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Buffalo Chips to Bohemian: Welcome to Southwest Florida's hottest dining destination



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It's nearing 3:30 on a Monday afternoon as Sally Majestic ends her break to head back inside.

"They'll be arriving soon for the wings," she says, referring to the customers who religiously show up for that day's \$1 wing special at Buffalo Chips. "It'll be a busy one."

Majestic has worked at her family's iconic restaurant in Bonita Springs — affectionately called "Florida's favorite upscale dive" — for 12 years. She knows her customers as well as Buffalo Chips knows Buffalo wings.

"Everyone loves our specials," said Majestic, whose uncle Alfred Greenwood bought the property in 1982. "Friday's fish fry, the burgers (on Thursday), the barbecue ribs (on Saturday). Some have been coming for generations."

Less than 1½ miles down Old 41 Road, but worlds away on the food scene, The Bohemian is quiet. Reservations have been (really, really should have been) made beginning at 5 p.m. for Brandon and Caitlin Schewe's stunningly beautiful, trendy, chic new-as-of-March-2022 restaurant in the trendy, chic, new again Entrada.

Guests are there for craft cocktails and shareable creations from the chef-driven kitchen, which are as visually pleasing as they are tasting.

Just a half-mile south, co-owner Carl Smith — known around Naples for his Brit Pit food truck — runs The Causeway, a new food-hall-style dining concept showcasing three

restaurants, a dessert bar and a beer wall, all under one industrially modern roof.

"I knew it was going to work and become the new place to be," the chef said while putting the final touches on orders of fish & chips and a ramen noodle bowl.

It's the latest hidden gem to emerge here in the last few years.

Welcome to the 4.4-mile stretch of Old 41 Road in Bonita Springs between The Causeway and North Bonita Country Club – Southwest Florida's hottest (and most unlikely) dining destination.

It's taken decades for this quaint, historic city to go from a handful of restaurants to a foodie favorite.

In the beginning ...

Before this area became a culinary hotspot, it was a tourist attraction. Let's start in 1921, when Old 41 Road was Heitman Avenue and The Heitman Hotel was brand new. The landmark property eventually became Bonita Springs Hotel, Villa Bonita and in 1963, Shangri-La Springs. Today, the stately site is home to Harvest & Wisdom, a farm-to-table restaurant that opened in 2019.

Travelers also came for Everglades Wonder Gardens, the roadside favorite originally called Everglades Reptile Gardens, which opened in 1936 and had a 25-cent admission fee.

Canadian Harold Crant arrived in 1938 and bought the four corners of Terry Street and Old 41 Road (old Highway 41 at the time). He opened the original Shell Factory on one corner, which after burning down in 1952, was rebuilt in North Fort Myers.

A Seminole Indian Village was on a corner and THE restaurant was on another.

"The Dome was there," said Joseph "Pepi" Minetti, whose Grandpa's Pizza is a pepperoni's throw away from the intersection. "They had orange juice samples. It's been gone for a long time now."

An eye-catching tourist stop with an orange dome roof and a green leaf in the 1940s, the Dome later became a restaurant, then a rough-and-tumble bar.

Crant reportedly bought the building from the government after World War II, when Buckingham Army Air Field was closed.

According to Chris Wadsworth, co-author of "Bonita Springs," a history of the city, the walls were partially made with leftover ammunition boxes.

It was demolished in 1992.

Stan's Super Subs, opened by Harry Van Brunt in 1972, sits just north of the Terry Street intersection. The small, counter-service shop changed hands a few times after he died in 2003 but is still slicing thin and piling high in Nelson's Plaza.

In the late 1970s, downtown Bonita Springs was bypassed when Tamiami Trail shifted to become the new U.S. 41 and Old 41 Road was off to the side like a lovely garnish.

But that didn't detour more restaurants from coming.

Grandpa's Pizza comes to town in 1980

Minetti stands in the cramped, no-frills-at-all entryway of his pizza joint on the end unit of an even-less-frilly strip mall. Blink and you may miss Grandpa's Pizza even though it's been in the same pizza-slice-sized space for 44 years.

"There was nothing around here," he said. "That's why we came. We were really busy because we were the only ones here. We're one of the oldest with Buffalo Chips. And there was Benson's (Grocery). All three of us are still going."

Minetti's cousin Hugo opened Grandpa's in 1980. Minetti and his wife Antonietta, who came to the U.S. from Naples, Italy, that same year, joined Hugo in the business in 1990.

