

Night fishing in Apalachicola Bay



Beekeeper George Watkins collects tupelo honey.



PHOTOS/RALPH DANIELS

BY HOPE S. PHILBRICK

**D**espite our size difference, a blue crab nearly knocks me over. I'm trying to net him for Chef Chris Hastings of Birmingham's renowned Hot and Hot Fish Club, who will prepare a bonfire dinner for our group this evening. The crab stands on his back legs, grabs my net with his front claws, tugs it and then unexpectedly gives it a push. I lurch back, splashing in the knee-deep water as I almost lose my footing. This strengthens my determination: I'm not about to lose a fight with a crab. When I succeed in lifting him out of the water, he spits at me. He never gives up the fight, continuing to spit and kick even hours later when Hastings lowers him into a pot of boiling salt water seasoned with onion, thyme, Old Bay seasoning and beer. Later, biting into the meat, I discover new depths of meaning in the phrase "sweet victory."

The dinner is the culmination of a culinary tour hosted by Hastings in Florida's panhandle (a region also known as "The Emerald Coast" and "The Forgotten Coast"). Though we've eaten well consistently—what else could you expect from a tour hosted by someone who's been nominated for a James Beard Award?—this is the first meal Hastings has prepared. Each course showcases local fare with a casual elegance that suits the candlelit beach setting.

# FORAGING FLORIDA'S FORGOTTEN COAST

A memorable seaside dinner took place in this tent.



Hastings' commitment to regional, seasonal ingredients is driven by passion. "By using local ingredients, chefs preserve rather than trample on culture," he says. Chefs are today's culinary stars, but Hastings thinks the spotlight should shift focus. "The purveyors are my personal heroes," he says. Hastings' tour provides an opportunity to harvest land and sea working side by side with some of his favorite purveyors.

## LABOR OF LOVE

Unlike that feisty crab, oysters are incapable of putting up a fight. But harvesting them is hard work. Kendell Schellis tongs for oysters an average of seven hours each day, collecting eight to 15 60-pound bags of oysters. A man of few words, he hands over the tongs and steps aside so that I can try tonging. Oyster tongs are comprised of two rakes with metal teeth and long wooden handles attached to one another like scissors. They are very heavy, especially after grabbing a load of oysters. Two scoops and I'm exhausted. Schellis is one patient, strong dude. After measuring an oyster to make sure it's at least three inches long (the legal limit), it's pried open for me to eat. It's cool, slippery and very salty.

George Ward, whose family runs the 13 Mile Oyster Company, suggests the salt I taste is the result of "an intimate and delicate balance driven by wind." The theory is that if the wind blows from the west, oysters will taste saltier than if it's an easterly breeze.

continued on 40

DESTINATION DINING

continued from 40

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Preparing for the seaside dinner



## A FEAST OF ONE'S OWN

PHOTOS/RALPH DANIELS

Either way, when oysters are topped with combinations of onions, bell peppers, cheese, chipotle and bacon—as they were for our oyster roast lunch—they're delicious.

Near midnight, I'm on a flat-bottom boat in a shallow bayou with fisherman Lynn Griner searching for flounder. "Don't be surprised if you see eyes peeking up at you," warns Griner as he maneuvers the boat near tall grasses. He expects we'll encounter a few alligators. "I call 'em creepy crawlies." I wonder if our chatter might alert the fish. "Nah, only thing that bothers flounder is the moon," he says. When we find a fish, Griner will spear it with his homemade "gig" that looks like a short-pronged pitchfork. Though the conditions are ideal for flounder gigging—dark skies, an incoming tide and water temperature of about 68 degrees F—we leave after several hours without finding one flounder (or, thankfully, alligators). That's the way it goes: Some nights Griner brings in several fish, other nights are a bust.

## SWEET SPOT

Keeping up with demand is also a challenge for beekeeper George Watkins: "We

Chef Chris Hastings hosts the four-day/three-night "Foraging Florida's Forgotten Coast" expedition four times a year for 10 adults. Upcoming 2008 trips are planned for March 6–9, May 8–11 and Oct. 23–26. The cost is \$1,500 per person based on double occupancy, excluding transportation. For details and reservations, contact Liz Lang at Brownell Travel, 205-414-1659, or visit [www.brownelltravel.com/specials13.html](http://www.brownelltravel.com/specials13.html).

don't have time to bottle it fast enough," he says of the tupelo honey he harvests each April with his business partner Jimmy Moses. During the three-week tupelo season, the duo works 16-hour days

under hot sun with the constant risk of getting stung, though they mitigate risk with precautions like wearing veils and lighting smoky fires. "To make certified tupelo honey, we isolate the bees so they can't get to any other types of blossoms," says Watkins. Since bees can travel a two-mile radius, this means placing the hives where they're surrounded by tupelo trees. The Ogeechee, Apalachicola and Chattahoochee river valleys of northwest Florida are the only place in the world where tupelo honey is commercially produced. It's wildly popular because it never crystallizes and has a mild, sweet flavor.

Florida's Apalachicola Bay area is more than that place downriver where endangered fat, three-ridge mussels are dying because of the drought and our states' tug-of-war over the water remaining in Lake Lanier. It's a region rich with culinary treasures and people dedicated to harvesting prized foods. **SP**

Ingredients for the seaside dinner

