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A Weekend in the Azalea City

IMMERSE YOURSELF IN THE NATURAL BEAUTY AND RICH HISTORY OF THE COASTAL PORT CITY OF MOBILE, ALABAMA.

Photography by JOHN O'HAGAN *Written by* NANCY MEEKS



MOBILE IS THE OLDEST CITY in Alabama and the original capital of the Louisiana Territory in the United States. Azaleas in a rainbow of colors and Spanish moss-laden oak trees greet you at every corner as you explore the Native American, French, Spanish, British, Caribbean, and African influences on the area.

What to See

Opened on July 4, 1976, as part of the nation's bicentennial celebrations, **Fort Conde** is a replica of an 18th century fort that protected Mobile for nearly 100 years. Costumed guides take visitors through the exhibits that tell the history of the city, from its Native American inhabitants, to the city's first settlement in 1702 by the French at 27-Mile Bluff north up the Mobile River, to how the flags of six nations have flown over the city.

Mobilians are proud to dispel the notion that Mardi Gras festivities in the United States began in New Orleans—it started in their hometown. At the **Mobile Carnival Museum**, you can trace the roots of today's modern Carnival celebrations in America back to 1703 at 27-Mile Bluff.

The museum is home to a huge collection of Carnival paraphernalia that includes intricately designed and handmade ladies' ball gowns and men's formalwear, as well as crowns, scepters, and robes of past Mardi Gras royalty. Photographs and documents tracing the history of Mobile's secret societies, or "krewes," offer an inside look at how the elaborate balls and parades are planned and constructed. You can even jump on board a parade float and throw a few MoonPies to the crowd shouting, "Throw me something, mister!"

Originally purchased by its founders as a weekend retreat, **Bellingrath Gardens and Home** is now a 65-acre estate located along the Fowl River that is famed for its roses, cascading mums, and more than 250,000 azaleas.

The gardens and home were the creation of Walter Bellingrath, the first independent bottler of Coca-Cola in the Mobile area, and his wife, Bessie, in collaboration with noted Mobile architect George B. Rogers. In spring 1932, the Bellingraths opened their property to visitors year-round, while still continuously expanding their gardens and buildings.

Within the estate you'll find a rose garden, conservatory, great lawn, live-oak alley, a porcelain gallery, chapel, rockery, Asian garden, riverfront pavilion, lake, and countless flora in bloom year-round. Special activities are planned during the holidays and seasonal events. You can also tour the Bellingraths' 10,500-square-foot home, complete with original furnishings and impressive collections of crystal, china, and silver.



Photos courtesy of Cooper Restaurants.

Where to Eat

Housed in a building dating to 1893 that's been everything from a shoe store and textile factory to an art studio and Thai takeout place, **The Noble South** is a farm-to-table restaurant that uses only local products from local purveyors.

"We get 95 percent of our produce from within two hours of Mobile," says owner and chef Chris Rainosek, who opened the restaurant in 2014. "I try to get all our meat and proteins locally, too, but I won't go outside the South for anything. North Carolina is about the farthest I'll go."

The menu of traditional Southern dishes changes seasonally, but a few of the items are so popular they're always available. Appetizers of sweet and tender pickled shrimp in a lemony brine and deviled eggs topped with crispy bacon and trout roe are mainstays, as is the shrimp and grits, which is topped with either fresh corn in spring and summer or hominy in fall and winter. Lunch specials include chicken salad, tuna salad, and pimiento cheese sandwiches, as well as a create-your-own plate lunch from meats including fried catfish, pork chops, meat loaf, chicken, and a crab omelet and sides such as mac and cheese, succotash, peas, greens, and cucumber and tomato salad.

One of Mobile's newest culinary destinations is **Dauphin's**, a fine-dining restaurant located on the 34th floor of the Trustmark Building in downtown. You can enjoy classic coastal cuisine with Caribbean and French Creole influences while taking in the sweeping views of the city.

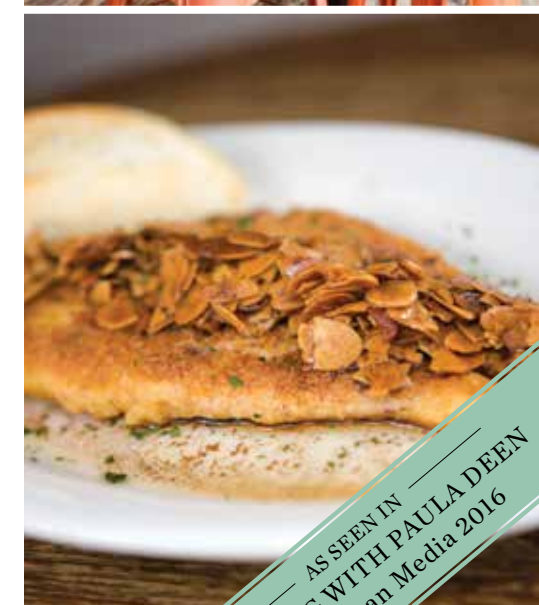
Dauphin's focuses on locally sourced products, as well as including fish and produce from the Alabama Gulf Coast and oysters cultivated right in their front yard in Mobile Bay. You can taste the island influences in the pecan-crusted fish of the day served with a creamy citrus sauce and mango salsa or the spiny tail lobster that's slow roasted with sweet butter. One of the most interesting nods to French Creole cooking at Dauphin's is their Gumbo Z'herb, which is made with greens, ham hock, chicken, and Conecuh sausage in a rich, beefy pot likker. The dish is a tribute to culinary icon Leah Chase of Dooky Chase restaurant in New Orleans, which serves a similar gumbo.