"We're a family," he said. "We didn't buy it from him. We joined him."

All three work shoulder to shoulder, five days a week. They've used the same recipes for four-plus decades.

And Grandpa's is thriving.

“Before, I only had locals,” Minetti said. “Now people come from all over. A lot of Europeans. New faces come in every day. Once you try our pizza, you stay with us.”

It surged into the national spotlight after Barstool Sports founder Dave Portnoy rated the cheese pizza a 7.8 and the best-selling Grandma’s pizza an 8.1 in his “One Bite Pizza Reviews” in 2021.

“Before that (show), we were really busy,” Minetti said. “Then it got even crazier. It was three years ago and I still hear it (from customers) 30 or 40 times a week.”

Even after 34 years, Minetti loves the community and what he’s doing.

“I’m still smiling,” he said. “I’d do it all over again.”

Buffalo Chips opens in 1982

Sally Majestic remembers when her uncle bought the property, complete with a motel, in 1982.

“I was a senior in high school,” she said. “And I moved here when I was 21. I never looked back. Bonita was a small town. I was from a small town in West Virginia, so it was just like being home.”

Alfred Greenwell, her uncle, turned an apartment on the premises into the quirky Buffalo Chips.

“He bought it because of the motel,” said Majestic, who came to help her cousin Chip who took over in 1991. “But he wanted to open his own restaurant.”

You’d think after all these years, business would start to plateau. Especially with shiny new restaurants coming in. But you’d be wrong.

“We still see new faces every day,” Majestic said. “For years we’ve had a steady increase. We don’t really have a slow summer. Regulars are very loyal. We get a lot from Naples too.”

Her best guess why?

“We have a one-of-a-kind golden product,” she said, referring to the beloved chicken wings. “But we also haven’t jacked up the prices. Look at our menu. It’s affordable for families. We’re blessed we can do that. We’re a family business. Customers are family.”

In 1992, Maria’s Restaurant moves in

Maria and Jose Romero already had a successful to-go joint on Bonita Beach Road when they heard about another spot.

“There was a restaurant here,” the always-in-motion Maria said in between greeting customers on a recent Saturday afternoon. “Someone said, ‘Do you want to buy it?’ So we closed the other one and came here. It was just a bar before. We added the food.”

The area was different back then.

“There was a lot of dirt,” Maria said. “There was nothing here. Buffalo Chips, a sandwich place — Stan’s Subs, Survey Café, Grandpa’s.”

“The orange bar was here,” added Jose. “Dixie Moon was here. They moved it to downtown just for show. It wasn’t open.”

The business succeeded from the start.

“We were the only Mexican restaurant,” said Jose, who does the cooking. “We have authentic Mexican food. Home cooked like my mom cooked. That’s how we do it.”

The Romeros stayed, raised their three boys (who are still in the area) and watched families grow with theirs.

“We are part of this community,” Jose said. “We work hard for the money and so do our customers. We keep our prices as low as we can.”

Beginning at 4 p.m. on Tuesdays, tacos are \$1.

“We have 13 different tacos,” Jose proudly stated. “We do 700 an hour, 3,500 on Taco Tuesday.”

Long lines form, but don’t let that deter you.

“It’s a lot, but we’re fast,” added Maria. “It’s a party. Everyone is family.”

She said Naples residents keep coming up, finding the restaurant for the first time. They soon become regular customers, part of the family. They bring new customers with them and so on...

“Mexican restaurants open and close around here,” Maria said. “We’ve been here 32 years.”

In the middle ...

Before diving into the newest of the new restaurants that have pushed Old 41 Road into the foodie spotlight, there have been plenty that helped pave the way.

Johnny Malloy’s: This Cleveland-based sports bar has been open in Bonita Plaza on the southwest corner of Old 41 and Bonita Beach SE roads since 2008. The outside was hopping on a recent stop at an off hour.

Tortilleria La Rancherita: Mexican restaurants in the area come in all shapes and sizes. But which ones are the best? If you ask former Naples Daily News food critic Annabelle Tometich, she would say this one, just south of Bonita Drive. Opened in 2000, she named its tacos the best in Southwest Florida in 2014 and put it on her best Mexican restaurants list in 2018. More than two decades later, Tometich still loves it.

Old 41 Restaurant: Technically a pancake flip off Old 41 Road on Bernwood Drive, this popular neighborhood diner has been serving up breakfast and lunch favorites with precision and a nod to founder Tony Backos’ Philadelphia roots since 2007.

