

Sun, Surf, and Sundown Fun: The South Walton Beaches Wine & Food Festival

Check out this end-of-April festival at a beachside getaway

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The colorful waters in South Walton, Fla.

If 2015 was any indication, the 2016 South Walton Beaches Wine & Food Festival is going to be quite an amazing event. Last April I spent relaxing days on the white sandy beaches at the recently renovated [Hilton Sandestin](#) in Destin, Fla., and at night I sipped distinctive spirits, native [brews](#), and fine wines while sampling the local cuisine at the [South Walton Beaches Wine & Food Festival](#). The combination of sun, surf, and sundown fun made for a perfect winter getaway.

There were no gray skies when I visited Florida's west coast, just hues of blue with an occasional white puffy cloud to shade me while cooling off in the aquamarine waters. I watched as families

frolicked in the waves and couples strolled arm in arm on the expansive **beach** from my shaded perch under a bright yellow umbrella. With cold drinks at my side, it was paradise listening to the melodic rhythms of the waves crashing ashore. I was tempted to doze off; however, I did not want to miss my **Serenity Spa** appointment, where I knew I would probably drift off.



Sushi in a cone was one of the many dishes served by local restaurants at last year's festival.

A relaxing hot stone massage helped relieve the tight knots in my shoulders, and I felt myself melting into the warm therapy bed with each breath of essential **oils**. I could have predicted that Serenity Spa would be voted one of USA Today's "Best 2015 Summer Spa Treatments Under the Sun" since my experience was so peaceful.

Now that I was fully relaxed, it was time to wake up and head to my room to get ready for the festival. I chugged a cup of free **coffee** on my private balcony overlooking the scenic pool and Gulf below, took a selfie to send to jealous friends in New England still dealing with snow, and made a beeline for the evening soiree.



Pink limoncello at the festival.

Unlike other notable upscale food and wine **festivals**, the atmosphere was very casual, a “come as you are” party where the way one dresses is not expected to match one’s nose for vintage wines. The snobbery was checked at the door, creating a chill yet sophisticated vibe as folks wander the grounds sampling nouvelle brands of spirits, local beers, and wines from around the world.

Among my favorite alcohols were the pink **limoncello** by Li’Destri that was mixed with sorbet to create a cold and frothy sweet treat and the Italian Borducan orange liqueur. I also tasted some interesting brews, both taste and label-wise. The Dogfish Head Namaste with orange slices, lemongrass, coriander, and peppercorns was an unexpected surprise. Another funny menu option was the Arrogant Bastard ale.

Various characters known in the wine world showed up, and no one was more colorful, charming, and enthusiastic than Jean-Charles Boisset of the Boisset Collection, who was wearing his signature colorful shoes with red socks. His JCB No. 81 Chardonnay was a special blend, not too woody and with just the right fruity notes.



Jean-Charles Boisset's prime footwear and chardonnay.

Chef Michel Cornu of Raymond Vineyards was on hand with a wide smile as he spoke with culinary fans about his dishes. Marc Perrin represented the distinguished Perrin Family Winemakers serving Château de Beaucastel from the Châteauneuf-du-Pape region. He was accompanied by a **lobster** and asparagus spoon appetizer created by his chef, Laurent Deconick, from the restaurant l'Oustalet in Gigondas, France.

The festival benefits the Destin Charity Wine Auction Foundation and has grown notably in prestige – so much so that it was named a Top 10 Wine Charity Auction by Wine Spectator Magazine. Not only are great **wines** from famous winemakers served – in addition, culinary celebrities showcase their food, and sommeliers give world-class tasting seminars. The wine auction itself has very lively bidding, which is all in good spirit to raise money for worthy charities like Children in Crisis, Habitat for Humanity, and Boys and Girls Clubs of America, to name a few.

Each night when I laid my head upon the pillow I fell asleep quickly. It must have been the fresh salty air, the comfortable bed, and the great food and wine. The 2016 festival festivities are sure to be just as incredible and will take place between April 28 and May 1.