If you drive between Panama City and Port St. Joe on Highway 98, you’ll encounter Mexico Beach, Florida. You could easily bypass the little coastal town, which has not one traffic light along the five-mile stretch of highway it occupies; however, the speed limit is only 35 miles per hour, so why not slow to a complete stop? You’ll meet many friendly natives, who eagerly share their gorgeous, uncluttered beaches and related treasures, including fantastic local cuisine.

A lucky fishing destination, Mexico Beach lures many seafood lovers, but only one restaurant—Toucan’s—sits directly on the beach for wide-open views of the Gulf of Mexico. Making the most of the location, the family-friendly dining room and upstairs Tiki Bar hum along with an island vibe and dress code to match. “You’re welcome to come in right off the beach,” says General Manager Scott Gordon, a native Floridian with 30 years of restaurant experience. Having managed Toucan’s since 2009, when new owners took over, he adds, “People love the relaxed, vacation atmosphere.” Even the employees seem happy to be at work, and their genuinely friendly service and good food flow from their cheerful, eager-to-please mindset.

When you arrive with an extra large appetite or a taste for everything on the menu, order the steam bucket, which contains snow crab, Jonah crab claws, shrimp, Andouille sausage, red potatoes, and corn on the cob. For something that doesn’t require cracking or peeling, the Grouper Imperial, one of the restaurant’s most popular dishes, is wonderful. A topping of jumbo lump crabmeat and sherry cream sauce add just enough flavor to the mild fish. Likewise, a combination of lobster sauce and tangy mango make the Key West Pasta with jumbo shrimp and scallops another gratifying option.

Making the most of the location, the family-friendly dining room and upstairs Tiki Bar hum along with an island vibe and dress code to match.
Another to-die-for seafood establishment is the aptly named Killer Seafood. Owned by a trio who started out in the entertainment industry, the fast-casual setup (you place your order at the counter and then sit down to be served) continues its 12th year in business with a philosophy of honing a selective menu and preparing it incredibly well. When first starting out with Kim Halverson and Kevin Crouse, Michael Scoggins, claiming he learned the restaurant business from bartending on the side and watching The Food Channel, says he wanted to bring a taste of Los Angeles (where the three previously lived) to Mexico Beach.

“To be successful,” Scoggins relays, “I knew we had to have something to hang our hat on.” One such item, he decided, would be fish tacos. Twelve years ago, no-one in the Southeast was serving fish tacos, but they were everywhere in LA. Although fish tacos more regularly appear these days, Killer Seafood’s variety has something special going on—grilled, fresh yellow fin tuna, which has spent a day in a teriyaki marinade. The idea to use tuna resulted after a sports fisherman friend provided an overly abundant supply, and the chefs needed a new way to feature it.

“The marinade begins with a teriyaki glaze,” says Scoggins, “and we add soy sauce, olive oil, onions, garlic, sesame seeds, and pineapple juice.” You can also order fried grouper for your tacos, and either fish alone is amazing, but the combination of the soft flour tortilla and toppings—lettuce, tomato, and shredded cheese, plus that Killer taco sauce—produce a dish you’ll order again and again.

You can’t fully appreciate the menu, however, without treating your taste buds to the Killer Seafood Simmerin’ Sauce, originally concocted by Scoggins for a unique barbecue shrimp recipe. “I first cooked it for myself,” he says, explaining that he was inspired by New Orleans-style flavors that originate with a tomato base and conclude with a grand finale of spices—fennel seed, rosemary, thyme, and garlic. It’s so good! Get ready to think you’ve died and gone to heaven when that first bite of shrimp in Killer Seafood Simmerin’ Sauce enters your mouth.

When you begin to wonder how you’ll live without Killer Seafood Simmerin’ Sauce, you’ll be relieved to know that jars are sold in the restaurant, via the website, and in 30 different retail outlets around the Southeast. “Our customers will go home and talk their local gourmet store or fish market into carrying the sauce,” says Scoggins, noting that a variety of recipes also come with each jar. “By allowing the sauce to simmer,” he says, “it thickens and works well for a wide range of dishes, including chicken cacciatore and meatloaf.”

Although the Killer Seafood brand is expanding, don’t count on the restaurant getting any bigger (the capacity remains at 40 seats) or any fancier (signed dollar bills add character to the rustic walls and ceilings). If the wait is a bit long during the busy season, take advantage of the chance to observe the kitchen’s activities in full view. “People enjoy watching us, and they’ll talk with us while we cook,” says Scoggins, adding that the open concept compels them to keep things extra clean—a source of pride for the owners and peace of mind for diners!

For a taste of Old Florida, you’ll want to visit the Fish House Restaurant, a fixture in Mexico Beach since the 1970s. Erik Spilde, who started there as a cook, purchased the place in 1995 and now has daughters Nichole and Kayla in charge of the dining room. Wife Mishelle McPherson owns a sign business but also helps out as needed, supplying her sinfully good homemade cheesecakes.

