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St. Petersburg, Fla., goes from senior rest home to hipster hangout

Katherine Rodeghier, Special Contributor

“‘God’s Waiting Room?’ Oh, that’s long gone,” says Greg Stanek, a guide in St. Petersburg, Fla.

The city’s tongue-in-cheek nickname dates from the days when it was just another Sunshine State retirement community, one that lost its vibrancy as its elderly population aged. Twenty years ago, there were no restaurants to speak of in downtown St. Pete, Stanek says, and Central Avenue was lined with “dusty old antique shops that never sold anything.”

After the 2008 recession, the accompanying real estate crash made property more affordable for young people and start-up businesses. It sparked a renaissance that’s transformed St. Pete into a very livable, walkable city, Stanek says.



Greg Stanek talks about urban artwork during a Saturday-morning tour of murals in St. Petersburg, Fla.

(Katherine Rodeghier/Special Contributor)

Haven for art lovers

St. Petersburg ranks among the world's best street-art cities. Buildings across the metro area are painted with dozens of murals. "Too many to count," says Stanek, one of the guides leading Saturday-morning tours past more than 30 works of street art. After the real estate crash, the city offered artists incentives to occupy empty buildings, he says. They painted eye-catching murals over ugly graffiti on exteriors. More murals went up during the first [Shine St. Petersburg Mural Festival](#) in 2015. Now an annual fall event, it attracts artists from around the world.

But the city's artsy side goes beyond murals to encompass major museums. Chief among them, the [Dali Museum](#) displays the largest collection of works by Spanish artist Salvador Dali outside his homeland. The building itself is a work of art, with giant bubble windows protruding from the exterior and an interior atrium with a spiral staircase twisting toward a latticed skylight.



The atrium inside the Dalí Museum in St. Petersburg, Fla., reflects the style of the Spanish artist.

(Katherine Rodeghier/Special Contributor)

In the Central Arts District, the [Morean Arts Center](#) displays the work of local, national and international artists. In 2016, it moved its Chihuly Collection into a new space across the street in a building designed specifically to showcase the mesmerizing glasswork of Dale Chihuly. Pieces in the permanent collection are installed in darkened rooms where spotlights make Chihuly's vibrant colors pop.

Drinking and dining

Other evidence of St. Pete's rebirth as a hip city lies in the sheer number of craft breweries, more than 30 on what has come to be called the "Gulp Coast."

A change in the law in 2012 allowed microbreweries to produce and sell their products. Now, craft breweries dot the Pinellas Peninsula from downtown St. Pete to outlying communities to the beach towns strung along the Gulf Coast. Beer enthusiasts following a designated beer trail can have a passport stamped at breweries along the way to snag prizes. Those without a designated driver can hop on a trolley or book an Uber.



St. Petersburg, Fla., has changed from a retirement community to a vibrant city of art, craft breweries and new-age restaurants, says Neil Keidel of the St. Pete Brewing Co.

(Katherine Rodeghier/Special Contributor)

St. Petersburg has gone from a dearth of bars and dining to the highest concentration of restaurants and nightlife in the region, many on the cutting edge of the new-age food scene.

[FarmTable Cucina](#) (formerly FarmTable Kitchen) opened late in 2015 on the second floor of the curated food hall [Locale Market](#). Both are the brainchild of celebrity chefs Michael Mina and Don Pintabona. The full-service restaurant offers a casual gourmet dining experience with entrees such as the St. Petersburg deluxe burger made with 30-day dry-aged beef and 32-ounce Niman Ranch prime rib-eye for two.

Most of the restaurant's ingredients come from Locale Market, the food hall downstairs with a wine bar, cheese counter, Zen Belly food bar and meat case where slabs of beef hang alongside plates of Himalayan salt.

Also opened in 2015, [The Mill](#) focuses on American cuisine from rising chef Ted Dorsey. Dog-friendly outdoor seating capitalizes on the energy from neighboring bars and clubs, while inside diners find a touch of steampunk in decor accented by gears, tooled leather and vintage waterwheels. Popular starters include watermelon bruschetta, while mussels and meatloaf Wellington are standouts among the entrees.

The emerging food scene extends beyond the city to the beaches. [BRGR Kitchen + Bar](#) opened in 2016 with the launch of the all-suite [Treasure Island Beach Resort](#). Signature burgers, 10 of them, are the main item, including the Hot 'n' Spicy custom blended beef grind with green chiles, jalapeno and Diablo Dust. Patio seating makes a great spot to watch the sunset while sipping the barman's signature cocktails.

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