

A s crowds of tourists stroll along the streets and young, decked-out professionals relax at sidewalk tables, the smell of fresh Italian herbs, buttery French sauces and aromatic Asian spices permeates the air, thanks to a sultry, coastal breeze that's wafting about. This is not the south of France or some other exorbitantly expensive oceanfront resort, it's Delray Beach's Atlantic Avenue, one of the most admired and fashionable swaths of restaurants in South Florida.

When it comes to eating, drinking and having a good time, there's no dearth of options in this walkable town. Because of the bustling dining and entertainment scene on Atlantic Avenue and its surrounding streets, Delray Beach has earned the honor of Most Fun Small Town in America by Rand McNally and USA Today. The city was even highlighted in an episode of the Travel Channel special, "The Best Small Towns in America."

As vibrant as Atlantic Avenue is now, this wasn't always the case. After years of taking a backseat to growing communities like swanky Boca Raton or wealthy Palm Beach, the city was dubbed "Dullray;" however, concentrated efforts by the city and the Delray Community Redevelopment Agency have turned this little town into the model for other areas looking to revitalize their downtown streets. One of the first establishments to start the reinvigoration process was 32 East; it's also the longest lasting. With a daily-changing menu of highest-quality ingredients from many local and other artisanal suppliers, its American bistro fare, with a blend of flavors and techniques from across the world, has earned 32 East a reputation as one of the most widely acclaimed joints in the region.

In addition to a number of prestigious culinary awards on his résumé, in March 2013, executive chef Nick Morfogen was featured on the Cooking Channel's series "Emeril's Florida." Before taking over the kitchen at the restaurant 14 years ago, Morfogen and his wife had been visiting 32 East as customers for ages. While the restaurant's philosophy of sourcing the freshest, most seasonal ingredients possible has not changed, awareness of local products has, making it a go-to for special occasions and significant life events. As one of the longest-standing chefs on the Avenue, Morfogen thinks that it's the constant change of international influences that keeps diners happy and coming back for more.

"Look at this country," Morfogen said. "It's so diverse. Take me, for example; I'm of Greek heritage with French and Italian training. Here we take things we like to eat, study and experiment, and then come up with a dish. It's not about signature menu items, but a signature style."

In terms of cultural influence in fare, Atlantic Avenue runs the gamut with restaurants ranging from Thai and Japanese to French and Italian to American bistro and comfort food to high-end steaks and seafood.

John Rosatti owns several restaurants in town: laid-back gastro pub the Office and rustic Italian spot Vic & Angelo's on Atlantic Avenue, as well as beachfront, fast-casual, burger-concept BurgerFi. As a restaurateur and businessman, Rosatti fell for the town's casual beach vibe, international appeal and growing dining scene. "Delray Beach is a charming village with one of the most exceptional beaches in Florida," said Rosatti. "It has been a developing area since the late 1990s, with a good mix of local residents and national and international visitors. It is also a destination-dining area for many residents ... from throughout South Florida, and it's also pedestrian-friendly. Erick Miranda, executive chef of Vic & Angelo's, has been in Delray Beach since 2010. After working in nearby Palm Beach Gardens

for 12 years, a friend who was working for the company called to ask if he was interested in making the move to Delray Beach. After months of visiting the restaurant and the town, Miranda decided it was time to take the plunge into the kitchen of the home-style Italian restaurant.

"I love the energy of this town," Miranda said. "I love the restaurant being right next to other restaurants. I think the competition is really healthy; the most important thing I have to do is make sure my customers are happy. It forces me to step up my game."

It's the lifestyle and quiet, but somewhat city-like vibe that drew partners Brandon Belluscio, Brian Albe and Anthony Pizzo to town. Together the three own two trendy and locally beloved restaurants on Atlantic Avenue: high-end modern steakhouse Cut 432 and casual watering hole Park Tavern. The team made the move up to Delray Beach about six years ago.

"We had restaurants in Boca Raton and we sold them," said Belluscio. "There weren't really a whole lot of restaurants on Atlantic back then, but we saw the momentum; we knew we wanted to be part of more of an urban restaurant scene rather than a destination restaurant. This town is hipper; we thought the cutting-edge concept of Cut 432 would be better received." For Cut 432, chef Anthony Pizzo has put his touch on what the trio of owners felt the new generation of steakhouse should be: innovative with a focus on top-notch ingredients. While Cut focuses on serving exclusive prime meats in a chic and sultry environment, Park Tavern is all about accessible fare with an extensive beverage program and a fun, upbeat vibe, crossing the borders of price point, atmosphere and cuisine. It's varied concepts such as these that draw a diverse and spirited crowd to the Avenue, making it a great place to dine, hang out or just walk around.

