



A TASTY PLATEFUL Croquetas and pastelitos at Chug's Diner in Miami's Coconut Grove.

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Visit Florida for the Sun, the Surf and... the Food?

The food world was surprised when Michelin devoted one of its few U.S. guides to the Sunshine State. But as locals know and travelers are discovering, the best culinary experiences are the spots where two courses and a glass of wine will run you less than \$50.

By Adam H. Graham / Photographs by James Jackman for *The Wall Street Journal*
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THE MEDIA has a fixation with what it calls Florida Man. Some choice headlines include: “Florida Man Throws Gator Through a Wendy’s Drive-Thru Window” and “Florida Man Fills Car With Frozen Iguanas To Cook, But They Thawed, Woke Up and Attacked Him.” You’d be forgiven for assuming that residents of the Sunshine State are more concerned about what might eat them than what they could eat.

But that changed in June 2022, when the France-based Michelin Guide launched its inaugural foray into Florida.

The reaction to the news was swift, with locals, including my own Floridian family and friends, as well as visitors asking, “Why now?” and “What is Florida cuisine anyway?” It might seem like the state that gave us Gatorade, Hooters, Olive Garden and Burger King isn’t exactly a gustatory heavyweight. But think again about Florida food—about stone crab, steamed oysters, Key West Pinks (shrimp known for their sweet tender meat)—and Michelin’s reasoning gets clearer. Factor in Cuban sandwiches, fresh orange juice, guava pastelitos and, of course, Key lime pie—and the choice seems downright inspired.

HOW MICHELIN STARS ALIGN

- One star: “High quality cooking, worth a stop.”
- Two stars: “Excellent cooking, worth a detour.”
- Three stars: Restaurants with “exceptional cuisine, worth a special journey.”

The esteemed red guide’s expansion into Florida marks the fifth U.S. destination that Michelin has recognized, after New York, Washington, D.C., Chicago and California. Some of its Sunshine State honorees align with the popular conception of a “Michelin-star restaurant.” (See “What Strikes Your Fancy Restaurants,” below.) The guide’s famously anonymous inspectors issued stars to 15 different Florida establishments in Orlando and Miami that met their criteria, including quality ingredients, a “harmony of flavors” in each dish, a chef who displays a mastery of culinary methods, and a consistency from visit to visit

(Restaurants are “inspected” several times a year).



The morning line-up at Zak The Baker in Miami's Wynwood neighborhood; the kosher bakery's picture-perfect croissant and java.

More surprising—and happily so—to anyone doubtful about the state's culinary reputation were the 29 Florida eateries that received a Bib Gourmand, a distinction introduced by Michelin in 1997 that's given to places offering exceptional quality for value. Flip past the guide's pages on haute-cuisine picks and focus on the entries devoted to casual American and ethnic eats: You'll find Zak The Baker, a kosher bakery in Wynwood; Chug's Diner, a Cuban-American diner in Coconut Grove; Hometown BBQ in Allapattah; and Z-Asian in Orlando, to name four that received a Bib Gourmand, whose symbol is an image of the Michelin Man licking his lips.

For the Bib Gourmand distinction, inspectors consider places where two courses and a glass of wine or dessert cost \$49 or less before tax and tip. The 29 eateries chosen in Florida include pizzerias, sandwich spots, and curry, pho and ramen joints. These are truly beloved local places that travelers seek out when they're searching for an authentic dive into Florida's diverse and delicious food culture.

The Bib Gourmand category seems particularly suited for Florida and considers places where two courses and a glass of wine or dessert cost less than \$49, before tax and tip.

That's what they'll find at Chug's Diner, the "morning-noon-or-night eatery" of chef Michael Beltrán, whose nickname is Chug. Situated on a busy street in Coconut Grove, one of Miami's oldest neighborhoods, it has a brightly hued interior that serves as a cool backdrop for an inventive menu of diner classics (burgers, patty melts and three-egg specials) complemented by sophisticated takes on Cuban classics such as pollo a la plancha (grilled chicken cutlet) and boliche (stuffed beef roast). Mr. Beltrán's "Abuela's Plate," a triple-threat meat combo of suckling pig, grilled chicken and masita (sautéed pork) has the optional "eat more" addition of fried fish, so typical of what a grandmother might lovingly push on a hungry child.



Order inside or outside at Chug's Diner; a tray of crackers and croquetas.

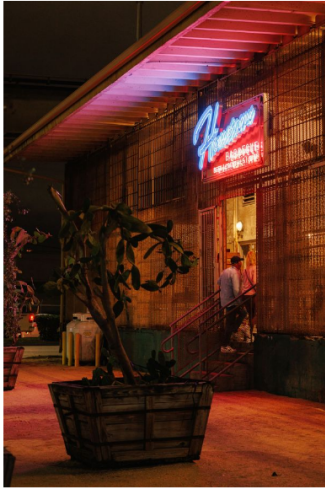


The Michelin Guide has its roots in road trips, the kind a food-loving traveler might plan today. Launched in 1900 by André and Édouard Michelin, two brothers who owned a tire company, it was a humble (and free) pamphlet given to French motorists to help them find food and lodging en route. “Travel and food are inextricably bound,” said food historian Jessica B. Harris. “When you get somewhere, the first thing you want to know is where you’re going to eat.”

