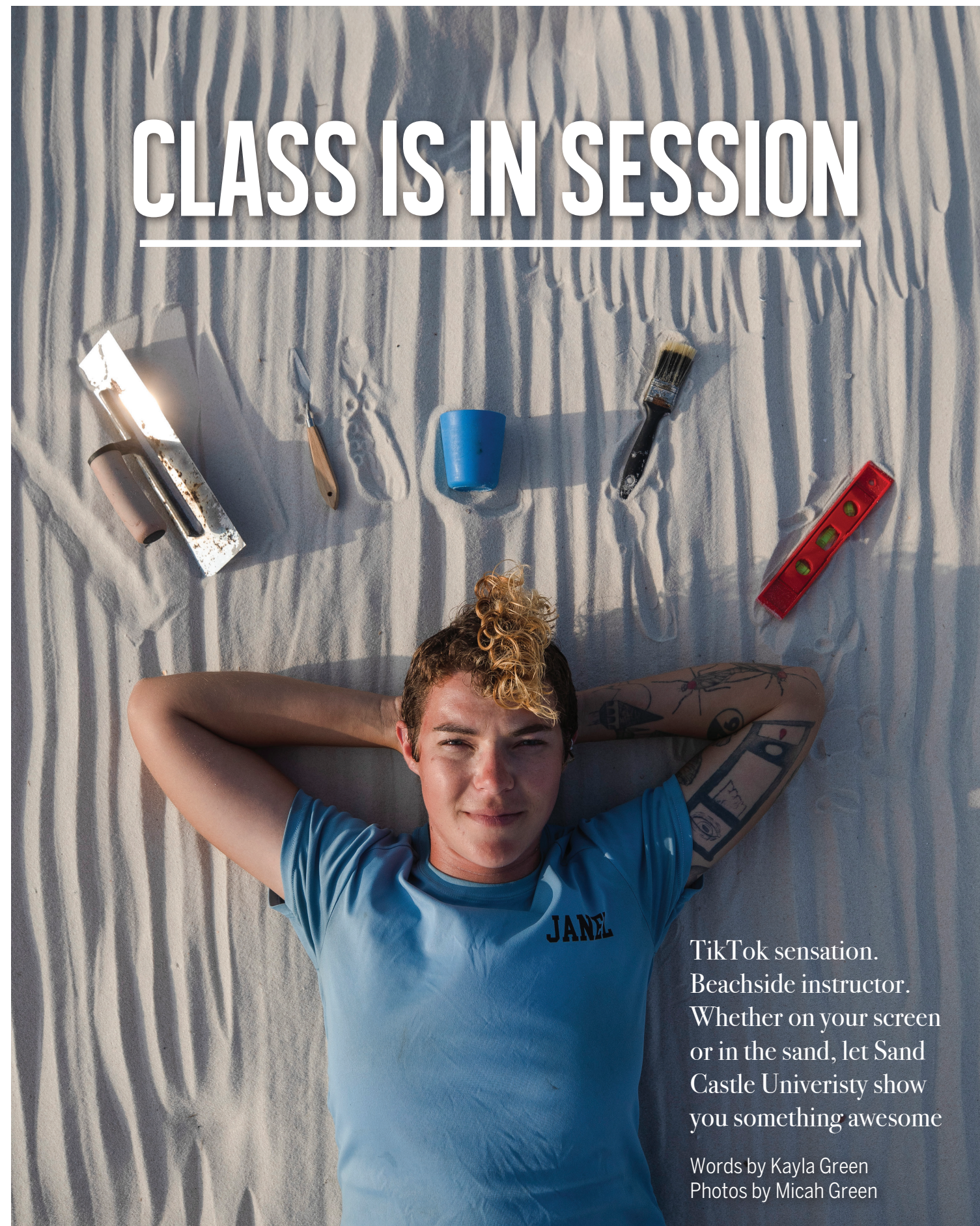
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CLASS IS IN SESSION



TikTok sensation.
Beachside instructor.
Whether on your screen
or in the sand, let Sand
Castle Univeristy show
you something awesome

Words by Kayla Green
Photos by Micah Green

Janel Hawkins is tapping into something intrinsically pure along the sandy-white beaches of Baldwin County's Gulf Shores and Orange Beach. Well, in the sand, really.