Located on the I-10 Causeway just before you're on the bridge to cross Mobile Bay is **Felix's Fish Camp**, a relaxed, welcoming restaurant with the soul of a fine-dining establishment. The beautiful sunsets over the bay are celebrated with a toast every evening, and the wait staff are professional, courteous, and eager to tell you about the menu that's full of the traditional dishes Mobile is known for, such as West Indies Salad, gumbo, and a catch of the day fresh from the dock.

Felix's West Indies Salad is one of the better and fresher takes on this crab dish that you'll find in the area. Their gumbo is Creole style with more pronounced vegetable and tomato flavors than a traditional gumbo but nevertheless rich and satisfying. Felix's also has a very popular crab soup featuring big lumps of sweet crab in a buttery cream base, as well as turtle soup that's finished with a hint of sherry. Order any by the cup or bowl, or get a One, One and One—a trio of the soups served in demitasse cups for a taste of them all.

The fresh fish of the day can be prepared fried, grilled, blackened, broiled, sautéed, with Greek or Creole seasonings, meuniere with browned butter and lemon, and amandine with butter, lemon, and toasted almonds. It's popular among regulars and repeat visitors to order their fish topped with an Oscar sauce of either crab or crawfish sautéed with butter, shallots, and white wine and drizzled with hollandaise.

Save room for MoonPie à la Mode, Felix's specialty dessert of warm, gooey chocolate MoonPies topped with vanilla ice cream and hot fudge sauce. It's an indulgent way to end your meal while watching for glimpses of Sheila and her babies, the alligators that make Felix's backyard their home.



Where to Stay

Standing at the corner of Royal and St. Francis streets, **The Battle House Renaissance Hotel and Spa** has a long and storied history. The original Battle House Hotel was built in 1852 by James Battle on the site of Andrew Jackson's military headquarters during the War of 1812. The hotel was a four-story brick building with a two-story gallery made from cast iron. It was a place to see and be seen, hosting Mardi Gras balls, civic meetings, and dignitaries of the day, including Jefferson Davis, Millard Fillmore, Henry Clay, and Stephen Douglas, who spent the night he lost the presidential election to Abraham Lincoln at the Battle House.

The hotel was destroyed by fire in 1905 and rebuilt in 1908. It remained open until 1974 and reopened in 2007 after a multimillion-dollar renovation that restored the hotel to all its former glory. As guests enter the grand lobby, they are greeted by a stained-glass ceiling with surrounding trompe l'oeil paintings that adorn whispering arches, a spot where guests can easily hear each other at a distance when speaking softly.

The Battle House is just steps away from the many museums, shops, cafés, and theaters of Dauphin Street, Bienville Square, and the main entertainment district of downtown Mobile. It's a great home base for your weekend of exploring the Azalea City.



For More Information

MOBILE VISITORS GUIDE
mobile.org

FORT CONDE
museumofmobile.com/fort-conde

MOBILE CARNIVAL MUSEUM
mobilecarnivalmuseum.com

BELLINGRATH GARDENS AND HOME
bellingrath.org

THE NOBLE SOUTH
thenoblesouthrestaurant.com

DAUPHIN'S
godauphins.com

FELIX'S FISH CAMP
felixsfishcamp.com

THE BATTLE HOUSE RENAISSANCE HOTEL AND SPA
marriott.com/hotels/travel/mobbr-the-battle-house-renaissance-mobile-hotel-and-spa



WEST INDIES SALAD: A MOBILE ORIGINAL

West Indies Salad sounds exotic, but it's a local creation made with just a few ingredients. It was invented in 1947 by Bill Bayley Sr. at his restaurant, Bayley's, in Theodore, Alabama, just south of Mobile. According to Bill Bayley Jr., the story goes that during Bill Sr.'s time spent on a merchant ship in the Caribbean, he would make a salad of lobster, oil, and vinegar. When he opened a restaurant, he started using local crab and added onion to

the mix because one of his favorite foods was cucumbers and onions marinated in vinegar. Named as a nod to Bill Sr.'s time on the ship, the dish was immediately popular, and it spread up and down the Gulf Coast. Bill Sr. eventually closed the restaurant, but Bill Jr. opened his own restaurant, Bayley's Seafood, in the 1990s in the original location of his dad's place.

The key to West Indies Salad is to layer the ingredients in the exact order specified and to let it marinate for several hours before serving. It's important to use vegetable oil because olive and other types of oil will solidify and clump in the refrigerator, as well as overpower the crab with their flavor. Fresh herbs, tomatoes, and even bell peppers are found in some versions of West Indies Salad, but it's best prepared and served served just how Bill Sr. did it and how Bill Jr. still does it—plain in a bowl for eating straight off your fork.

WEST INDIES SALAD

Makes about 3½ cups

- 1 medium onion, minced
- 1 pound fresh lump crabmeat, picked free of shells
- 1 teaspoon salt
- ½ teaspoon ground black pepper
- ½ cup vegetable oil
- 6 tablespoons apple cider vinegar
- ½ cup ice water

1. Sprinkle half of onion in bottom of a medium shallow glass or ceramic dish. Top with crab, then remaining onion. Sprinkle salt and pepper onto onion. Drizzle oil onto onion; drizzle vinegar onto onion. Slowly drizzle ½ cup ice water onto onion. Do not stir ingredients together. Cover and refrigerate for at least 4 hours before serving or up to overnight.