

BEACHiN'

Snowbirds, let's eat!

Love seafood? Try Gulf Shores' newest
assemble-your-own boil bag spot.
Plus, a guide to brunch at the beach.

WINTER 2025

7 Things that define
Gulf Shores City Schools
Superintendent Matt Akin

GOODBYE, EARL?

Big Earl has been entertaining crowds at the
famous **Flora-Bama Lounge** for over 30 years,
but he's stepping away from the weekend lineup.

Who is **Jack Robertson**, the man
behind the iconically raucous act?

MARDI GRAS MANIA

Parade schedules, lingo and what to
know before you head out; krêwe!
Also, more events and things to do
on and off the beaten path.

A PUBLICATION OF
GULF COAST MEDIA



Coastal Arts Center OF ORANGE BEACH



~ UPCOMING EVENTS ~ UPDATED LIST - 2025

- Jan. 10 *Four A Change* concert, 6:00 *
- Jan. 24 *Roman Street* concert, 6:00 *
- Jan. 30 Friends of the Arts annual Meet n Greet
- Feb. 13 *Sunderland Cello Quartet*, 6:00 *
- Feb. 21-22 "The Shagwood Secret"
interactive melodrama play *
- March 8-9 **FESTIVAL OF ART!**
- Apr. 24 Friends of the Arts "Grand Event"

**Tickets available at the Coastal Arts Center*

CoastalArtsCenter.com | 251-981-ARTS (2787)
26389 Canal Road, Orange Beach

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BEACH RESORT & GOLF COURSE



OPEN TO THE PUBLIC



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Kiva Dunes Golf Course is always at the top of the list when people talk about the best golf in Alabama, and it's easy to see why. This gorgeous track winds through a secluded piece of land, presenting incredible shotmaking opportunities in an unforgettable setting.



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Jack Robertson stands on the Tent Stage at the Flora-Bama Lounge & Package Store in December 2024, decked out in Christmas attire for the Roast of Big Earl, an event to celebrate his retirement. If you've seen his show any Friday or Saturday evening over the last 31 years, you know no one is safe, and you've probably seen his butt. But do you know how different Jack is from the character so many people have come to enjoy synonymously with the famous bar?

Photo by Micah Green.

COVER STORY 26



6

Off the Beaten Path

Take a day trip to northern Baldwin County to taste local wines, vinegars and spirits at Alabama's first post-Prohibition farm winery.



10

7 Things

Gulf Shores City Schools Superintendent Matt Akin reflects on what inspires him to disrupt education on a national level.



16

Brunch

Forget breakfast, lunch and dinner. Brunching at the beach gives you all the flavor without the restrictions of traditional schedules.



22

Seafood

A new spot in Gulf Shores offers steam-at-home seafood bags so good Shark Tank investors agree.



34

Tattoo

Local artist shares her love for the craft with locals and visitors alike, and she has plans to grow even more.

Perdido Vineyards

Taste wine, vinegars, spirits at Alabama's first post-Prohibition farm winery

Words and photos by Ruth Mayo

THIS WASN'T IN THE BROCHURE!

A series exploring nearby places off the beaten path.

Imagine sitting back in a wooden chair on a covered terrace sipping a glass of sweet muscadine wine while a cool wind blows and leaves gently fall in the vineyard around you.

This peaceful thought may bring images of Californian or Mediterranean grape vines, but this vineyard is in Baldwin County, about an hour and a half from the beach. Located in Perdido, Perdido Vineyards is the perfect getaway to enjoy free tastings of locally produced wines, vinegars, juices and spirits while also learning about the history of the area.

Theresa Grundman, business operations manager at Perdido Winery and Vineyards, explained that as a manufacturer, they can't sell their wine by the glass, but bottles can be purchased and enjoyed on the "veranda" after a tasting to decide which to buy.

While the products and view are the main attractions, there's always more behind it all, or, as Grundman said, "a lot of our stuff has a history to it." Perdido Vineyards earned a historic marker, which is planted just outside the entrance, in 2010.

A BRIEF PERDIDO VINEYARDS HISTORY

Jim Eddins, founder of Perdido Vineyards, served in Korea and Vietnam before returning to Washington D.C. to serve in "presidential duties." He retired in the late '60s/early '70s and became an engineer at IBM, where he met his "New York-native wife," Marianne. After the couple married, Eddins decided he wanted to move back home, so he brought his newlywed to lower Alabama.

Grundman provided a historical background on why Eddins started the vineyards; he was dedicated to finding a bottle of wine that his wife liked to drink.

Alcohol couldn't be bought in grocery stores or gas stations



PERDIDO VINEYARDS IS AT 22100 COUNTY ROAD 47 IN NORTHERN BALDWIN COUNTY.

Take AL-59 north, continuing straight onto Bay Minette Bypass/McMeans Avenue, to Interstate 65 North. Stay on I-65 for 7.2 miles, then take exit 45 toward Rabun/Perdido. Turn right onto CR-47, and it will be on your right in 0.4 miles.

at the time as the state of Alabama regulated and sold all the alcohol in the state.

“So, you can imagine there wasn’t a whole lot of choices and especially as wine goes because, you know, wine’s really more of a recent thing,” Grundman said, “I mean, they’ve been making wine for hundreds of thousands of years, but it’s really become popular in the last, you know, maybe few decades I would say.”

Eddins searched continuously for a bottle of wine suitable for Marianne’s taste. Grundman spoke of a video of Eddins where he said, “I would’ve swam Mobile Bay for that woman.”

He found a muscadine wine that Marianne liked at the now-closed Bartels Winery in

Pensacola. However, a new problem arose as Eddins soon found out the wine she liked was hard to keep in stock due to a lack of muscadine cultivation in the area, despite it being a native fruit to the Southeast with over 100 varieties.

So, because he was able to, Eddins bought 100 acres in Perdido, planted 50 acres of muscadines and became the supplier for Bartels Winery in 1972. This worked until the owner of Bartels passed away in 1978 and the business slowly shut down, leaving Marianne wineless again. To continue pleasing his wife, Eddins aimed to start his own winery.

This was illegal in the state of Alabama at the time.

“There was actually a state law that said you could not sell alcohol that was made with fruit grown on the same property,” Grundman said.

This went back to the state having a monopoly on alcohol. The state would allow Eddins to make wine to give away or keep for personal consumption, but he was not allowed to sell it, a tough spot to be in with 50 acres of muscadines growing in his backyard.

According to the vineyard’s website, Eddins reached out to his local representative, John McMillan, and senator, Dick Owen, to push for legislation called The Alabama Native Farm Winery Act of 1979, making Perdido Vineyards the first post-prohibition

farm winery in Alabama.

However, his challenges weren’t over yet for Eddins, as he soon found that even though he could now legally run a winery, none of the banks wanted to loan him the money. Grundman said there was no reason Eddins should not have received a loan other than he was producing wine and the banks didn’t want his winery “in the middle of the Bible Belt.”

Eddins did not give up. Grundman said he called “his old buddy” from the U.S. Naval Academy, the late Jimmy Carter, who happened to be serving as president at the time. Eddins told Carter about the banks not loaning him any money, so the president who was also from a small Southern town

“There was actually a state law that said you could not sell alcohol that was made with fruit grown on the same property.”

made a few calls. Soon, Eddins had his loan.

