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December 17, 2013

## Go For the Food: Fun Eats in St. Petersburg, Fla.

By THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

ST. PETERSBURG, Fla. — A typical St. Petersburg itinerary might include seeing the Dali Museum, having a drink at the storied Vinoy hotel and checking out nearby beaches. As in any good-sized city, the downtown and waterfront areas have plenty of restaurant options, from seafood and Italian to Asian and Mexican.

But just west of downtown along Central Avenue, in St. Pete's emerging Grand Central District, a funkier, somewhat less grown-up array of eateries is bubbling up. Here, amid a dozen antique and thrift shops, just beyond Haslam's enormous book emporium, you'll find bars and cafes with unique themes. The clientele ranges from hipsters and tattooed 20-somethings to middle-aged couples and groups of friends out for a fun evening.

One area of note begins around 23rd Street with Taco Bus, a bright-yellow food truck that looks like an overgrown toy, with outdoor tables shaded by colorful umbrellas. The menu of standard tacos and burritos also offers items like tofu fajitas and vegan steak strip quesadillas. At night, the spot is brightly lit along an otherwise dark stretch, giving the truck, tables and line of customers a moody look reminiscent of the lit-up diner in Edward Hopper's "Nighthawks" painting.

A block away, Nitally's offers Thai-Mex cuisine — reflecting the owners' dual heritage — along with bi-cultural decor, like decorations for the Mexican holiday Day of the Dead at Halloween alongside Buddhas. There are Thai dishes on the menu, Mexican dishes and some fusion dishes that combine the two (though truth be told, panang mole is more entertaining as a concept than as reality).

Across the street, Beak's St. Pete has a fun, laidback, Old-Florida vibe complete with shell art decor and twangy guitar music. (Beak's refers to a parrot, in case you were wondering.)

The real gem here for serious foodies, though, is a slightly more upscale place across the street from Beak's and Nitally's called Queenshead. The interior decor is vaguely British, with a Union Jack and a bust of Queen Elizabeth, while the spacious outdoor seating is Florida-style with lounges and cabanas. But there's nothing standoffish about

these Anglophiles: If you choose to eat at the bar, friendly bartenders will keep you company while other patrons recommend their favorite dishes.

Entrees echo the British theme: shepherd's pie, fish and chips, bangers and mash. But the real stars here are the creative small-plate starters. Some work as bar snacks if you want something to anchor your cocktails, but you could also make a meal out of ordering a few of them. These are all as utterly scrumptious as they sound: crispy chickpeas dusted with smoked paprika (way better than bar popcorn to accompany your black-and-tan); huge, sweet, seared scallops with the best darn brussels sprouts you ever ate; and pumpkin-flavored goat cheese on house-made crackers. And here's an idea worth copying for your next at-home party: a plate of caprese skewers, with cherry tomatoes, a folded basil leaf and slivers of mozzarella speared on a long cocktail pick, turning the classic caprese salad into finger-food that's easy to share.

For dessert, try the sticky toffee, and don't worry about some scary crunchy surprise getting stuck in your teeth — it's as smooth and tasty as homestyle butterscotch pudding.

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#### If You Go...

QUEENSHEAD: 2501 Central Ave., St. Petersburg, Fla., <http://www.thequeensheadbar.com> , 727-498-8584.

BEAK'S ST. PETE: 2451 Central Ave., St. Petersburg, Fla., <http://www.facebook.com/BeaksStPete> , 727-321-9100.

NITALLY'S: 2462 Central Avenue, St. Petersburg, Fla.; <http://www.nitallys.com> , 727-321-8424.

TACO BUS: 2324 Central Ave, St. Petersburg, <http://www.taco-bus.com/> , 727-322-5000.