Survey Café: Although it’s behind Benson’s Grocery on Wilson Street, we couldn’t overlook this charming 1940s-era cottage-turned Southern café that opened in 2009. After all, its name pays homage to the area’s history. Once a surveyor’s camp, folks began to settle there in the late 1800s. It was named Survey until 1912 when investors, including J.H. Ragsdale, bought land and began to develop. Ragsdale reportedly renamed the community Bonita Springs after his daughter and the springs behind the Heitman Hotel.

Vikingos Restaurant: Former construction worker Carlos Landeros opened this Mexican-style seafood restaurant in Nelson’s Plaza north of Terry Street in 2009. For five years before

that, he sold his dishes from his house to co-workers and friends. They told him to open his own place. Good thing he listened.

Trackside Donuts: This former home to Dairy Queen and Mexican restaurants on the southeast corner of Old 41 and Bonita Beach SE roads has been making bigger better donuts since 2011. Although there have been several owners, the donuts are still known to sell out before the 1 p.m. closing time.

For Heaven Shakes: Heaven Scent flower shop owner Susie Sayger opened this ice cream shop in her building more than a decade ago. It serves 36 flavors from its cool spot on the southeast corner of the Ragsdale Street rotary.

El Gran Taco Loco: If you ask Guillermo Becerra who has the best Mexican food, he'll respectfully disagree with Tometich and go with this walk-up spot that opened behind Benson's in 2015. "I've been coming here since I was 13 and I'm 21 now," the loyal customer said. "It has the best flavor, the best for the money. And it has the nicest people."

New kids in the neighborhood

In 2015, a two-year project began to create a more welcoming downtown and a better sense of community. Improvements included replacing the traffic lights at Pennsylvania Avenue and Terry Street with roundabouts, creating a median strip with plantings, moving overhead utilities underground and bettering street drainage. Sidewalk and road improvements were made to the 0.84-mile stretch along Old 41 Road between Terry and Tennessee streets. As all these changes came, so did some of our new favorite restaurants.

Downtown Coffee and Wine Co.: In 2019, Caitlin Schewe told The News-Press that she and her husband Brandon began to formulate a plan to open this gem of a shop — in the historic building that once housed the Corner Shop — while road construction was going on in 2017.

"My friends said, 'Why would you go downtown?'" she said shortly after opening. "I knew it would take off in a few years."

She couldn't have been more right.

“We wanted more than just a coffee shop or a breakfast/lunch place,” Brandon said at the time. “We wanted to create much more, a sense of community, by supporting local businesses for what will be showcased on our menu.”

Mission accomplished. Located a couple of blocks south of Riverside Park, it's still one of the coolest spots around. (We swoon just thinking about the s'mores macchiato).

But the Schewes didn't stop there. More on that in a bit ...

Aji Limon Taste of Peru: The fourth location of this longtime JLB favorite started by chef and owner Jorge Rouillon opened in late March 2018. It took over Ceviche 41's former spot in the Shoppes at Hawthorne.

Chartreuse: Bonita Springs got its first craft cocktail bar and dessert lounge thanks to Danielle Dyer, her husband Stephen Dyer and Peggy Baker. Named and themed around the French liqueur, the trio opened this 1930s-old Florida-swanky hotspot in July 2021.

Ceremony Brewing: On the south end of our route, across Oak Creek from Shangri-La Springs, sits Zach Smith's neighborhood taproom, brewery and bottle shop that opened in November 2021. Find it on Packinghouse Lane.

Hopsized Brewing Co.: Award-winning home brewers since 2019, owners Darlyn Victor and Ana Rodriguez de Vera opened this well-lit warehouse of a taproom with a friendly staff around the same time. Just off Old 41 Road on Cockleshell Drive, it's a perfect place for a pint or two.

North Bonita Country Club: Known for its pork tenderloin “as big as your face” according to bartender Lisa Johnston, this is more of a cool sports bar than a country club as the name implies. It opened last summer, taking over for Seaside Bar and Grill which opened in March 2020.

Rooftop at Riverside: When Sanibel's Best Homemade Ice Cream owner Laurie Verme first heard about this food truck park across from Riverside Park, she jumped at the chance to be included.

“We applied right away,” said Verme. “We had just bought the (Crooked Cow Creamery) food truck when Hurricane Ian hit. It was a great opportunity for us.”