“Between the Naval Academy and serving in the Marines on presidential duty and stuff, he had a lot of very powerful people that he knew,” Grundman said.

The beginning of Casa Perdido Vinegars, made and sold at the vineyards, also started in conflict with the state. Alabama vineyards wanted their products in the state stores. One distributor sued the state, and the state pulled all the wine licenses. Eddins didn’t want to lose his wine supply, so he created wine vinegars and purchased a food permit (with a late fee). Business never slowed down.

“So, that’s how it all started, was just (Marianne) wanted some wine,” Grundman said.

Even the tastings were a product of Marianne’s wine expertise. Her philosophy was to avoid making customers buy a bottle of wine of any brand for it to turn out it isn’t the type they like (say, they unknowingly buy a dry wine but prefer sweet wine), and they decide to never buy from that brand again by default. By offering tastings, the options opened for customers to avoid buying a whole bottle just to see if they liked it or not, potentially turning them off from the brand and wasting wine.

PERDIDO VINEYARDS TODAY

After conflicts and challenges, the winery has come a long way to be the award-winning vineyards they are today. Their vinegars have been recognized in Austria, and their wines have won at state-level competitions for labels and recipes.

In 2021, Eddins passed away, leaving the vineyards to his first cousin. Eddins’ legacy and some of his achievements are preserved in documents and old pictures hanging along the wall of the tasting room/gift shop.

While Eddins was still alive, the vineyards fell to a state of overgrowth after undergoing foreclosure for eight years (a result of yet another conflict). Eddins had to work hard to clear the area after returning to his property. Currently, only about six acres have been cleared for new crops, but progress is ongoing to plant more muscadines for years to come.

Perdido Vineyards is open Monday-Saturday 10 a.m.-5 p.m. For more info, call (251) 937-9463.



7 THINGS

with
Matt Akin
Superintendent
Gulf Shores City Schools

How well do you know Gulf Shores City Schools Superintendent Matt Akin? He's been in the role since the district became its own and has a long tenure in leading successful and innovative city districts in Alabama, including U.S. News & World Report naming Piedmont High School one of America's Best High Schools for 10 consecutive years, from 2007-2016.

A lot of people credit family, their career and sports to the most important aspects in their life, but Akin's 7 Things are so interconnected it seems he couldn't have one without the other, each a brick in the story of who he is today.

Words by Kayla Green
Photos by Micah Green

1. PARENTS' WEDDING PHOTO

Parents are usually the first influences in a person's life, and Akin's set him on a path from childhood. His mom was a pre-K teacher for 30 years and pressured him academically. He, like many kids, resented it at the time, but here's a hint: it's worked out great. His dad, a juvenile probation officer, took him on transport rides so kids felt less alone and along to bring Christmas gifts to others in need. "He taught me the value of caring for other people and not judging them. That the world is a better place when you're kind to people."



2. MAGIC JOHNSON TICKET

Akin has always been a basketball guy, but not everyone makes it to be point guard for the Lakers. (You can make sure you go back to get the autograph after first humbly saying you only need a handshake, though.) With the perspective of distance in time, Akin appreciates how formative it was to be able to observe how his coach reacted to different types of people and emotions. The lessons 16-year-old Akin incurred about teamwork, cooperation and perseverance would carry him through adulthood.

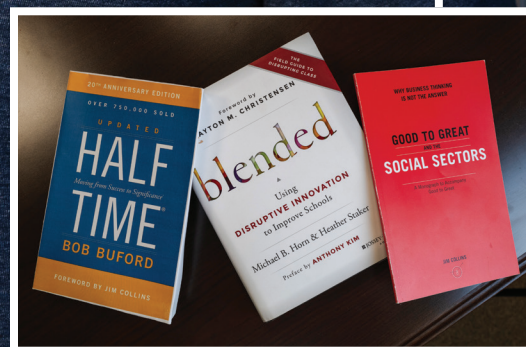


3. STUDENT-BUILT AIRPLANE

Akin's upbringing manifested in his method of educating. Innovation in personalized education and empowering teachers. As Piedmont City Schools superintendent, he gave students laptops, commonplace now but unheard of then, to level the playing field for low-income students. Piedmont was one of 15 inaugural League of Innovative Schools in 2011, now a coalition of more than 150 forward-thinking districts in 34 states. Akin traveled the country to see what other members were doing, including the then-novel notion of learning loss in 2012. He got the idea to let teachers pick topics they're interested in to teach as summer electives. "I learned to really listen, carefully, and ask teachers how do they want to do this? ... Teachers weren't used to that. Teachers are very creative. If we empower them, we can do great things."

4. BOOKS

That membership travels with a superintendent, so Gulf Shores is also an Innovative School. GSCS was going to be good when it split to its own district regardless, Akin said, because it has parental involvement and resources. He wanted to be great. A lifelong learner, Akin credits industry reads for his professional vision to "disrupt schools," to make learning better for any student at any level, whether they're in third grade on a fifth-grade reading level or in fifth grade on a third-grade reading level. His industry tenure has afforded him



introductions and friendships with some of these authors and the ability to share and learn with similarly minded educators across the country. "Halftime" speaks to this concept of sharing success. It's the second half of life. You've earned personal success. What will you do to make a true impact on others now? "It's not about my success anymore."

5. INDUSTRY MILESTONES

Akin served in Piedmont for 14 years and Huntsville City Schools for a little over a year before getting the Gulf Shores job in 2018. The recognition he and his districts have garnered over the years are less focused on standard student achievement. That's a welcome byproduct. In Piedmont, he was named one of five national Leaders to Learn From for building a digital hub so students could access their laptops at home with free internet, before broadband and omnipresent internet reigned. "It let me tell our story of our teachers and our families and impact to other districts, and they would come to visit, and that's what it's all about is to take it to the next level and multiply impact." He learned about a guitar elective in Fort Payne, but Gulf Shores already had that. So, he grew it become the Hangout Music Lab.

6. FAMILY PHOTO WALL

Sharing success hits close to home. Amid the books and papers and Dolphin state championship trophies are the smiling faces of Akin's five children and 10 grandchildren (the 11th is on the way). It's a different worry to strive for your own kids' success, rather than student achievement. Akin and his wife always encouraged them to go see the world. After growing up in Piedmont, a city of 4,400 in 2020, they now live in California, New York, Florida, Louisiana and Fairhope, afforded the ability to work remotely from anywhere. Just like how giving students computers was novel when Akin did it 20 years ago, "we're always saying we're preparing students for jobs that don't exist yet. I can see that now." Akin's thought process: What should schools be? What do I want the educational opportunities to be for them anywhere in the country?

7. PHOTOS WITH FRIENDS

Clearly, Akin is invested in his profession, and he has family influences bookending his motivation. But everyone needs those people you choose. Tourists come for the big beach. Akin stays for the small town. Whether it's getting together after work with friends or participating in the annual Gulf Shores Gives Back service day with hundreds of students, teachers and community members, "we care about each other on a personal level. The friends I have here, I value greatly. I've got people who care and will be there in a time of need. That's often overlooked in a tourist town."



