

Sampling St. Petersburg's New Art And Food Scene



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Given all the “[best beach](#)” lists the St. Petersburg, Fla., area has topped over the years, you could be forgiven for thinking the Gulf Coast town is all sand and no substance. But beyond the 35 miles of coastline, which reaches from Caladesi Island in the north to Fort De Soto Park in the south, it’s not a stretch to say that [St. Pete](#) is experiencing an art- and food-fueled renaissance. The two scenes often intermingle, in fact, from the inaugural, celebrity-chef-studded Enjoy Arts & Tastes festival last November to the Beer Project that will bring three days of tastings to the Museum of Fine Arts this June. Though a host of new developments—including the Museum of the American Arts and Crafts Movement, a redesigned pier and [luxury shopping](#) at The Shops at St. Pete—are still on the horizon, food lovers and culture hounds will find plenty of draws in downtown St. Pete now. Here are Forbes Travel Guide’s tips for your trip to this most sophisticated of beach towns.

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The Birchwood, photo courtesy The Birchwood

Where to Stay

Rarely does an 18-room boutique inn draw the lines you'll find at The Birchwood on high-end Beach Drive. With the farm- and sea-to-table Birch & Vine restaurant and cabana-lined The Canopy rooftop lounge, The Birchwood lures locals and visitors looking for elevated gulf cuisine and a buzzing social scene. More than a few merrymakers no doubt wander in after seeing projections of The Canopy's happy throngs, tropical-inspired cocktails in hand, on the sidewalk in front of the hotel. But while the bartenders' blood orange margaritas are refreshing and Birch & Vine's seasonal specialties, such as sous-vide butter-poached lobster with truffle grits (the truffles just flown in from Alba, Italy), are perfectly prepared, it's the 18 guest rooms that make The Birchwood a true gem. Each one puts a modern twist on 1920s décor—the era when the building first opened—with two- and four-poster beds, romantic lantern lighting, and porcelain and silver claw-foot tubs under gilded mirrors (there's a large shower with a rainshower head, too). The color palette and materials are dramatic, with bold damask, wide stripes and marble and crimson bathrooms. Despite the water views, this is not your typical [beach hotel](#).

What to See and Do

Start your exploration of St. Pete's art scene just a block from The Birchwood at the Morean Arts Center's Chihuly Collection. The museum—a stunning but intimate structure that complements Dale Chihuly's glassworks with wood-plank walls and marble floors—was the first of its kind when it opened in 2010; a second facility designed to house a permanent collection of Chihuly's work has since opened in [Seattle](#). If the artist's iconic [Las Vegas](#) pieces, in the Forbes Travel Guide Four-Star [Bellagio](#) hotel and in his [CityCenter](#) gallery, don't impress you, this collection will, as each nook here was designed to display a specific work. Get a better understanding of the collection on one of the short, docent-led tours that leave every hour on the half hour, Monday through Friday, until 3:30 p.m.

From one striking waterfront museum to another, The Dalí Museum, opened in 2011, is a mind-bending, bulbous building that houses an expansive collection of Salvador Dalí's provocative art, with a helical staircase as the centerpiece. Here, too, taking one of the numerous daily docent-led tours is a must in order to fully appreciate the complexities—and there are a lot—of each work. From now through April 27, catch the special exhibition featuring one of Dalí's most famous contemporaries, Andy Warhol. *Warhol: Art. Fame. Mortality.* brings more than 100 of the artist's works to The Dalí and explores the similarities between the two icons and friends.

In contrast to St. Pete's impressive museums, the Grand Central District is a grassroots arts strip that stretches from approximately 16th to 31st streets along Central Avenue between downtown and the beaches (with the Central Avenue Trolley shuttling from city to sea). If you're visiting on the second Saturday of any month, the 2nd Saturday Art Walk from 5 to 9 p.m. is an excellent way to browse the district's studios and galleries. Participating spaces include neighborhood anchors Duncan McClellan Glass and Nuance Galleries, as well as smaller enclaves and boutiques. This area is also home to a number of studios that offer workshops if you're looking to try your hand at painting, glass blowing or clay firing—Painting with a Twist, Zen Glass Studio and St. Pete Clay are just a few places to see the city's creative community at work.