Kids build sandcastles at the beach as their parents bake in the sun. They play. They get dirty. They pack dry sand into mounds, drip wet beach mud onto itself until the tower falls, screaming in delight as they witness destruction. Or they stomp it themselves.

What makes Hawkins tower above the level of standard play is she has made it an art and a business model.

She has leveraged two opposite powers to share her work through Sand Castle University. The power of awe inspired by in-person observation on one scale, the power of virality built by digitized social media buzz. Over 8 million tourists visited Baldwin County in 2021, representing 28% of the total number visitors to the entire state. Baldwin County residents only make up 4.7% of the state population.

That guarantees a lot of passersby when Hawkins, a professional sandcastle sculptor, builds behemoth beach turtles in front of The Hangout all afternoon. Her TikTok, @sand_castle_university, has nearly 263,000 followers. Her account has 7.5 million likes, spanning content that ranges from time lapse videos to ASMR episodes (the term used to describe the tingling response people get from watching varying types of "soothing" or "satisfying" videos with sound). People like footage of her commissions and classes, shots of her running feet first into a finished piece and clips of her throwing handfuls off wet sand onto a pile of wet sand that in 30 seconds becomes into a castle with arches and doors and windows and small seashells decorated atop the railing.

A boy, seemingly a teenager or whereabouts, and his friend walk over to Hawkins as she brushes sand debris from thin canals that run through and around one of the turtle's legs to denote scales.

"Haven't I seen you on TikTok?" he asks, coolly.





GETTING STARTED? CARRY THESE SAND SCULPTING TOOLS

FORM BUCKET

To pound up and make the basic of a form, use heavy-duty scissors or a saw to cut the bottom off a bucket to create a tube that will build a packed form of a sand tower.

LUBRICANT

Some sand sculptors line their form buckets with a lubricant to prevent sticking. If you do this, make sure to use a biodegradable product. You can also skip this tool and tap hard against the form bucket to prevent the sand from sticking. Practice makes perfect.

WATER BUCKET

For hauling water. You need a lot of water to make a sandcastle that doesn't collapse.

PLASTIC SHOVEL

To fill your form bucket with sand and to create a large sand outline for your sculpture. Use a small shovel or buy a snow shovel for larger projects. **NOTE:** Do not dig holes on the beach. They impede turtle hatchlings and are a prohibited hazard.

MEASURING SPOONS

Great for creating windows in castles. A basic kitchen supply set will give you various shapes and sizes.

SERVING SPATULA

Helps with various steps like removing sand and making stairs.

SPATULA/PALLET KNIFE

Perfect for creating lines and shapes for details.

STRAW

Use a biodegradable straw to help with details. Use them to blow the sand out of lines and shapes.

CHIP BRUSH

Use to brush sand away while keeping details and sculpture form. Use any type, big or small, firm or soft.

"Yes, and now you can say you've seen me in real life," she says with a sense she is truly listening while simultaneously whipping the brush over the sand-animal's giant leg, back and forth in quick, swift motions.

"Sick!" the boy says, and he and his friend continue toward their larger gaggle of friends.

TikTok has unquestionably boosted Hawkins, her art and her business. But like her feet in the sand, she remains grounded.

"I'm just a business, not an influencer. That's an importance difference because that means I don't have to do any paid ads or sponsored content or any of that," she said. "If TikTok goes down, I lose that following, but I still have my business."

Back on the beach, she posts a sign during her builds that explains a class or project is in progress. She encourages observers to take photos and includes her social media handles. The classes she (and her now also handful of employees) teaches pay the bills so she can be more selective in the commissions she takes. Plus, the intricate builds are the ones that go viral on TikTok. Teaching groups the basics over and over keep her rote memory of technique far better than up to snuff, so when she gets out on her own, she can let her creativity go wild.

And wild they have gone.

A sea serpent with a castle inside its mouth. A skyscraper with a smooth, slanted exterior indented by windows. An alligator resting in the sea of sand as her body is partially submerged. A crown sits atop her bony head.

She tries to add a new build option for classes each year. In 2023, she's offering a hammerhead shark for



beginners and an octopus for the advanced level.

BUILDING HER CRAFT

Saying it's play is not to undermine the effort.