FIND YOUR FUN

THINGS TO DO ON THE GULF COAST
FROM THE BEACH TO THE EASTERN SHORE



WE'VE MADE IT THROUGH THE HOLIDAYS TO THE HEIGHT OF WINTER, THOUGH THE DEFINITION OF COLD MAY VARY DEPENDING IF YOU'RE A YEAR-ROUND LOCAL OR ARE SNOW-BIRDING TO ESCAPE THE BIG CHILL. WHETHER YOU'RE A FAN OF FOOD, ART, MARDI GRAS FESTIVITIES OR EVEN PHYSICAL ACTIVITY, THERE ARE PLENTY OF THINGS TO DO APPROACHING ON THE CALENDAR. IF YOU'RE NEW HERE, EXPLORE YOUR COMMUNITY. IF YOU'RE A SNOWBIRD, WELCOME HOME, IF ONLY FOR A WHILE! IF YOU'RE A LONGTIME LOCAL, TRY SOMETHING NEW OR RETURN TO YOUR FAVORITES. NO MATTER WHO YOU ARE, WE THINK YOU'LL FIND SOMETHING THAT FLOATS YOUR GULF BOAT.

JANUARY

The Big Beach Marathon

What: The Big Beach Marathon and Half Marathon courses are flat and fast, running on the fully paved trails through Gulf State Park. In addition to Sunday's marathon and half marathon, the Safari 7K on Saturday gives attendees an opportunity to take on the Shark or Dolphin Challenge. Run the 7K Saturday and the full or half marathon Sunday to secure medals, cool shirts, extra beer tickets and the ultimate bragging rights.
When: Jan. 25-Jan. 26
Where: The Hangout, Gulf Shores
Details: www.bigbeachmarathon.com

Dauphin Island Gumbo Festival

What: Get ready to spice up your winter at the Dauphin Island Gumbo Festival. Join the festivities for a flavorful celebration of the Gulf Coast's favorite dish, with plenty of mouthwatering gumbo and local fun.
When: Jan. 25
Where: Dauphin Island
Details: www.dauphinislandchamberofcommerce.com

Gumbo & Alabama Slammer Festival

What: Don't miss this day of family fun and wear your comfy pants for tons of gumbo. Bring a chair, a blanket and a friend. The event will feature food trucks, arts and crafts vendors, a kids zone with pony rides and a petting zoo, and, of course,

Alabama Slammers and other mixed drinks, beer and wine. Enjoy live music and food-based contests throughout the day.
When: Saturday, Jan. 25, 10 a.m.-6 p.m.
Where: Heritage Park, Foley
Tickets: \$5 admission; 12 and under free

FEBRUARY

2025 Snowbird Fest

What: Snowbird Fest is a true festival, trade show, expo, and sometimes even a car show, all packed into one. Snowbirds get free entertainment and an opportunity to meet local area businesses to find lodging, test their services and often get delectable samples from local restaurants. Past Snowbird Fests have featured RV expos, health and fitness expos and boating expos – every year is different, from the entertainment to the attractions. Enter raffles to win giveaways and get involved in the shows put on by local entertainers. The goal is to thank our beloved Snowbirds, monthly vacationers and mid-term rentals for choosing our coasts to spend a part of their year calling our home their own and enjoying the Southern hospitality that comes with it.
When: Feb. 4, 11 a.m.-1 p.m.; doors open for pre-registered attendees at 9 a.m.
Where: Orange Beach Event Center at The Wharf
Details: www.snowbirdfest.com

31st-annual Super Chili Bowl Cookoff

What: Everyone is invited to come and enjoy delicious chili variations while supporting a wonderful cause. All proceeds will be donated to Relay for Life and the American Cancer Society. This year, there will be a Best Decorated Booth Contest.
When: Feb. 8, 10 a.m.-2 p.m.
Where: Flora-Bama Lounge & Oyster Bar
Tickets: All-inclusive ticket \$20

Sea Turtle Half Marathon and Sweetheart 5k

What: Make plans to participate in this long-standing race in Gulf Shores, with options for a half-marathon, 5K or 1-mile fun run. Events will take place at The Hangout and will run down to West Beach in Gulf Shores. beverages and live music.
When: Feb. 15
Where: The Hangout, Gulf Shores
Tickets: \$100
Details: www.runsignup.com/Race/AL/Gulf-Shores/Sweetheart5kandSeaTurtleHalfMarathon

33rd-annual Orange Beach Seafood Festival & Car Show

What: The festival is the major fundraising event for the Makos Academics Arts & Athletics Club, which directly benefits Orange Beach schools. Student volunteers help park cars, and donations are accepted in support of the city's schools.

*WANT MORE EVENTS?
HEAD TO OUR
EVENT CALENDAR AT
WWW.GULFCOASTMEDIA.COM*

Each year, more than 15,000 people attend for a full day of delicious food, 100 artists from throughout the South and music for the whole family to enjoy on two stages. In addition, there is a large Kids' Zone with activities and a huge car show featuring antique, classic and hot rod vehicles all along Main Street.
When: Saturday, Feb. 22, 10 a.m.-4 p.m.
Where: The Wharf, Orange Beach
Tickets: Free admission

Fort Morgan Oyster Fest

What: Whether you like 'em naked or dressed to impress, Sassy Bass, The Beach Club Resort and Spa and Navy Cove Oysters will be serving up happiness on a half shell at the Fort Morgan Oyster Fest held annually the last weekend of February. Additional festival food and drinks (including beer and cocktails) will also be available. Practice your oyster-shucking skills, and you may be invited to enter the Oyster Shucking Contest.
When: Feb. 22-23
Where: The Beach Club Resort, Gulf Shores
Tickets: Ticket prices vary; for details go to www.fortmorganoysterfest.com

MARCH

Perdido Beach Resort Half Marathon

What: Don't miss this new hot event along Alabama's beaches. The second-annual Perdido Beach Half Marathon, Fun Run & 5k is sure to be a fun one, starting and ending at the beautiful beachfront property of Perdido Beach Resort. Proceeds will benefit the Jennifer Claire Moore Foundation, which has a vision to create a compassionate and informed community that instills positive mental health and resiliency in Baldwin County youth for generations to come.
When: March 8
Where: Perdido Beach Resort, Orange Beach
Details: www.jennifermoorefoundation.com

Orange Beach Festival of Art

What: For more than 50 years, the Festival of Art has been the island's first rite of spring. It is a celebration of visual, literary, performing, musical and culinary arts. The show has won Best Art Show in Alabama three times in the past five years and is currently ranked in the top 100 of national fine art and design shows. The event also has a kid's art alley, a culinary arts court featuring local fare and a music and songwriter's stage.
When: March 8 - 9
Where: Orange Beach Waterfront Park
Tickets: Free admission

Fairhope Arts & Crafts Festival

What: The festival was recently named one of the Top 15 art shows in the nation by the prestigious Sunshine Artist Magazine in their annual ranking of the nation's top festivals.
When: March 14-16
Where: Downtown Fairhope
Details: www.fairhopeartsandcraftsfestival.com

The Wharf Boat and Yacht Show

What: Featuring over \$100 million in boats and marine products and more than 120 exhibiting companies, it's the "Top Boat Buying Show" in the northern Gulf. Take in a display of 80 wet slip boats and yachts, more than 300 sport and console boats on land, live music, kid's art classes with marine artist Larry Rackley, instructional seminars and more. There's something for everyone, from an entry-level boater to a seasoned veteran. The best part? This three-day blockbuster event will benefit St. Jude Children's Research Hospital.
When: March 21 - 23
Where: The Wharf, Orange Beach
Details: www.wharfboatshow.com

