
We have two of the three @ HBS.

So says the sign welcoming you to the Hawthorne Bottle Shop in the edgy Grand Central District in St. Petersburg, Fla. (727-800-2810, www.hbsforlife.com). Inside there’s an impressive selection of more than 300 varieties of beer and about 80 varieties of small batch wines from around the world. Want to try something? There’s no corkage fee, and you can break up that six-pack of brew if you like. Select anything you want from the shelves, and grab a seat in one of the nooks. If you prefer, there’s a smart selection of draft beer and wines by the glass at the bar, where you can also order a really good, made-from-scratch deli sandwich (named after famous music festivals). We had the Burning Man, a stack of rare roast beef smeared with fiery horseradish sauce and topped with arugula, sautéed onions, and blue cheese, and the Bonnaroo, with local almond butter, smashed sweet potatoes, bananas, walnuts, and Florida honey. (“Comes with a free high five.”) A small, funky sitting area-library invites you to “bring a book, take a book.” A tub of cold beer sits near the door to the outdoor patio; pop a brew open before you head outside. Sometimes there’s live music; dogs are always welcome.
“We liked the vibe of this neighborhood,” says Hawthorne Bottle Shop co-owner Amanda Hill. “I grew up on Hawthorne Street in Portland [Ore.], and it was very much like this. Lots of creative energy and freedom.”

Not that long ago, this rapidly-growing neighborhood was a string of empty storefronts, and a place you avoided walking through at night. “It was pretty desolate,” says Jonathan Tallon, president of the Grand Central District Association. “But it was dirt cheap and you could do what you wanted, so it attracted a very curious and interesting mix of entrepreneurs. It became an innovation lab.”

Today, the pedestrian-friendly area, stretching east-west between the 1600 and 3000 blocks of Central Avenue, is filled with people who quit their day jobs to pursue their passion. There are colorful murals, vintage boutiques, yoga studios, coffee shops, brew pubs, tattoo parlors, hair salons, doggie daycares, and a growing list of restaurants. Old buildings have been repurposed; flower boxes planted, and the laid-back, Old Florida hub, designated both a national and state Main Street community, is on the rise.

“Everyone’s eyes are on Grand Central right now,” says Tegan Foster, co-owner of Hawthorne Bottle Shop.

We started at the new **Imagine Museum**, which opened in January this year, and is already adding more buzz to the district (727-300-1700; [www.imaginemuseum.com](http://www.imaginemuseum.com)). Located in a former charter school building, the wildly colorful museum showcases the work of studio glass artists. The collection includes more than 400 major pieces, from tiny dioramas to large chandeliers. We gawked at early Dale Chihuly pieces, glass horses by Shelley Muzylskowi Allen, and artist Paul Stankard’s paperweights, housing tiny flower bouquets and honey bees.

Just down the street was **Haslam’s Bookstore**, Florida’s largest independent bookstore, and a longtime anchor in the area (727-822-8616, [www.haslams.com](http://www.haslams.com)). Folks came to Haslam’s long before GCD was revitalized. If you’re a book lover, this is mecca. It’s timeworn and musty and jam-packed with stacks of new and used books, and home to a store cat and ghosts. (It was a frequent hangout for Jack Kerouac, and some believe he still haunts the place, moving his books around to more prominent spots.) We left with a bag of books, and crossed the street to take a peek in the **ARTpool Gallery & Vintage Boutique** (“vintage Florida meets indie culture”). This quirky, eclectic shop-gallery-entertainment venue (727-324-3878, [www.artpoolrules.com](http://www.artpoolrules.com))
is housed in a former 7,500-square-foot auto repair shop and full of all things retro: vinyl records, vintage clothing, jewelry, and furniture. It also has local art for sale and hosts a popular monthly craft fair. We spent a good hour pawing through its huge collection of stuff, and left with a few finds (a velvet fedora! cool vintage earrings!) and our bellies grumbling.

There are plenty of places to eat and drink in the GCD, and over the course of a few days, we tried our best to check out some of the hot spots. The Urban Brew and BBQ (727-822-8919, www.urbanbrewandbbq.com) serves craft beer and Southern-style barbecue (try the braised pork belly, smoked in draft root beer for more than seven hours.) The colorful Casita Taqueria (727-498-8749, www.casitatacos.com) has simple Mexican street fare, made in-house with fresh ingredients. Their camarones, with garlic grilled shrimp, chipotle mayo, and cilantro, and the slow-cooked pork carnitas, topped with salsa verde and queso fresco cheese, are favorites. Enjoy them with a cold Modelo at the picnic table outside. At Nitally’s Thai-Mex Cuisine (727-321-8424, www.nitallys.com) you can get chipotle stir fry, panang mole, and chorizo fried rice — sounds weird but it works, and somehow mirrors the funky, diverse neighborhood. The hippy-ish, save-the-planet (we like that stuff!) Love Food Central (727-317-2034, www.lovefoodcentral.com) serves vegan and gluten-free dishes, like the popular G-mash toast with smashed garbanzo salad and avocado, and the pulled BBQ sandwich with jackfruit, avocado, and house-made BBQ sauce. At the more sophisticated, but still unpretentious, Lolita’s Wine Market (named after the owner’s dog Lola — Lolita when she misbehaves), you can create your own charcuterie board, selecting from a large variety of cured meats, cheeses, and pickled accoutrements (727-505-0303, www.facebook.com/lolitaswinemarket). They also have daily small plate specials, like a burrata roasted pear and arugula salad, garlic shrimp, and chorizo oysters Rockefeller.

On our last day in the GCD, we sat at the Dog Bar (“Sit. Stay. Drink.”), a combo doggie daycare, dog park and a full liquor, beer, wine bar (727-317-4968, www.dogbarstpete.com). Dogs played in the park, with on- and off-leash areas, swimming pools, doggie ramps, tunnels, and cots for lounging. People clustered at outdoor tables and hunkered up to the bar to chat with neighbors and strangers over cold brews, watched sports on TV, and played Ping-Pong and corn hole. We wondered: How long will the GCD stay so wonderfully funky, before it becomes too gentrified, sanitized, expensive.

“The district still has a little bit of dirt and grit under its fingernails,” Tallon said. “That’s what makes it interesting.”

We agree; let’s hope it stays that way for a while.
If you go . . .