“I bake all of the cheesecakes myself,” she says. “Sometimes it’ll be a chocolate mocha, which has a layer of chocolate and a layer of vanilla mocha on a chocolate cookie crust with a milk chocolate top. Other times it’s a tiramisu, which has a mocha cream with a ladyfinger crust and is dusted with chocolate powder.” Equally decadent is the peanut butter cream version with a chocolate cookie crust and a chocolate and nut topping.

Another Fish House signature dessert is Aunt Sally’s rum (Bundt) cake, crowned with either chocolate or vanilla plus a creamy whipped topping. The moist texture melts in your mouth with more than a hint of rum. Although you’ll see chocolate mentioned a few times on the menu, the made-from-scratch brownies are the supreme option for traditionalists. Ask for them just as they’re described—topped with vanilla bean ice cream and caramel syrup. Likewise, if ice cream’s your passion, you must try the old-fashioned root beer float, which tastes exactly how it should.

The desserts can steal the show, but don’t let them distract you from the main courses. Mishelle confides that the seafood platter has undergone a few changes over the years, but the fried gulf shrimp, bay scallops, fresh oysters, fish of the day, and crab remain nostalgic in many ways and universally appealing. The Fish House’s gumbo is also a winner in the true sense, having earned first place multiple times in the annual Mexico Beach Gumbo Cook-Off.
You can also taste some of the best wings imaginable while in Mexico Beach, thanks to Mango Marley’s. Count on large wings that you can bite into. To select a winner from 25 different sauces available, choose the Mango Tango, a crowd favorite, which has a mild oriental flavor. Skewers who insist on hot wings should order the Tsunami, made with habanero pepper and pineapple and described on the menu as “the hottest of hot.”

The menu is expansive, but as General Manager Jessica Schwark confirms, all of the items are cooked to order and taste freshly prepared. While waiting, have a glass of wine or a beer—the beverage menu is extensive as well—or a signature drink. Mango Marley’s is known for its margaritas, featuring fresh mango or watermelon. In the meantime, kids and adults (who believe that ageing well means having fun) pass the time cheering their sports favorites on one of eight televisions; playing a traditional arcade game, like football, old school Pac-Man, and pinball; and listening to live singers and musicians, who typically perform three nights per week, except on Saturdays during football season. Granting many reasons to hang out, Mango Marley’s is all about taking your time.

“Our staff is laidback,” says General Manager Jessica Schwark. “They aren’t trained to turn and burn customers. We see a lot of locals and regulars who vacation here, so the service is more personal.”

As if prepared for friends, entrée sizes are generous. If you like burgers with a twist, try the half-pound Kahuna, prepared with Jamaican jerk seasoning and a sweet and savory sesame sauce. Served with grilled pineapple and bacon (delicious!), plus onions and lettuce on a toasted bun, the juicy, crunchy textures yield a scrumptious combination of sweet, hot, and salty.

Bacon also makes a splash when paired with shrimp; therefore, forget about cholesterol and have the chargrilled bacon-wrapped shrimp skewers, served over yellow rice with a side of mango salsa. While you’re indulging, order a side of red beans that the pickiest Louisiana food critic would love. They’re simmered with pineapple, garlic, Andouille sausage, onion, bell pepper, celery, and Cajun seasoning. If you can’t eat it all, request a doggie bag. Incidentally, outdoor seating permits any canine in your family to keep you company—and share a bite!
When the sun rises, find a seat in Sharon’s Café. Although she firmly believes God led her there, Sharon Call says she seemingly found the café “by accident. A friend of mine had told me a man was opening a breakfast place in Mexico Beach, and at the time I was traveling to Panama City for work. I stopped by before the building was finished and asked if he was hiring.” In response, the man, JT Barineau, wanted to know if Sharon could make biscuits. “Yes, sir,” she responded, and he hired her on the spot.

She learned to cook from her mother, who was a finalist in the 1970 Pillsbury Bakeoff for her Pronto Enchilada Bake casserole, so she felt right at home in the kitchen and in the dining room. JT ended up leasing the restaurant to Sharon within months, and she bought the property a few years later in 1990.

“It’s a friendly atmosphere,” says Sharon. “Most of my staff have been with me for years. I have a very good crew. They are happy with their jobs and they take care of our customers, or they wouldn’t be here. One has a son who just turned 21, and she was pregnant with him when she came to work for me. I call my crew the café kids because I feel like I’m their mother, and now that their children are working here, I have café grandkids.”

“I have some people tell me that when they die and go heaven, they hope there’s a Sharon’s Café.” Sharon reveals. Until that time comes, Mexico Beach—with its idyllic location, kindhearted people, and delicious food—really is a little slice of heaven in Northwest Florida.