The Original German Sausage Festival

What: A 40-year tradition, the festival is a major regional event that attracts a cross-section of the community in what has become a reunion type atmosphere. It is also the main source of revenue for the area's volunteer fire department. Enjoy Elberta's famous German sausage and sauerkraut, plus continuous entertainment for adults and children and 250 arts and crafts booths. There will also be carnival rides and a full-scale Midway. Of course, there will also be a bier garden along with polka, country and German music.
When: March 29
Where: Elberta Town Park
Details: www.festapp.elbertafire.com

MARDI GRAS MANIA



PARADE TIPS

Travel lightly and bring a large bag to carry your throws home. **Carry small amounts of cash when possible.** Vendors and food carts often line the parade routes. **Leave purses and valuables at home.** **Arrive early.** Avoid traffic and find a close, well-lit parking spot. **Obey barricade ordinances.** **No jumping the barricades.** Check weather/parade route. **Know whether to bring a jacket or umbrella, or if your parade time or route has changed.**



IT'S A COMMON MISCONCEPTION THAT NEW ORLEANS IS THE HOME OF MARDI GRAS. IN FACT, IT'S SOUTH ALABAMA THAT ORIGINALLY PARADED THROUGH THE STREETS. THE MOBILE CELEBRATION STARTED IN 1719 AND PARTIED ON OVER TO BALDWIN COUNTY SOON AFTER. TODAY, CROWDS LINE BOTH SIDES OF MOBILE BAY TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS GULF COAST TRADITION. PATRONS CATCH MOONPIES, DOUBLOONS, CUPS, BEADS, STUFFED ANIMALS AND OTHER GOODIES.



LINGO TO KNOW

Float barn: Secret location where Mardi Gras organizations build and keep their floats when it's not parading season.

Throws: Items thrown from parade floats, such as doubloons, MoonPies, beads, cups and stuffed animals.

MoonPies: Marshmallow cake, usually chocolate, banana or orange flavored. Newer flavors of coconut, vanilla, mint, peanut butter and salted caramel have recently been added.

"Laissez les bon temps rouler":
French for "Let the good times roll!"

King cake: Usually oval and braided, this cake is iced with traditional Mardi Gras colors. A tiny, plastic baby doll is hidden inside, and according to custom, whoever finds the baby in their piece of cake buys the next King Cake or throws the next party.

Krewe: Mardi Gras societies often refer to themselves collectively as a Krewe, and often the term is part of the society's official name.

Ball: A celebration, usually after a parade, involving food, beverages, call-outs and dancing. Some organizations don't parade and just have Mardi Gras balls. Tickets are sold to some balls, while others require invitations from a society member.

PARADE SCHEDULE

SATURDAY, FEB. 1
Krewe de la Dauphine, 1 p.m. — Dauphin Island

SATURDAY, FEB. 8
Dauphin Island People's Parade, 1 p.m. — Dauphin Island

SATURDAY, FEB. 16
Massacre Island Secret Society, 6:30 p.m. — Dauphin Island

FRIDAY, FEB. 21
Apollo Mystic Ladies, 6:45 p.m. — Dauphin Island

SATURDAY, FEB. 22
Knights of Ecor Rouge, 6:30 p.m. — Fairhope

FRIDAY, FEB. 28
Maid of Jubilee, 6:45 p.m. — Fairhope

SATURDAY, MARCH 1
Foley Parade, 11 a.m. — Foley
Krewe of Mullet Mates, 2 p.m. — Mullet Point
Marshals Parade, 5:30 p.m. — Orange Beach
Mystics of Pleasure, 6 p.m. — Orange Beach
Knights of Cote d'Azur, 6:30 p.m. — Loxley
The Shadow Barons, 6:45 p.m. — Daphne

SUNDAY, MARCH 2 - JOE CAIN DAY
Fort Morgan Parading Society, 1 p.m. — Fort Morgan
Loyal Order of The Fire Truck, 2:29 p.m. — Daphne

MONDAY, MARCH 3 - LUNDI GRAS
Order of Mystic Magnolias, 6:45 p.m. — Fairhope

TUESDAY, MARCH 4 - FAT TUESDAY
Gulf Shores Parade, 10 a.m. — Gulf Shores
Orange Beach Parade, 2 p.m. — Orange Beach

NOTE: Parade dates, times and routes are subject to change due to weather and other circumstances.
* Source: MobileMask.com, Facebook, Big Beautiful Baldwin, City websites, Alabama Travel



WHO'S UP FOR BRUNCH?

10 PLACES ON THE BEACH TO RELEASE YOUR INNER FOODIE

Whether you wake up late, prefer to eat early or simply are craving indulgent Southern dishes or fresh, energy-boosting ingredients, Orange Beach and Gulf Shores offer an array of inviting spots to satisfy your mid-meal appetite.

From cozy cafés with made-from-scratch treats to retro diners serving up a taste of nostalgia, these destinations make brunch more than just a meal — it's an experience. Here's your guide to some of the best spots to enjoy good food and great vibes.

ANOTHER BROKEN EGG CAFE

(251) 981-7780
25910 Canal Road, Suite K, Orange Beach

Another Broken Egg Café elevates brunch with its Southern-inspired dishes and hand-crafted cocktails. Located in the heart of Orange Beach, the café offers savory selections like the Mardi Gras omelette, a festive dish packed with flavors of the South. Pair it with the Milagro mango margarita, a refreshing cocktail with a tropical flair, for a truly satisfying meal. With a focus on fresh, high-quality ingredients and a welcoming atmosphere, this café is a favorite among both locals and visitors.

BRICK & SPOON ORANGE BEACH

(251) 981-7772
24705 Canal Road, Orange Beach

Brick & Spoon in Orange Beach serves up Southern classics with a creative twist, making it a standout brunch spot on the Gulf Coast. The Killer Creole Omelet is a bold choice for those

seeking a flavorful, adventurous meal. For those who love a good cocktail, their bloody mary, made with a variety of unique garnishes that you can hand-curate, is a consistent favorite and perfect for pairing with their hearty dishes. The warm, inviting atmosphere and diverse menu make this a must-visit destination for brunch enthusiasts.

BUZZCATZ COFFEE & SWEETS

(251) 980-2899
25689 Canal Road, Suite A, Orange Beach

BuzzCatz Coffee & Sweets is more than just a café; it's a destination for homemade goodness. Alongside freshly brewed coffee and made-from-scratch sweets, this Orange Beach spot serves up hearty breakfast and lunch options. The BuzzCatz Breakfast Platter, featuring eggs cooked to order, bacon and grits, is a go-to for a filling meal, while their cinnamon rolls, baked fresh daily, have earned a reputation as one of the best treats in town.

KITTY'S CAFE

(251) 948-5233
3800 Gulf Shores Pkwy., Suite 100, Gulf Shores

Kitty's Café in Gulf Shores is a haven for those craving traditional country cooking. This local favorite serves up hearty breakfasts and lunches with a focus on Southern flavors. The eggs benedict is a standout, featuring perfectly poached eggs and creamy hollandaise sauce. Their flaky biscuits, smothered in rich tomato gravy, are a must-try for first-time visitors. The friendly service and cozy atmosphere make this a go-to spot for comfort food done right.