The Dalí Museum, photo credit iStock, Dominika Sebjan

Where to Eat and Drink

St. Pete's dining landscape is dotted with quirky, independent restaurants rather than national chains or imports (one exception: the first-ever Sylvia's soul food restaurant to open outside of New York City debuted here in November 2013), and the Central Avenue corridor is home to a growing number of them. Perhaps the most eye-catching is Taco Bus, serving authentic Mexican tacos—pulled pork in ancho pepper sauce, chicken in mole sauce—from a food truck disguised as a yellow school bus. There's also Bodega, a trendy restaurant housed in a tiny box of a shop with yellow awnings and chalkboard menus. You'll find a range of Latin flavors in the sandwiches here, from Cuban-style roast pork to churrasco with pepper-and-onion sofrito, and as at many St. Pete restaurants, the cuisine is meant to be enjoyed under the sun, at casual tables where the people-watching is as delicious as your dish.

On the other end of the spectrum is downtown's newest fine-dining destination. The visually stunning Rococo Steak opened in October 2013 in a restored 1920s Neoclassical Revival building, with a chic interior swathed in deep hues of scarlet and purple—think red crystal chandeliers—and a 25-page wine list that includes such rarities as a 1906 Château Lafite Rothschild. Executive chef Richard Potts, who previously helmed the kitchen at Forbes Travel Guide Four-Star Sorrel River Ranch Resort & Spa in Moab, Utah, has created a playful menu to match the dramatic space. Before tucking into your filet or rib eye, begin with his free-range fried-chicken lollipops, foie gras pain perdu or bacon flight featuring three styles alongside rustic grilled bread.

For gastronomic artistry in a more casual environment, head to Z Grille on Second Street, another area densely packed with restaurants and bars. The focal point of this sleek space is a skateboard mural depicting *The Last Fiesta*—a twist on Leonardo da Vinci's *The Last Supper* featuring masked Mexican wrestlers. Chef Zack Gross' food is just as whimsical. Start your meal with one of the unique daily deviled-egg specials. On a recent visit, the habanero-topped Sriracha deviled eggs, along with the blue cheese-bacon-spinach version, were packed

with vibrant flavors. Then you might try the chef's locally famous fried chicken and waffles, with a bacon-and-caramelized-onion waffle, pink peppercorn butter, applewood smoked bacon-cheddar grits and bacon maple syrup.

One of the biggest culinary trends in this sun-kissed corner has nothing to do with food, but rather beer. The peninsula is home to a burgeoning craft beer scene, with half a dozen breweries and beer bars opening in downtown St. Pete within the last few months alone. Green Bench Brewing Co.'s new 6,000-square-foot warehouse is home to a brewhouse, tap room and beer garden. More local brews can be found at the recently opened Cycle Brewing on Central Avenue, where there's also a sidewalk café; 3 Daughters Brewing; The Amsterdam; The Flying Pig Taphouse; and The Brass Tap, adjacent to Rococo Steak. Tampa-area beers are also taking local restaurant taps by storm, including those at The Vinoy Renaissance St. Petersburg Resort & Golf Club, a short walk from The Birchwood. Try a local draft at the elegant Marchand's Bar & Grill, a frescoed, columned throwback to the historic hotel's 1925 opening. The Vinoy has since hosted generations of celebrities, from Jimmy Stewart to George Clooney; during Spring Training, don't be surprised if you spot a star ball player here, in the same place where Babe Ruth and Joe DiMaggio once stayed and played. While St. Pete has long drawn all kinds of sunseekers, it's never had more to offer travelers.