In January, Chris Magnus opened this unique inside-outside venue with food trucks, a two-level, two-bar dining area with a cocktail program developed by Phil Wills of “Bar Rescue” fame. On our visit last month, food trucks included Verme’s Crooked Cow, Zoey’s Pizza, OCN Seafood, Butcher’s Blvd. and Ma Petite Creperie.

(Not open yet but we’re so excited for) Sugarshack Downtown: Colleague and entertainment reporter Charles Runnells has been keeping a close eye on the 20,000-square-foot property being developed around an existing 1943 building on the southeast corner of Old 41 Road and Childers Street, a block south of the Rooftop. The live music restaurant venue is a collaboration between Sugarshack Sessions, Bonita development company Moran Kennedy and Maine-based Brickyard Hollow Brewing Co. The 1,200-square-foot Sugarshack Downtown building will house indoor dining, a bar and a retail store selling Sugarshack merchandise, Eddie Kopp — co-founder, director and editor — told Runnells. He also said seven to 10 smaller open-air buildings, including the kitchen, a large outdoor bar, bathrooms and open-air pergola-style buildings for outdoor seating, will surround that. According to its website, the highly anticipated venue is “coming real soon.”

(We also can't wait for) Chubby Mermaid Brewing: You can't have too many breweries, especially when one is named for a Florida manatee. It's set to open soon on Industrial Road, on the south end of Old 41 Road, near The Causeway.

Oh Entrada, how we love you

This bank-turned-development on the northeast corner of Bonita Beach and Old 41 roads has become the who’s who of new restaurants. It’s a trendy, chic, all-in-one-stop for culinary creativity.

And we couldn’t love it more.

Napoli on the Bay VIII: The pizzeria was an early addition to Entrada, opening late in 2021. It’s the first Napoli on the Bay location outside of Collier County.

The Rabbit Hole Kava Bar: Gianna Kawicki’s "Alice in Wonderland" themed wonder was also one of the first to open here in 2022. Kava and kratom beverages are served in the creative 1,000-square-foot space.

The Bohemian Restaurant: Re-enter the Schewes. When the couple behind Downtown Coffee and Wine Co. unveiled this stunning space in March 2022, it instantly became the hottest spot around. It's bustling and beautiful, trendy and tight. Annabelle Tometich described the menu — from bar bites and smaller snacks to picturesque seafood towers and larger plates of quail, seafood and steaks — as “a parade of wows, a rhapsody of them.”

We couldn't agree more.

The Boba Shop: New Yorker Jon Armen wasn't familiar with Bonita Springs when he decided to go all in and open his Instagramable shop in March 2023.

“I didn't know the dynamics of each area,” he said. “I found (Entrada), met the developers and they sold me on it. It's a growing area with a lot of projects. The food truck park down the road. The proximity to the beaches. It's more family oriented. It's an exciting area to be in.”

And it's been a good decision so far as customers have been coming back for his drinks. The brown sugar and pink Himalayan salt cheese foam is a best seller.

Waffle Monkey: Before bringing its wild waffles here in April 2023, the only other locations were at Tamarindo Beach in Costa Rica and George Town, Grand Cayman. Elicia and Abraham Bedell opened this franchise in partnership with founders Renae and Jacob Cook.

So why Old 41 Road?

“We wanted to live in this area and everything just fell into place,” Elicia said last year.

Lucky for us waffle lovers. Fluffy handmade Belgian waffles range from old school with powdered sugar to chicken & waffles and the big breakfast (waffle with ham and cheese baked in, plus a fried egg).

Wolfmoon: “You can actually feel a little bit of history when you walk or drive through downtown Old 41 Road,” said Clara Fasciglione, owner and executive pastry chef of this chic bakery that opened in June 2023. It's what attracted her to the area, along with the surrounding quaintness and community.

“I felt more rooted here,” she said. “More comfortable. More at home. And don't we all seek a sense of belonging and being part of?”

The community has embraced her as well, lining up daily for her mouthwateringly flaky croissants, pastries, sandwiches, salads, croques and coffee.

The future and The Causeway

Carl Smith just couldn't pass it up.

“I built the place,” said the executive chef and co-owner of The Causeway. “I was the general contractor and decided to become partners in the business. Every day we gain new customers.”

Since its December debut, those customers have been coming to this new food-hall(ish) concept that combines three restaurants and a dessert bar under one roof. They come for the beer wall, the desserts and of course, the variety of food — street food from around the globe from Smith's Smithy's, Italian favorites from Orzo and deli offerings from Roast. And oh, those Dessert Lab desserts.