PICNIC BEACH BAR & GRILL

(251) 540-0117
128 E. 1st Ave., Gulf Shores

Picnic Beach Bar & Grill offers a vibrant, family-friendly atmosphere that's perfect for a casual meal before a day of exploring Gulf Shores. While not a traditional brunch spot, it delivers on fresh and flavorful options. The mahi-mahi sandwich

is a standout choice, featuring perfectly grilled fish and zesty toppings. Pair it with a passion fruit boba tea or a Gulf Coast cooler for a refreshing twist. With its outdoor seating and relaxed vibe, Picnic Beach is ideal for groups of all sizes.

RUBY SLIPPER

(251) 360-2400
24151 Perdido Beach Blvd., Orange Beach

Ruby Slipper has become synonymous with brunch in Orange Beach. Known for its creative takes on Southern breakfast staples, this restaurant offers an impressive array of options, from indulgent French toast bites coated in powdered sugar to the refreshing Big Easy mimosa, a light yet flavorful accompaniment. While brunch steals the spotlight, the menu also features crowd-pleasers like burgers, fried chicken and salads, ensuring there's something for every appetite.

SUNLINER DINER

(251) 937-6590
100 E. 2nd Ave., Gulf Shores

Step into a retro wonderland at Sunliner Diner, where the 1950s come to life with vibrant décor

and classic American dishes. Start your morning with the BeeGees Breakfast Combo or a western omelet, both hearty options for fueling up before a busy day. No visit is complete without trying one of their famous milkshakes or malts, made the old-fashioned way. For adults, the boozy bushwacker cocktail is a deliciously indulgent treat.

THE SOUTHERN GRIND COFFEE HOUSE AT THE WHARF

(251) 923-3265
4751 Main St., Suite 116, Orange Beach

The Southern Grind Coffee House combines delicious food with a cozy, welcoming atmosphere. Located at The Wharf, this café is the perfect spot for a casual meal or coffee break. Popular menu items include the turkey club panini, a satisfying sandwich packed with flavor, and the java chip frappe, a rich, icy drink perfect for those types of people who like ice cream in the winter. For pet owners, the café's outdoor patio offers a pet-friendly space to relax. They also have a second location at Hotel Indigo, giving visitors even more ways to enjoy their menu.

THE UGLY DINER

(251) 224-3182
2200 E. 2nd St., Unit E, Gulf Shores

The Ugly Diner may have an unusual name, but the food is anything but unpleasing. This Gulf Shores eatery offers a mix of classic comfort food and creative dishes, all prepared with care. The reuben sandwich, loaded with tender corned beef and tangy sauerkraut, is a favorite among regulars. For seafood lovers, the shrimp and crab omelet is a flavorful dish that showcases fresh Gulf ingredients. The laid-back vibe and generous portions make this a hidden gem worth discovering.

TACKY JACKS

(251) 948-8881
240 E. 24th Ave., Gulf Shores

With locations in Gulf Shores, Orange Beach and Fort Morgan, Tacky Jacks is a Gulf Coast institution. Their shrimp and grits is a beloved classic, combining creamy grits with perfectly cooked shrimp. The farmer's omelet is another favorite, packed with fresh vegetables and cheese. For a fun and flavorful twist, try the moonshine bloody mary, a cocktail that's as bold as it is delicious.

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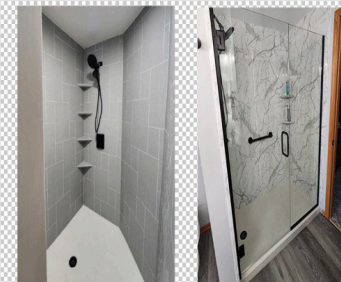
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Seafood Kitchen

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

GUMBO & SOUP

- Seafood Gumbo
cup bowl
- Crab & Shrimp Bisque
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 Etoufee
- 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
- *Paneeed 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



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gouda grits topped with hash browns, a fried egg & crumbled bacon

BREAKFAST BUDDY | 11

fried egg with cheese and choice of bacon, sausage or ham on toasted English muffin. Comes with grits or hashbrowns

ALL AMERICAN | 16

two eggs any style, bacon, sausage or ham, grits or hash browns with toast

BISCUITS, GRAVY & EGGS | 14

two biscuits topped with two fried eggs covered with sausage gravy

BREAKFAST BURRITO | 11

scrambled egg, sausage or bacon & cheddar cheese comes with grits or hashbrowns

Specialties

{ SHRIMP & GOUDA GRITS | 17 }

Sweets

choice of bacon, sausage or ham

FRENCH TOAST STICKS | 11

Pancakes

BLUEBERRY | 13

BANANA PECAN | 13

CHOCOLATE CHIP | 13

PLAIN | 11

Benedicts

served with grits or hashbrowns

CHICKEN FLORENTINE | 17

fried chicken, sautéed spinach and basil, poached eggs, hollandaise sauce on a toasted English muffin

VEGGIE | 17

fresh spinach, portabella mushroom, sliced tomatoes, poached eggs, hollandaise sauce, fresh herbs on a toasted English muffin

CAJUN | 18

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 | 15

8oz patty, choice of cheese, on a buttered toasted bun

TERIYAKI CHICKEN BREAST | 15

bacon & swiss cheese on a toasted ciabatta roll dressed & served with honey mustard sauce

BUFFALO CHICKEN | 15

fried chicken tenders coated with a spicy buffalo sauce. Served dressed on a toasted bun with a rancho bleu or swiss cheese dressing

REUBEN | 15

corn beef, swiss cheese, sauerkraut & thousand island dressing on grilled rye

TURKEY FLATBREAD | 15

turkey, swiss, spinach with a pesto sauce

SHRIMP POBOY OR WRAP | 16

remoulade sauce, dressed on a warm cuban hogie

MAHI POBOY OR WRAP | 17

fried, grilled or blackened

Platters

SHRIMP PLATTER OR FISH PLATTER | 17

grilled, fried or blackened, corn fritters, coleslaw & choice of side

CHICKEN TENDERS PLATTER | 15

SEAFOOD COMBO | 20

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 | 10

Mixed Greens with Sugar Coated Walnuts, Goat Cheese, & Craisins
Served with an Apple Cider Vinaigrette. Add Chicken Or Shrimp \$6

CAESAR SALAD | 10

Romaine Lettuce, Parmesan Cheese, Fresh Baked Croutons
with Caesar Dressing. Add Chicken Or Shrimp \$6



Elevate your takeout, Shark approved

New Gulf Shores seafood joint makes boils easy with signature steam pots to-go, or build your own. Just add liquid!

Words and photos by Colin James

Since opening their doors in Gulf Shores, the family-operated seafood joint Topsail Steamer has been making waves both in Baldwin County and on national television. Located along Gulf Shores Parkway, Topsail Steamer offers what they call “Bay Buckets,” which are filled with a variety of seafood, such as shrimp, oysters, crab legs, sausage, and various vegetables in signature combos or build-your-own. Take it home, follow the steaming instructions, and dinner is served.

Since establishing themselves in Baldwin County, Topsail Steamer, which has nine other locations all on the East Coast, has been embraced by the community and has developed a loyal customer base, particularly evident during the holiday season in coastal Alabama.

