



# The Ultimate Guide to Jacksonville's Iconic Camel Rider Sandwich

July 1, 2025 Jeffrey Spear

Some iconic American foods indelibly align themselves with specific cities. Philly has its cheesesteaks. Boston has clam chowder. New Orleans is synonymous with Po'boys, as is Chicago with its deep-dish pizza.

In case you didn't know, Jacksonville, Florida, has the Camel Rider.

## A Bit of Background on Jacksonville's Camel Rider

Jacksonville, once described in advertising campaigns as

the “Bold New City of the South,” has been attracting national attention, ranking among the country’s fastest-growing cities. With a desirable climate, extensive white sandy beaches, several prestigious museums, vibrant nightlife, and thriving commercial districts, Jacksonville has become an alluring tourist destination.

Culinary travelers will find plenty of restaurants and cafes, from fast casual to fine dining. Many serve Southern favorites, including shrimp and grits, fried green tomatoes, macaroni and cheese, pimiento cheese, and cornbread. Less well-known is Jacksonville’s diverse ethnic population, which gives rise to numerous restaurants offering cuisines from nearly every corner of the world.



**Freshly baked pita bread is widely understood and available in mainstream supermarkets. The best are the ones baked fresh and delivered daily to the Middle Eastern ethnic markets around town. © Jeffrey Spear**

As part of that, in the late 1800s, Jacksonville experienced a wave of immigration from Syria, Lebanon, Israel, Palestine, and surrounding territories. Since then, the Arab community in Northeast Florida has been growing, so much so that Jacksonville has been

recognized as the 10th largest Arab population in the United States. As a result, there are several delightful Middle Eastern restaurants featuring foods such as baba ganoush, kibbe, falafel, manakeesh, shawarma, and kabobs of varying descriptions.

And then there's the Camel Rider. It's a pita-based sandwich made with ham, salami, bologna, and sandwich fixings, and it's unique to this part of the world.



**One of the best places to experience a truly authentic Camel Rider is The Sheik, advertised as the “Home of the World Famous Camel Rider.” © Jeffrey Spear**

## **Arabs Introduced Pita to Jacksonville**

Some of the earliest Arab settlers established grocery stores selling pita, a novelty at the time, known as Arabic or Syrian bread. However, it wasn't until the early 1960s when Joseph Assi, a Lebanese immigrant, opened the Gold Room restaurant. Eager to offer a quick, affordable, convenient, and satisfying meal that, while aligned with his cultural heritage, would also appeal to the tastes of



Jacksonville's working class, he introduced a cold-cut-filled pita described as an Arabic club sandwich. Over time, it became known as the Camel Rider.

Not surprisingly, "Camel Rider" was initially considered a pejorative moniker, resulting in alternate names and spellings. Eventually, both the name and the sandwich have been accepted by the community as an authentic culinary icon. While the Gold Room is long gone, The Pita Bakery, operated by one of Assi's nephews, specializes in fresh, authentic pita bread and is still going strong.



**The Camel Rider served at the Southern Grill takes minor liberties with the classic recipe, including turkey along with the ham and salami, as well as both American and Swiss cheeses. © Jeffrey Spear**

Despite the time it took to attract recognition, the Camel Rider became popular, peaking in the '70s. The sandwich is broadly defined as a pita bread stuffed with bologna, salami, ham, American cheese, lettuce, tomatoes, mayonnaise, and vinaigrette.

It's interesting to note that the Steak-in-a-Sack, a pita

filled with sliced steak and grilled onions, has become almost as popular in the area. This has inspired additional variations on the pita sandwich around the Jacksonville area. They include veggie, grilled chicken, BLT, and several breakfast options—steak, egg and cheese, halloumi cheese with bacon, and bacon and eggs.

But the original Camel Rider persists.

## Camel Riders of Note

Today, the Camel Rider can be found in sandwich shops in just about every corner of Jacksonville. To fully appreciate how it's being prepared, I identified any noteworthy variations in ingredients, flavor, and overall performance by becoming better acquainted with these popular Jacksonville eateries.



**With multiple locations around town, The Sheik has become a much-loved destination for Camel Riders and other pita sandwiches. © Jeffrey Spear**

## The Sheik

Advertised as the “Home of the ‘World Famous’ Camel Rider,” **The Sheik** opened its first fast-casual restaurant in 1972. It has since expanded to include eight locations around northeast Florida. Along with its best-selling Camel Rider, which includes ham, salami, bologna, American cheese, lettuce, tomato, mayo, onions, and dressing, and Steak-in-a-Sack pita sandwich, the menu also includes subs, burgers, and hot dogs.



**Kris is just one of the incredible servers at the Southern Grill. They serve up Camel Riders and a long list of local favorites, including biscuits and gravy and burgers.**

© Jeffrey Spear

## The Southern Grill

With a loyal customer base, **The Southern Grill** has been serving home-cooked meals from the same location for 27 years. While its menu includes the Camel Rider, ham, turkey, salami, American and Swiss cheese, mayonnaise, and vinaigrette, it also features a long list of local favorites. These include biscuits and gravy, omelets,

chicken wings, sandwiches, salads, burgers, and more. With a well-stocked bar, it's easy to understand how this place has endured for so many years.



