



TABLE TALK

THE TASTING TOURS: ST. AUGUSTINE'S DINING & SIPPING LEGACY

story and photos by
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In 2011, two dynamic businesswomen met one evening at the original Cellar 6 wine bar on Aviles Street in historic St. Augustine for a glass of vintage Beaujolais. Today, they both have their own version of the birth of their new business.

Andrea Jones-Downs recalls wine at Cellar 6, and JoAnna Page-Engel recalls images of margaritas on the beach! Either version is fine with them over the years since both locations were very enjoyable. However, the conversation couldn't have been sharper; they enthusiastically agreed on their three passions: drinking, eating and talking!

Depending on the number of glasses they enjoyed that night, they were both ready to leave prior careers and embark on something together. JoAnna had been the owner of a successful hair salon and spa; she was the owner/broker of a thriving real estate company working part-time and known as Jumpin' JoJo on a St. Augustine pirate ship. Andrea's reincarnation was going to be from her years as a cruise director on Disney's Premier Cruise Lines and the owner of First Coast Talent Agency in Jacksonville for film, TV, commercials and videos.

"What do we want to do now? What do we love to do? What do we enjoy doing on vacations? What do friends want to do when they visit St. Augustine?"



Niki Kemper, JoAnna Page-Engel and Andrea Jones-Downs

All their light bulbs pointed to starting a food tour company. Speaking the following morning, they realized that their "wine talk" was completely on target. They launched The Tasting Tours at the bar of the Casa Monica Hotel, which was the home/base for their first year. Why? Because they served wine!

Not only did these two entrepreneurial and career-minded women "click" because of their personalities but the new venture made business sense, too. They nurtured and grew The Tasting Tours by doing everything themselves as

a two-woman organization, progressing from \$5,000 annual gross to \$1-million-plus. They didn't have sophisticated high-tech online booking, but instead used a spiral notebook to take Tasting Tour reservations.

Today, with nine full-time employees and a personal touring staff of up to 20 professional guides, they continue to expand their footprint of offices and event space, too. They touch the heartbeat and bring into focus many new and legendary St. Augustine restaurants, wine bars, specialty food eateries, bakeries and more than 30 venues, including Island Boulevard across the famous Bridge of Lions.

Don't forget about St. Augustine's brilliant history. Andrea and JoAnna cherish St. Augustine's historic chronicles and legends. Their guides are licensed from the City of St. Augustine and pass an extensive historical test. After being tutored by Tour Managers, they can qualify to take guests on either pedestrian strolling tours through history or drive one of The Tasting Tour's nine-guest electric vehicles.

Both "Rolling & Strolling" tours make delicious stops during the day's, or night's, adventure, which includes four or five restaurants and/or bars. Each guide hand-selects from more than 30 stops and often customizes the tastings

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for return guests to make sure that they experience a cornucopia of culinary favorites!

The team of culinary professionals who work for The Tasting Tours brings added excitement for many of their guests. Your guide could be a private chef, former restaurant owner, sommelier, event planner or a local “foodie” who has dined their way around the region. Whether you are a party of two or 22, each stop has happy staff waiting to welcome your tour group with a perfectly set table, bar, lounge or rooftop open-air verandah.

The variety of restaurants and menus always surprises you with what is being served. The Tasting Tours prides itself on selecting the best dining/tasting venues in town and planning a balanced tour of gourmet delights. From craft cocktails and wines to fresh fruit mocktails, your tasting pleasure is important to making their selections for you. From chocolate decadence to charcuterie, lamb chops and dessert buffets, seafood specialties or five-star chef choices, their



The strolling option in The Tasting Tours’ “Rolling & Strolling.”

commitment to excellence is on their plate every day.

The Tasting Tours is a huge advocate of supporting local businesses and giving back to the community. This has been their mission since the company's



The rolling option in The Tasting Tours’ “Rolling & Strolling.”

launch. They have contributed more than a million dollars back into the local economy through their daily food tours. If you're a perfectionist for checking on reviews, whether travel, dining or just shopping around, their business has received prestigious honors — from the Hall of Fame and Travelers’ Choice Awards to 13 consecutive years recognized with TripAdvisor’s Certificate of Excellence.

Driving the company's growth over

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the years now belongs to their director of sales, Niki Kemper, who began her journey originally as a tour guide in 2016. As she steadily climbed the ranks through dedication and hard work, she delivered exceptional guest experiences as tour manager. Andrea and JoAnna

honored her as a shareholder, and their three familiar faces continually represent the superiority of today's hospitality industry.

Whether team building, planning a girlfriend getaway, seeing history from a uniquely different angle or taking a romantic evening to find a lovely route around town that's typically used by locals, The Tasting Tours is a memorable and authentic look at life in St. August-

tine in each area you visit. The cuisine is perfectly woven into the tapestry of nearly 500 years of history, and all you have to do is show up!

PS: Surprise someone you love with a private horse-and-carriage ride. The Tasting Tours can make all the arrangements for you. I might just be in the elegant carriage three blocks away with my honey and our favorite vintage Bordeaux!

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