“We had a great Thanksgiving,” said Amber McGinley, who helped bring the Gulf Shores location of the franchise chain to life. “Even if people wanted to stick to their traditional Thanksgiving meal, many chose to have a seafood steam pot. Since they were still preparing for their dinner, it was so easy to just grab one the night before. A lot of people bought the pot and cooked it for the holidays, football bowl games and other celebrations.”

While Topsail Steamer has been keeping busy in Baldwin County, they’ve also made a splash on television, appearing on the popular reality series “Shark Tank.”

On the show, entrepreneurs pitch their business ideas to a panel of investors, followed by negotiations for financial backing in exchange for equity in their company for those interested.

Danielle Mahon, who founded Topsail Steamer on North Caroli-



na’s Topsail Island in 2017 after jumping the corporate America ship to share the joy of steamed seafood feasts she experienced “down the shore” as a kid, represented the company on “Shark Tank,” showcasing their brand and cuisine with the goal of expanding across the United States. After serving the sharks a sample of their “Wrightsville Bucket,” Mahon answered their questions about the company’s growth and future plans.

Mahon initially asked for an investment of \$350,000 in exchange for an 8% stake in the company. In the end, she secured a deal with Raising Cane’s founder and guest Shark Todd Graves and investor Lori Greiner, settling on an 18% stake in Topsail Steamer for the \$350,000 backing.

“We’ve had people coming to town saying, ‘We’ve been waiting to come see you because we saw you on Shark Tank, and we’re visiting Gulf Shores,’” McGinley said. “We’ve had a lot of excited customers come in just to try it and support us after seeing us on the show.”

They’ve also introduced the “Shark Bite Bucket,” allowing customers to try the same seafood the Sharks ate as featured on the show.

Although they’ve only been open for a short time, Topsail Steamer is already gaining significant attention in Gulf Shores and Baldwin County, with plans to expand their presence further in the region.

“We want to offer a unique and different seafood experience for people visiting the beach who want to relax by the pool but still enjoy a seafood boil in the comfort of their own homes,” McGinley said. “It’s not just about the seafood; it’s about the total experience, and we want to share that with as many people as possible. We hope they’ll give us a try.”



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GOODBYE, EARL?

After 30+ years of playing a character, do you become that character? Maybe in part. But there's so much more to Jack Robertson than you'll see from the **Flora-Bama** stage he's "retiring" from.

Words by Kayla Green
Photos by Micah Green

There's a person behind every persona. Some are mirrors of their outward expression. Others, a ven diagram with no intersecting circles. It'd be unfair to say Big Earl and Jack Robertson are circles that don't touch because Robertson's humor and character development bring Earl to life, but it's less about a shared belief in judgements and more about a shared enthusiasm for jest.

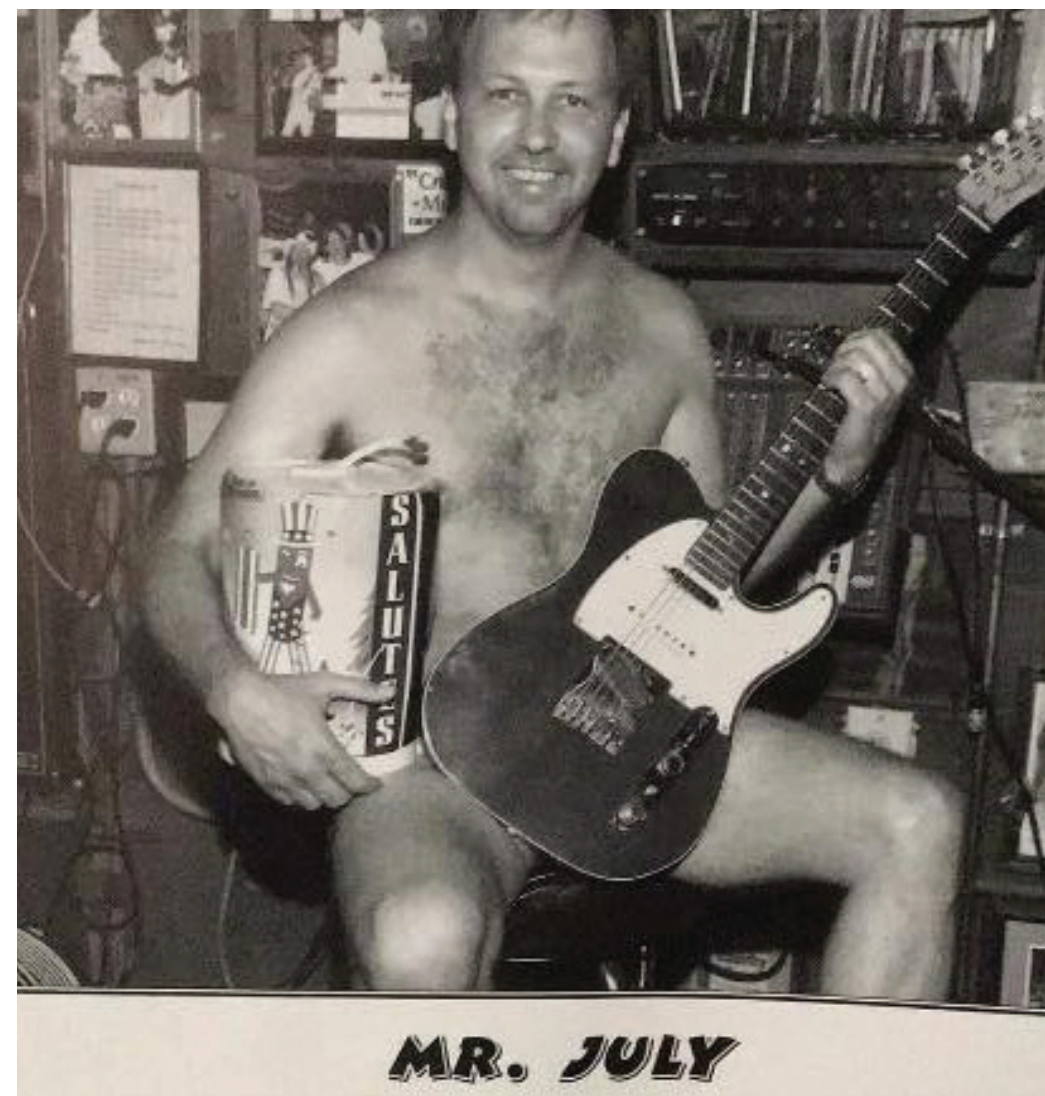
"It's hard to believe, but not everybody likes me. I know, that comes as a shock," Robertson said. "I pick fun, I make fun, of myself more than I make fun of anybody else. If you can't make fun of yourself, you're just a loser, you know? I don't go out there and just insult people."

Most people associate the person named Jack Robertson with his other one. They think of the man who has been leading a hybrid comedy/music show at the Flora-Bama Lounge, Package & Oyster Bar every Friday and Saturday night for 31 years. They think of the brash jokes, the heckling comments, the crude lyrics and focus on body parts – females', yes, but also his own rear, often flashed bare. They also think of the musical talent of the band. Of the audience, no matter the combination of roaring laughter and skeptical observation, rapt.

