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cooking with **Paula** DEEN®

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The Best Eats on the Crystal Coast

NAMED FOR ITS BEAUTIFUL WATERS, THE CRYSTAL COAST OF NORTH CAROLINA HAS A VARIETY OF RESTAURANTS—FROM UPSCALE ESTABLISHMENTS TO TAPAS RESTAURANTS TO MARKETS—THAT REFLECT THE DIVERSITY OF THIS REGION AND ITS NATURAL OFFERINGS.



NORTH CAROLINA'S CRYSTAL COAST is a stretch of outer banks coastline more than 85 miles long with nine distinct regions. From the lush, natural setting of Emerald Isle to the quaint little town of Beaufort to the islands surrounding the black-and-white checkered Cape Lookout Lighthouse, the Crystal Coast provides a number of environments and opportunities for a variety of activities. But tucked away along this dune-capped shoreline is a hidden culinary experience in the restaurants and markets that dot the coast.

In Morehead City, the Crystal Coast's most populous town, you'll find a flurry of activity and a variety of restaurants bringing diverse flavor to the community. Circa 81, a modern tapas-style restaurant and cocktail bar, has become a local favorite for those looking for a change from typical "beach food."

Opened in 2010 by Clarke Merrell, Circa 81 was born out of a desire to provide quality food that is both creative and delicious. Clarke, executive chef and owner, grew up in the restaurant business working at his family's restaurant on the coast. After going to culinary school and taking over the family eatery, he decided to open his own restaurant in January 2010.

Clarke wanted to bring a nontraditional dining experience to the area and liked the idea of small plates to encourage sharing and conversation. The idea of a small plates, tapas restaurant is to order a bunch of different dishes and share them with the table.

"This way you have the opportunity to try different proteins, different flavors, and different cooking styles instead of choosing just one main dish," Clarke says.





Some of Circa's fabulous tapas selections include Shrimp & Grits with a fried grits cake, sautéed shrimp, and Cajun cream sauce; Crab Cakes with jumbo lump crab, Wasabi aioli, and pineapple relish; and Ashley Farms duck breast with charred beets, celery root, fennel, and Braeburn apple.

"Typically a tapa is four to six bites' worth," Clarke says. "The idea is to leave guests wanting one more bite."

Using seasonal and locally available ingredients, Circa keeps guests coming back for one more bite as the menu is ever changing. Clarke uses local fish caught right off the Crystal Coast and is always providing the best for his customers.

"You have to know your area and who you're feeding," Clarke says. "We really care about what we do and putting out a great product and experience."

JUST ACROSS BOGUE SOUND from Morehead City is Atlantic Beach, a beach town with rows of colorful houses, fishing piers stretching out over the crystal water, and a state park, home to historic Fort Macon. Atlantic Beach is a favorite with families, and Amos Mosquito's Restaurant and Bar has been a staple for upscale family dining at the beach for more than 12 years.

The beginnings of Amos Mosquito's trace back to Morehead City in 1999, where Hallock Cooper opened the original Amos Mosquito's Swampside Café. After four years, Hallock was considering going back to school even though the restaurant had been successful. However, after marrying husband Sandy Howard, a new opportunity presented itself in a building in Atlantic Beach. With the help of Hallock's mother, Pam Cooper, Amos Mosquito's Restaurant and Bar opened in Atlantic Beach in 2003.

Eventually the three of them realized they needed more help, and they brought on a partner, Dave Brumley. Hallock started out as chef, but after the birth of her and Sandy's first child, Richard Alexander took over as head chef. He brought his influences of Creole, Caribbean, and Southern cooking to the kitchen, mixed with Hallock's flair for Asian cooking.

Today, Head Chef Luke Maguire uses his expertise to create modern American cuisine with Southern flair. He cooks with local and sustainable ingredients, uses only domestic seafood,



Photos courtesy of The Crystal Coast Tourism Authority and Hungry Town Tours.



and makes everything from scratch. Options like Brown Sugar Glazed Meatloaf, Jamaican Jerk Roasted Chicken, and the day's Fresh Catch—prepared sesame seared, grilled, or over a salad—have made Amos Mosquito's one of the most popular restaurants on the beach. Kids especially love to order the S'mores for dessert, where they get to roast their own marshmallows over a "campfire" brought to the table.

A LITTLE WAYS DOWN the road is Emerald Isle, another favorite beach town with lush vegetation that gives the area

its name. The best place to grab breakfast or a picnic lunch for the beach is at The Village Market.

Visit in the morning for the full breakfast, including options such as bacon and eggs, omelets made to order, French toast, bagels, and homemade hash brown casserole. For lunch and dinner, they offer 30 gourmet sandwiches, in hot and cold varieties, and make all of their salads (including chicken, egg, and tuna salad) and sides (pasta salad, potato salad, and slaw) from scratch.

GETTING THERE

CIRCA 81

4650 Arrendell Street
Morehead City, NC 28557
circa-81.com

AMOS MOSQUITO'S

703 E Fort Macon Road
Atlantic Beach, NC 28512
amosmosquitos.com

THE VILLAGE MARKET

7802 Emerald Drive
Emerald Isle, NC 28594
thevillagemarketei.com

HUNGRY TOWN TOURS

400 Front Street
Beaufort, NC 28516
hungrytowntours.com



You can pack up options such as the club sandwich, Cucumber Dill Wrap, and homemade Pimiento Cheese on sour-dough and take it to the beach or pier for a picnic.

"We want to make it easy for people to get out and enjoy the sunshine," owner Pam Whitley says. "We keep things fun."

And the market is a fun place for visitors and locals to come to. In addition to consistently good food, the market also offers a wide selection of gifts and specialty food items, many of which are made in North Carolina.

Since The Village Market is open year-round (some businesses close down for the winter), they have acquired a great local following. Pam even has a 10 percent off card that she gives her loyal locals. So next time you're in the area, visit The Village Market and linger over lunch, browse the store, or grab your food to go and enjoy the beach.

ONE OF THE MOST FUN and unique activities on the Crystal Coast is found in Beaufort. Hungry Town Tours offers food- and wine-focused bike and walking tours around town. Owned by David and Betsy Cartier, their mission is to introduce people to Beaufort's food scene through an environmentally friendly tour option.

"The idea is to integrate local restaurants and promote local farmers and fishermen by promoting local seafood," David says.

Hungry Town offers a variety of culinary bike tours, including the Beaufort Culinary Tour, Beaufort Lunchbox Tour, North Carolina Shrimp Tour, North Carolina Oyster Tour, and Bike, Brunch, and Bubbles. They also offer the Historic Beaufort Walking Tour & Lunch and the Sunday Brunch Walkabout, for those who prefer not to bike.

"Oftentimes, people have a tough time deciding where to go or don't know where to go," David says. "So we want to introduce them to local, chef-owned and operated restaurants."

The most popular tour is the Beaufort Culinary tour, which includes stops at three restaurants and wine and olive oil tastings. David and Betsy like to keep things different for their customers, so they rotate among a number of restaurants. Some restaurants and dishes include Spicy Crab Fritters from Finz Grill, the freshest fish tacos from Front Street Grill, and Beaufort Butter Cake from Old Salt Restaurant.

For the bike tours, you'll ride around on single-speed cruiser bikes painted in bright colors with license plates on the back bearing the names of different herbs, like rosemary, thyme, parsley, and sage. It's an adorable touch to this fun activity that gives you the best taste of all that Beaufort and the Crystal Coast have to offer.