Community thrives here as well with plenty of local flavors.

“We sell doughnuts from Trackside,” said Smith, who co-owns the restaurant side of The Causeway with Carol Smith, Randy Decker and Janak Amin. “They make them, we glaze them. Grumpy Goat Coffee (Roastery) too. He roasts it and we brew and sell it. And Royal Scoop Ice Cream for the Dessert Bar. They're all within three miles.”

While the north end gets all the attention, Smith is out to bring some of the love south.

“We're the last thing on this road before you cross the train tracks and change counties,” he said. “We're trying to bring life to this commercial end. We are a hidden gem.”

And it's here we choose to end our culinary road trip, at this venue that represents the history of Old 41 Road while reaching for the future.

The Causeway, after all, stands on the same property that was the home of Causeway Lumber for 31 years. It opened in 1978 just before the Minettis, Alfred Greenwood and Maria and

Jose Romero took a chance, opened their restaurants and paved the way.

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Restaurants included in this article:

Aji Limon Taste of Peru: 26455 Old 41 Road, Suite 19, (239) 301-4634, ajilimonperuviancuisine.net

The Boba Shop: 27975 Old 41 Road, Suite 109, (646) 500-2933, Instagram

The Bohemian Restaurant: 27975 Old 41 Road, Suite 104, (239) 451-9619, thebohemianbonita.com

Buffalo Chips: 26620 Old 41 Road, (239) 947-1000, buffalochipsrestaurant.tv

The Causeway: 28280 Old 41 Road, (239) 431-4912, follow on Facebook

Ceremony Brewing: 10441 Packinghouse Lane, (239) 221-7849, ceremonybrewing.com

Chartreuse Craft Cocktail Lounge: 27313 Old 41 Road, Units 1 and 2, (239) 949-2776, chartreuselounge.com

Chubby Mermaid Brewing Co. (coming soon): 28292 Industrial Road, Unit 1, (239) 221-2470, chubbymermaidbrewing.com

Downtown Coffee and Wine Co: 27546 Old 41 Road, (239) 272-60068, downtowncoffeeandwinecompany.com

El Gran Taco Loco (at Benson's Groceries): 27301 Old 41 Road, (239) 703-3464

For Heaven Shakes Ice Cream: 27515 Old 41 Road, (239) 495-0647

Grandpa's Pizza: 27030 Old 41 Road, (239) 992-7119, order.yourmenu.com/grandpaspizza

Harvest & Wisdom (at Shangri-La Springs): 27750 Old 41 Road, (239) 949-0749, shangrilasprings.com

Hopsized Brewing Co.: 9201 Cockleshell Drive, No. 13, (239) 317-2287, hopsizedbrewing.com

Johnny Malloy's Sports Pub: 10347 Bonita Beach Road SE, No. 101, (239) 992-5000; johnnymalloysbonita.com

Maria's Restaurant: 27080 Old 41 Road, (239) 495-1868, restaurantmarias.com

Napoli on the Bay VIII: 27975 Old 41 Road, Suite 105, (239) 494-3020, napolionthebaynaples.com

North Bonita Country Club: 24850 Old 41 Road, Unit 12, (239) 288-1470, nbcountryclub.com

Old 41 Restaurant: 25091 Bernwood Drive, (239) 948-4190, old41.com

The Rabbit Hole Kava Bar: 27975 Old 41 Road, Suite 102, (239) 449-0440, Facebook

Rooftop at Riverside: 27333 Old 41 Road, eatdrinkparadise.com

Stan's Super Subs: 26880 Old 41 Road, (239) 99209973, stanssubs.com

Sugarshack Downtown (coming soon): 10510 Childers St., sugarshackdowntown.com

Survey Café: 10530 Wilson St., (239) 992-2233, surveycafedowntown.com

Tortilleria La Rancherita: 26751 Old 41 Road, No. 3, (239) 498-4633

Trackside Donuts: 28001 Old 41 Road, (239) 390-1400, track-sidedonutsfl.com

Vikingos Restaurant: 26880 Old 41 Road, (239) 992-1265, vikingosrestaurant.com

Waffle Monkey: 27975 Old 41 Road, Suite 106, (239) 325-0024, wafflemonkey.net

Wolfmoon: 27975 Old 41 Road, Suite 107, (601) 557-3238, wolfmoon.co