Robertson retired from his weekend gig with his band, the Sexual Biscuits, in January, saying goodbye to an act that has become iconic of the iconic beach bar On the Line. Or, as he says, until he runs out of money in a few weeks and needs the work. He may be so much his stage character by this point that he answers to Earl in the grocery store, and the Flora-Bama may be so much Big Earl that for years he has been getting emails asking for his schedule so people can plan their annual vacations around being able to see him, but there is more to the longtime Orange Beach local than his guitar, witty banter and a spin-the-wheel you might expect to find at a frat party's spring break beach house. He'll tell you it's that his butt looks just as good without stage lighting. Dive a little deeper, and those who know him will say it's his talent as an entertainer, his love for his family and his commitment to making his city a better place for the local community.



Archive photos courtesy of the Flora-Bama



“As the years went by, I just started wanting to have more fun, and it just sort of evolved on its own.”





BIG EARL, A GENESIS

When Robertson started playing at the Flora-Bama, he was hired just to play guitar. He asked Donna Slater, who booked entertainment at the time, if he needed to sing. He had, after all, come from Nashville on a record deal that produced a few songs and a video involving animals, excrement and certain acts of alliteration on a pontoon boat.

“She said no, I need a guitar player,” Robertson said.

So, he did something you might not expect based on what his show is now.

“I kept my mouth shut and played guitar because that’s what I was hired to do,” he said. “But, as the years went by, I just started wanting to have more fun, and it just sort of evolved on

its own.”

Part of that evolution was the rounding up of his band. With resumes that include drumming for Chely Wright, helping launch Rascal Flatts, playing with Trace Adkins or being Charlie Daniels’s keyboardist, one by one these guys moved down to the beach, saw Robertson playing at the dive bar that’s always got a rocking crowd and asked about gigs.

“What’s great about [the Big Earl show] is my band. So if I get up and do a funny song or say a joke and it’s not going well, I have a good enough band where I can play a good song and I get them dancing, get them feeling good,” Robertson said. “It’s not a comedy show. It’s not a music show. It’s all intertwined together. And so, I have the luxury of having one of the best bands I’ve ever worked with that’s able to play any style of music.

And if [the crowd isn’t] in a laughing mood, we’ll just play music. And it’s fun music. You know, things I don’t like doing are a bunch of slow songs. People come there to have a good time and, you know, let their hair down, and that’s what I always think about. They spend a lot of money to come down here, and they want to have fun.”

Robertson credits Flora-Bama leadership for the evolution and popularity of his show.

“The Flora-Bama is the only place I’ve ever worked playing music that will pretty much allow you to be yourself and do what you want to do. Because there’s so many bars that won’t let you do any of that. At clubs and stuff, you got to play the top 40,” he said. “Now, they’ve reeled me in a few times, but, yeah.”

BEHIND THE CURTAIN

Another evolution Robertson has been part of at the Flora-Bama is his friendship with Brandon Parnell, CEO of Island Entertainment LLC, the company portfolio that includes Flora-Bama’s three adjacent locations, Coastal Restaurant, Shunk Gulley, Cork & Barrel and the Frank Brown International Songwriters’ Festival, among others.

But around a decade ago, Parnell was working in the beverage industry and filled in to help mix a show. He didn’t know which one or who was up there.

Lucky draw.

“I didn’t realize it was a hybrid show of comedy and music. It caught me off guard. But at the end of the first set, I began to understand what Jack

was doing on stage and watched him in terms of audience engagement, and it gave me a sense of who he is as an entertainer and his showmanship,” Parnell said. “His real-time wit is what he’s exceptionally good at. He reads the audience and responds to what he sees and contours what he’s doing to change the dynamic of engagement with them and enhance their experience. In all senses, it’s really an art, and he’s clearly mastered it.

“And then to pair it with musicianship is exceptionally hard to do.”

Both men started at the bar with no intentions to stay long-term. But here we are. Parnell places the legacy Robertson leaves at the Flora-Bama as the “crown jewel” of entertainment venues on par with the greats who shaped it, like Jimmy Lewis, Jay Hawkins and Ken Lambert, having learned from the likes of Rusty McHugh.

“Rusty was mostly lyrical in the genius of his songs,” Parnell said. “Jack took it and integrated it into the show and took it further with audience engagement.”

He may say Big Earl is one of the foundational acts “paramount to the continued success” of the Flora-Bama, but it’s Robertson’s real life off the stage over which the two have bonded into a “sincere friendship.” It’s Robertson’s humility – a trait expertly masked publicly under a heavy dose of self-deprecation – and his civic engagement. His philanthropy and how he interacts with his wife, Jamie, and daughters. His 20-plus years spent as an ultrasound technician while also performing every weekend for 30-plus.

Robertson serves on the Orange Beach Water Authority and is a member of the planning commission. He’s been part of the police and fire

GulfCoastMedia.com — BEACHIN’ 31

advisory committees. He'll say he hates using the word "serve" but that he thinks Orange Beach is the "best little city anywhere, hands down. ... [Being on these committees] feels like I'm contributing a little bit."

"He cares about the manner in which we grow and how we treat our residents. He's very resident-minded in terms of inputting his thoughts for what's important," Parnell said about Robertson's involvement on the planning commission and other boards.

Robertson's two lives may appear as parallel, but he winds them together through philanthropy and fundraising. Big Earl's big shows are all fundraisers for Mary's Shelter Gulf Coast or St. Jude Children's Research Hospital. The bras hanging in the dome inside the Flora-Bama? Parnell said his wife, Jenifer, Flora-Bama's marketing director, and Robertson came up with the idea to donate them to the shelter. Robertson said he likes the Baldwin-based organization because it's the only one around that takes in pregnant women who have been abused as well as their children.

"He's always searching for an angle to use his craft to be of benefit to those who need it," Parnell said. "The local audience certainly knows who he is behind the character; they realize he is a family man, he loves his daughters and his wife. It's awesome to watch him with his family because it's a

stark contrast between what you see on stage." So when you hear the stories about the guy who moons the audience and the dude who messes with those Nigerian princes who definitely have \$1 million if you just MoneyGram them enough to get an airplane ticket, or the musician who at his retirement roast was dubbed the Deliverance Version of Jimmy Buffett, also add to your definition of Big Earl the man who sells VIP tickets to his shows to fundraise for the local women's shelter. Who volunteers to help his city practice proper land and water use.

Don't worry. He'll still answer if you call him Earl when you see him at Walmart. But, after three decades of putting the persona first, he now gets to spend his weekends just being Jack.

OK, BUT WHO IS EARL?

The light-hearted, crude humor Big Earl's shows are known for may have been in even more stock throughout Robertson's music career outside the wood paneling of the Flora-Bama. How and why did he come up with Earl? "I listened [to my first CD], and I thought, 'This sucks. I don't



NOT TOTALLY DONE

Robertson isn't putting Earl into a glass case completely just yet. He's still scheduled to play on Tuesdays at the Flora-Bama as a single act, sans Sexual Biscuits. And who knows, maybe he'll hop on stage with them every now and then.



want my name on that. The lyrics are bad, singing is bad, music is bad.' But it sold like hot," he said. "Yeah, I had a bag on my head my first 13 CDs or didn't show my face because, you know, I had two daughters in school and I was working at a hospital and teaching ultrasound."