Among the Bib Gourmand picks are breakfast and brunch hot spots—because who doesn’t want to score the best coffee and croissants while on vacation? From Zak Stern, who earned his culinary cred at organic farms in Israel, France and Sweden, comes the kosher Zak The Baker, a semifinalist for “Outstanding Bakery” in the 2023 James Beard Awards. It fits right into the hip Miami neighborhood of Wynwood, known for its murals, craft breweries and late-night bar scene. Locals line up for Americanos and picture-perfect croissants but double-chocolate babka, everything bagels and the nova brioche with smoked salmon and arugula are popular too.

Thanks in part to Florida’s ever-changing population, the state’s food has transformed in recent years, absorbing culinary influences from Colombia, Cuba and Vietnam. “Orlando has a solid pedigree of Vietnamese restaurants, and Z-Asian is one of the best, even though it is one of the newest,” said Faiyaz Kara, restaurant critic for the Orlando Weekly. Run by husband-and-wife team Hien Pham and Huong Nguyen, the restaurant is known for Ms. Nguyen’s flavorful made-from-scratch broths. These make her soups—whether the marinated duck marrow soup, pho with bone marrow or anchovy-based seafood bun mam —“a legit draw,” said Mr. Kara.

“Hometown” in the name of the warehouse-like Hometown BBQ, in Miami’s Allapattah industrial neighborhood, gives a nod to Brooklyn (Red Hook pitmaster Billy Durney is behind it), but its charred brisket slices, char siu baby back ribs and Frito pie earned it a loyal local following and a Bib Gourmand.



Hometown BBQ in Miami’s Allapattah neighborhood; a share platter of meats and sides.

Still, for many travelers, Florida means seafood. Florida native and blogger Terry Ward, puts it this way: “Quintessential Florida food is casual and boils down to Gulf and Atlantic seafood—oysters, snapper, grouper, hogfish, stone crab, lobster and red fish—as fresh as the best catches you get from a neighbor who fishes or goes lobstering.” Her test of culinary greatness? “A restaurant with a great grouper sandwich.”

In the last decade, Michelin expanded globally at a rapid pace and, as a result, has been dogged with rumors about its choices. Local food critics in a tourism-dominated economy like Florida are wary when outsiders weigh in, so skepticism remains high. “A majority of the starred Florida restaurants are contemporary Eurocentric and Japanese places that would feel as much at home in San Francisco as they would in Miami,” said Mr. Kara. The greater attention has also put a crimp in getting a table. “It’s definitely harder to get a reservation these days,” said Miami food blogger Cari Garcia from Fat Girl Hedonist.



Faiyaz Kara, restaurant critic for the Orlando Weekly called Z-Asian (above left) in Orlando’s Mills 50 district “one of the best, even though it is one of the newest; Z-Asian’s grilled jumbo squid.

Still, visitors from abroad or elsewhere in the U.S. rely on the guide for reference. According to a 2019 Ernst & Young poll, 84% of frequent travelers trust the quality of restaurants selected by the Michelin Guide. “For more than 120 years, the Michelin Guide has been an independent publication produced by anonymous Michelin inspectors,” said Gwendal Poullennec, international director of the Michelin Guides. “These former hospitality professionals, which include local and international inspectors, all have at least 10 years of experience so they have a precise and technical knowledge of the field. Their identity, and where and when they are visiting a restaurant, are all kept secret. They pay their own bills, just as any other [customer].”

Some chefs and restaurant owners were surprised by being chosen by Michelin and said they didn’t seek out recognition in advance. Z-Asian chef Ms. Nguyen said the Bib Gourmand her restaurant received caught her unaware. “My friends were calling all day to congratulate us, but we had no idea we were even being considered,” she said. “Many of the recipes we use were handed down to me from my grandparents so it’s great they not only stay alive, but are appreciated by an international group like Michelin. Now maybe my kids will eat more of my cooking!”



Open early for coffee and bagels, Zak The Baker is a colorful beacon for the breakfast crowd in Miami's Wynwood neighborhood. Mr. Stern, earned his culinary cred at organic farms in Israel, France and Sweden; his kosher bakery is a semifinalist for "Outstanding Bakery" in the 2023 James Beard Awards.



Challah coming out of the oven at Miami's kosher bakery, Zak The Baker. Other offerings such as the double-chocolate babka, everything bagels and the nova brioche with smoked salmon and arugula are popular too.



Chef Michael Beltrán brings the Miami Cuban-American experience to life, he said, "with food that speaks our language," at the brightly-hued Chug's Diner in the city's Coconut Grove neighborhood.



Chug's Diner is a "morning-noon-or-night eatery" with an inventive menu of diner classics (burgers, patty melts and three-egg specials) complemented by sophisticated takes on Cuban classics such as pollo a la plancha (grilled chicken cutlet) and boliche (stuffed beef roast). Shown here: the yummy 'Cast Iron Pancake.'



Thanks in part to Florida's ever-changing population, the state's food has transformed in recent years, absorbing culinary influences from Colombia, Cuba and Vietnam. Huong Nguyen and Hien Pham of Z-Asian in Orlando's Mills 50 district, received a Bib Gourmand distinction. Their creative use of fresh local ingredients enhances Vietnamese dishes.



"Many of the recipes we use were handed down to me from my grandparents," said Ms. Nguyen, "so it's great they not only stay alive, but are appreciated by an international group like Michelin." Shown here: Chef Nguyen's pho beef soup at Z-Asian.