She spent two years in an apprenticeship under a master sand sculptor and has all the steps any business must take. After launching her business solo in 2017, she hired her 76-year-old neighbor to be her administrator and help with expansion. She takes heed that she works in nature and with our precious resources that make this area desirable, so she doesn't dig holes. She buys shovels and buckets that adhere to Gulf Shores' and Orange Beach's different regulations (some are about size, other about material). She uses biodegradable straws.

And it's not without obstacles. She had a personal trainer teach her how to stand and move in the sand all day. She must be vigilant about hydration and sun-protection.

But let's not get too into the dunes. It's hard work. It's fun. It's art.

"It's the opposite of a fine art," she said. "When you're building, you do you. There are no rules at sculpting competitions, so whatever works, you make it work."

She has a list of tools on her website that guide a beginner looking to solo sculpt. Her own arsenal is more varied, honed through years of experience in her apprenticeship and self-learning, but there is a low barrier to entry. A photo of her finished King of the Gulf, an octopus with legs curving like

“It’s the opposite of a fine art ...
When you’re building, you do you.
There are no rules at sculpting
competitions, so whatever works,
you make it work.”



Photo courtesy of Janel Hawkins



NEED TO KNOW

Sand Castle University provides the tools you'll need. What should you bring?

- Drinking water
- Sunglasses
- Towel
- Sunscreen
- Creativity!
- Cash tips are accepted

Classes (and Sand Castle University) are possible because of our natural world. Respect it's power.

-Weather decisions are made the day of your booking. There is no fee if your instructor cancels or ends class early because of weather. If possible, you may reschedule.

COST

Group size and class type determines the cost. All ages are welcome! Children 3 years and younger do not count in the total number of participants but may participate with an adult or hang out while class is in session. Other members of your group can observe and hang out. Only participating people are counted in the group pricing.

CHOOSE YOUR CLASS!

Introductory – 1 hour

- Traditional Castle
- Turtle
- Crab
- Hammerhead Shark

Advanced – 2 hours

- Traditional Castle
- Sea Serpent
- Mermaid Tail (interactive tail/fin)



Photo courtesy of Janel Hawkins



“Like ‘This was supposed to be a dollhouse, but now it’s a modern skyscraper. The sand tells you what it wants to do. I always want it to be something. I hate walking away without finishing.’”



a roller coaster and feet sticking out from the ground (that is until, according to video evidence, she smooshes and smashes them before taking a bow), at sunset inspires awe like any museum piece, but her tools are not expensive, one-time-use paints and canvases, her access to a studio not dependent on clout. Tentacle suction cups can be scooped out with measuring cups. *She works like a butcher, who chops and slides his knife with precision only successful when used in confident quickness, imbibed with a potter’s touch from which a blob births a masterpiece. She pours water onto the turtle’s legs, being careful to not really dump but rather push it across them, like a wave on a no-flag Gulf afternoon. Dips and hills form the shell of the turtle’s*

back from its head to its “cute little butt.”

AT HOME
Hawkins loves sand sculpting. It isn’t the kind of thing you do if you don’t. She graduated from Foley High School in 2011 and worked at a sand sculpting company during college, where she studied business. Hawkins does not love traveling. Why would she? Through those regional commissions during college, she learned her hometown beach has everything she needs. “To have a consistent location that’s well-maintained?” she said. “I’m the only one doing this from Destin to Galveston.” And the sand. People come from all over the country to spend their one week of vacation on Alabama’s Gulf Coast for a lot

of the same reasons Hawkins likes working here. The fluffy, sugar-white sand looks as good as it does on tourism websites as in the shape of a castle. Sand here is white because it’s full of quartz crystal from the Appalachian Mountains that flowed into the Gulf of Mexico after the last Ice Age. Beached quartz is good for sculpting because it’s soft, condenses well and holds together. In quartz, the details shine. The sand on Florida’s east coast is a good texture because it’s silty, but its brown loses a build’s curves, its grooves and indentations. “Right now, I’m obsessed with rooftops and railings and pushing the limits on how deep you can go,” Hawkins said. Hawkins’ story is largely one of success.