So he thought back to a bus driver he knew in the '90s from Nashville whose name was Earl. "He was a big guy. We didn't call him Big Earl, but I just started going by Big Earl." Years later, Earl, who was production managing for a well-known country band, was asked about a CD. "They told him, 'Earl, we didn't know you had a CD.' And he walked over and heard 'Poontang on the Pontoon,' and he said, 'I know that guy.'"

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Tattoo artist forms following with locals, visitors alike with award-winning work

Words by Ruth Mayo
Photos by Micah Green

Warol Silva, owner of and artist at The Empire Tattoo Company, has a total of 10 years in tattooing experience, and “it’s been quite a journey” to get to the competition-winning level she is at today.

Silva and the entire tattooing team at Empire attended the Inkin the Coast Tattoo Festival in Biloxi, Mississippi, in October. She said the experience was “very special” as she was competing among “very respected artists with very impressive artwork.”

Silva completed two tattoos at the festival with one winning Best of the Day for Friday and the other winning Best in Show overall. Another artist at Empire, Lief Purdy, won Best Small Black and Gray Tattoo for Friday.

When asked what tattoo she is most proud of, Silva said the piece that won Best in Show, a realistically styled comic of Batman, was her favorite. When asked if she had a personal favorite tattoo, Silva could not decide. She remembers the moment behind each one.

“But one that is very special for me is the logo of the shop that I have here,” Silva said, pointing to a small inking on her wrist. “It’s very simple, but it kind of explains everything else, you know?”

Originally from Brazil, Silva moved to the area about eight years ago and looked to start tattooing locally as soon as possible. In Brazil, Silva had her own tattoo shop where she worked as the only artist and was adjusted to her “own way of working and the ambience.”



Inking an Empire

Upon moving here, she worked at other tattoo shops until she felt prepared to step out on her own again. When originally thinking about opening the business, Silva said, she wanted to create a place “that was welcoming for everybody, not intimidating,” and a place where artists provide a variety of styles to “literally give tattoos to everybody” who wants one.

Silva said she has tattooed in a variety of styles and enjoys “pretty much anything,” but she chose to focus on one style to grow in her craft. While she enjoys traditional tattoos as a “collector,” Silva chose to focus on realism and black-and-gray as an artist, which allows her to “really connect with the clientele in a different way.”

“I feel like most of those tattoos, because of the look of black-and-gray realism, it can be very personal,” Silva said. “You can communicate an emotion or story behind a tattoo. Some days, we’re doing something that is memorial and it’s very emotional, it’s very deep.”

Silva enjoys finding out the “story” or “motivation” behind a tattoo as she believes that even if the tattoo lacks “huge meaning,” the detail in it is “telling you something about that person.” Silva said she has devoted at least six years of her life to learning this style specifically.

Before moving to the area, Silva was studying animation at the University of Brasília where she had a class with a teacher who was “covered in tattoos” and always talked about the backstories of them. He was not a tattoo artist, but he inspired her to take action with her “desire of becoming a tattoo artist.”

“I started visiting the tattoo shop that was close to me, possibly looking for an apprenticeship and stuff like that,” Silva said on her first attempts at tattooing professionally. “This didn’t really work out, so I started as a self-taught (artist), which 10 years ago was much harder than it is



here today.”

She was able to study tattooing using YouTube and magazines, but Silva said having a background in animation and art “made it easier to transition.”

Silva said she loves the instant completion of tattooing compared to animation, which requires “24 drawings for something to start moving.” After she started to take on tattooing as a career, she dropped out of school and left “everything on the side” to “dive 100%” into the craft.

MEET SOME OF THE STAFF

Megan Fonley is an artist at Empire who first started as Silva’s apprentice in October 2020 before officially coming on full-time in March 2021. Fonley describes

her own tattooing style as “blackwork illustration” with some realistic aspects. Fonley gravitates toward “anything creepy, dark,” but she also enjoys doing animals and pet portraits.

“It takes a while to find your style, but I think I’ve finally gotten to the point where I guess people look at my portfolio and can recognize what I do instead of, you know, me having all this random stuff coming in,” Fonley said.

Both Silva and Fonley said they would often draw at a young age, as Silva remembers “drawing with a Sharpie on the arms of friends” in high school, and Fonley said she was the high school student who “had C’s because I was drawing in class versus paying attention to what I was supposed to.”

While both artists dabbled in other art forms before picking up a needle, the process can be challenging to adapt to and takes practice. Silva said skin can be more challenging to work on because it is “not as constant as a piece of paper.”

“Like, girl, on paper, I’ve got an eraser,” Fonley said. “But it’s kind of like any other art medium, like once you learn the basics and you get your technique down and you’ve been doing it for a while, it’s like drawing on paper.”

Silva and Fonley both have their own inspirations when it comes to designing



“It’s mind-blowing to see those pieces from centuries ago ... they’re so detailed, they’re so deep ... they’re everything I try to achieve in tattooing.”

tattoos. Silva looks to classic art, with her favorite artist being Caravaggio, an Italian painter who is known for his work in realism and chiaroscuro, the contrast between light and dark.

“It’s mind-blowing to see those pieces from centuries ago from a different reality and they’re so detailed, they’re so deep,” she said, “They’re everything I try to achieve in tattooing.”

Fonley looks to tattoo artist twin brothers Ryan and Matthew Murray, (@blackveiltattoo on Instagram) who work in Salem, Massachusetts. She said they are “just cute little dudes, and all they do is grim stuff.”

COVID-19 AND THE EMPIRE TATTOO CO.

When Empire opened in May 2020, Silva said they stuck to appointment-only and limited the number of people allowed in the lobby with COVID-19 restrictions. Along with the sanitation and safety procedures already implemented by tattoo shops, there was additional cleaning of commonly touched surfaces, and everyone in the shop wore masks.

“That was a reality for everybody in

2020, so we made sure to be very respectful of this,” Silva said. “Even though when you’re opening a business you want to open the door for everybody and be like ‘walk-ins, everybody, anytime’ but that wasn’t possible.”

There was much local support during that time, as Silva mentioned how great it was to win Best Tattoo Shop in Gulf Coast Media’s Best of Baldwin readers choice contest in Empire’s first year being open.

However, Silva spoke on some of the challenges that have come up as she has tried to bring Empire to places like Gulf Shores or Orange Beach. She said there are restrictions in place because tattooing is “still seen as an industry that is not family-friendly.”

However, that has not slowed down business at the Foley location with locals and visitors alike regularly making appointments and taking advantage of the summer walk-in season, which Fonley said brings in people across the country, with some getting tattoos each time they visit.

Silva said people are even “scheduling visits here just to get tattoos” and that she feels that is something the area “should be proud of and should advertise.” She said she hopes the area will soon be “recog-

nized by the permanent artwork that we’re putting out.”

RENOVATIONS AND POSSIBLE EXPANSIONS

The current location for Empire, at 3800 S. McKenzie St. in Foley, will soon have a redesigned shop aesthetic that will “reflect the artists and the type of artwork” they put out. Silva didn’t have many details on the renovations, but she promised that “it won’t be boring.”

Silva also mentioned how Empire is “possibly moving to a bigger location,” as she wants to offer new services such as tattoo laser removal (to avoid “solid black blob” cover ups), scar cover-ups and 3D tattooed nipple reconstruction for breast cancer survivors.

Silva said she thinks these services are “part of the business now” and that she hopes she’ll be able to offer them soon. She said this is a “part of what we expect for 2025.”



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