**Brandy Boutros is the new owner of Russ-Does, continuing the tradition of authentic Camel Riders and more for over 42 years. © Jeffrey Spear**

## Russ-Doe's

Probably the most enduring restaurant, operating from the house that used to be their family home, is **Russ-Doe's**. As much of a Jacksonville original as their Camel Rider itself with ham, bologna, lettuce, tomato, mayonnaise, they've been serving this iconic sandwich since they opened their doors 42 years ago. Supported by a cadre of loyal regulars, they're open for breakfast and lunch, serving everything from egg sandwiches, grits, pancakes, and French toast to PB&Js, steak quesadillas, salads, and burgers. Although this is a takeout operation, there are plenty of picnic tables available around the building. All are shaded by monumental oak trees that tower overhead.



# Beyond the Camel Rider

Considering the size of Jacksonville's Middle Eastern community, it's not surprising to find a few highly regarded restaurants that specialize in foods from their homeland. These are just a few excellent choices for your visit.

## Noura's

One of several popular destinations for Middle Eastern, Mediterranean, and Lebanese cuisine is **Noura's**. It is owned and operated by Raymond and Noura Abi Khahil, Lebanese natives who emigrated to the United States in the 1980s. The restaurant serves authentic dishes for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Noteworthy offerings include manakish, beef tenderloin kabobs, shawarma platters, gyros, tabbouleh, hummus, and more. It's interesting to note that, while lots of sandwich shops around town serve Camel Riders, Noura's is the only authentic Middle Eastern restaurant that includes them on its menu.



**Offering an extensive menu of flavored hookah blends, the Casbah Café provides a tantalizing glimpse into the traditions of the Middle East. © Casbah Café**



## The Casbah Cafe

Another destination offering authentic Middle Eastern experiences is **The Casbah Cafe**, a lively place located in the stylish Avondale neighborhood. Along with an impressive number of dishes such as baba ganoush, muhammara, borek, several styles of kabob, wraps, and more, their menu includes an extensive list of hookah flavors. It's no surprise to see hookahs being passed around among friends at the dining tables. Weekends feature traditional belly dancers.



Along with their on-premises restaurant and freshly baked pitas, Hala's also bakes a variety of pies, known as Fatayar. They're available in three varieties – meat, cheese, and spinach. © Jeffrey Spear

## Hala's Mideast Eatery & Market

No list of Middle Eastern food in Jacksonville would be complete without mentioning **Hala's Mideast Eatery & Market**, known simply as Hala's. Operating as both an ethnic grocery store and a Middle Eastern restaurant, Hala's lets you enjoy the rich flavors of authentic Middle Eastern cuisine in the restaurant. Then wander the aisles

of their market, picking up everything you'll need to prepare these exotic dishes at home. Since Hala's operates its own bakery, be sure to pick up some freshly baked pitas, delectable zatayar, pita pies available in spinach, cheese, or meat, their flavorful za'atar bread, and a selection of house-made sweets.

## Let's Make a Camel Rider

To make many of the Middle Eastern dishes described above, you may need considerable cooking skills and a well-stocked pantry. Fortunately, the Camel Rider is a relatively easy dish to prepare.

As a Jacksonville creation, not something imported from abroad, it's made from ingredients readily available at most supermarkets. As long as you have a sharp kitchen knife, assembly is easy.



**Spear's Camel breaks slightly from tradition. It uses Black Forest ham, salami, Swiss cheese, red onion, mild yellow pepper rings, and peach jam. © Jeffrey Spear**

# Spear's Camel

Since I'm not a fan of bologna and abhor American cheese, my take on the Camel Rider uses somewhat better ingredients and delivers a more flavor-forward outcome. I add sweetness with the peach jam. The added tang of red onions and spice from yellow peppers makes the perfect finishing touch.

## Ingredients

- 1 pita, 6 to 7 inches in diameter\*
- 1-2 tablespoons mayonnaise (I prefer Duke's. It's a Southern thing.)
- 1-2 tablespoons peach jam (I find Stonewall Kitchen jams have the best flavor.)
- 3 slices Black Forest ham, thinly sliced
- 3 slices salami, thinly sliced\*\*
- 2 slices Swiss cheese, thinly sliced
- 2 slices ripe tomato, thinly sliced
- lettuce, shredded, as needed
- red onion, thinly sliced, optional
- mild yellow pepper rings, optional

## Directions

- Trim approximately 2 inches from one end of the pita. (You can use this scrap for dipping with hummus, baba ganoush, muhammara, or labneh.)
- Gently open the cut end to create a pocket.
- On one inside surface, spread a generous amount of mayonnaise. On the other, spread a generous amount of peach jam.
- Place the ham, salami, cheese, and tomato in layers inside the pita. Fill the remaining space with the shredded lettuce, taking care not to split the pita open.

- To make room for everything, you may need to hold the pita with the open end facing upwards, gently tapping the ingredients into the pocket.
- Add strands of red onion and a few slices of yellow pepper, to taste, and serve.

\* When working with pita, you should handle the bread gently while opening and filling. The best approach is to gently warm the pita for a few seconds in a microwave oven. Then carefully open it for filling. While I like a generously stuffed sandwich, tearing or breakage occurs easily if you try to pack in too much.

\*\* Depending on where you live, your deli may or may not have an extensive variety of salami. I like the Kosher varieties, such as Hebrew National. However, in Jacksonville, Boar's Head is dominant, with varieties limited to hard salami, genoa, and soppressata.