Social media following, local popularity. She’ll be creating a massive masterpiece for Hangout Music Festival this May. After starting out alone, she now has five instructors on payroll. But that’s not how she defines herself. “People never ask me what it’s like when it doesn’t turn out at all like you planned,” she said. “Like ‘This was supposed to be a dollhouse, but now it’s a modern skyscraper. The sand tells you what it wants to do. I always want it to be something. I hate walking away without finishing.’” *The turtle will not last long. It never does. It will be returned to its non-formed state whether by the force of feet, the crushing of rain or the erosion of wind, becoming part of the beach that brings Hawkins back and people to her.*

She walks in a circular motion, at first around the edges of the sand-reptile’s form, each orbit a wider circumference. As she walks, a rake she drags behind her creates an evenly lined surface, like an oversized zen garden. It – and she – is ready for their cover shot. The knowledge for preparation? She’s a TikTok star. A professional artist. She knows what she’s doing. Just like the Gulf and its current, she calmly forms, reforms, sometimes destroys. But she’s there. Count yourself lucky if you witness it, on whichever end of the power spectrum you find her.

...





*Open 7 days a Week
 Located in Ft. Morgan
 7am – Sunset*

Rise & Shine BREAKFAST

Served Daily 7am - 11am

The Basics

- BREAKFAST BOWL** | 8
 gouda grits topped with hash browns, a fried egg & crumbled bacon
- BREAKFAST BUDDY** | 8
 fried egg with cheese and choice of bacon, sausage or ham on toasted English muffin. Comes with grits or hashbrowns
- ALL AMERICAN** | 12
 two eggs any style, bacon, sausage or ham, grits or hash browns with toast
- BISCUITS, GRAVY & EGGS** | 11
 two biscuits topped with two fried eggs covered with sausage gravy
- BREAKFAST BURRITO** | 8
 scrambled egg, sausage or bacon & cheddar cheese comes with grits or hashbrowns

Specialties
 { SHRIMP & GOUDA GRITS | 16 }

Sweets

choice of bacon, sausage or ham

FRENCH TOAST | 10

Pancakes

- BLUEBERRY** | 12 **CHOCOLATE CHIP** | 12
BANANA PECAN | 12 **PLAIN** | 10

Benedicts

served with grits or hashbrowns

- CHICKEN FLORENTINE** | 16
 fried chicken, sautéed spinach and basil, poached eggs, hollandaise sauce on a toasted English muffin
- VEGGIE** | 15
 fresh spinach, portabella mushroom, sliced tomatoes, poached eggs, hollandaise sauce, fresh herbs on a toasted English muffin
- CAJUN** | 16
 conecuh sausage, 2 poached eggs, on an english muffin, topped with crawfish queso

Late Day ENTREES

Served Daily 7am - Close

Sandwiches

served with slaw and choice french fries, sweet potato fries, chips, and onion rings

- HAMBURGER** | 14
 8oz patty, choice of cheese, on a buttered toasted bun
- TERIYAKI CHICKEN BREAST** | 14
 bacon & swiss cheese on a toasted ciabatta roll dressed & served with honey mustard sauce
- BUFFALO CHICKEN** | 14
 fried chicken tenders coated with a spicy buffalo sauce. Served dressed on a toasted bun with a rancho bleu or swiss cheese dressing
- REUBEN** | 14
 corn beef, swiss cheese, sauerkraut & thousand island dressing on grilled rye
- TURKEY FLATBREAD** | 14
 turkey, swiss, spinach with a pesto sauce
- SHRIMP POBOY OR WRAP** | 15
 remoulade sauce, dressed on a warm cuban hogie
- MAHI POBOY OR WRAP** | 16
 fried, grilled or blackened

Platters
 { SHRIMP PLATTER OR FISH PLATTER | 16
 grilled, fried or blackened, corn fritters, coleslaw & choice of side
 CHICKEN TENDERS PLATTER | 14
 SEAFOOD COMBO | 19
 mahi, shrimp, grilled, fried or blackened with choice of side }

Salads

Choice of Ranch, Caesar, Bleu Cheese, Italian, Honey Mustard, Apple Cider Vinaigrette & Balsamic Vinaigrette

- CRAISIN SALAD** | 9
 Mixed Greens with Sugar Coated Walnuts, Goat Cheese, & Craisins Served with an Apple Cider Vinaigrette. Add Chicken Or Shrimp \$6
- CAESAR SALAD** | 9
 Romaine Lettuce, Parmesan Cheese, Fresh Baked Croutons with Caesar Dressing. Add Chicken Or Shrimp \$6



**GREAT IDEAS FOR
DINNER TONIGHT!**

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Waterfront Family Dining

