Some of the World Equestrian Center's chefs and some of their dishes are pictured at the Equestrian Manor in Ocala. **STEPHEN M. DOWELL/ORLANDO SENTINEL PHOTOS**

MIND THE MANOR

The Equestrian Manor is 'an opportunity to put Ocala on the map' for food-minded visitors

By Amy Drew Thompson
ORLANDO SENTINEL

The Equestrian Manor is pictured at the World Equestrian Center in Ocala.

Thirty years ago, I went to Ocala to meet up with a friend from home who was down visiting his parents' humble retirement community, but didn't have time to head to Clearwater Beach, where I lived at the time.

We played pool, drank beer and played the jukebox in a modest local bar, mostly empty on a weekday afternoon. It was paddock-adjacent — I'd heard Ocala was a horse lover's community — and the surrounding area was pastoral, largely rural with planned suburban communities making inroads.

It did not prepare me, nor even did the grand photographs I'd seen ahead of my visit, for Ocala in 2026.

I had an understanding of the World Equestrian Center before my visit. It is the nation's largest complex of its kind, with more than 20 arenas, each with top-tier footing (trails have the same for when riders want to take their horses out recreationally). There is stable space for some 3,000 horses, all of it climate-controlled. Arenas for competitive action. There is retail space, everything from tack to toys to Vera Bradley, but this description pales.

The place is an absolute spectacle. And the new Equestrian Manor facility, with event space and rooftop perches, adds even more while affording guests (who need not stay on property to visit) a bird's-eye view of what came before.

The first quick wave of culinary was fast-casual, but in 2021, the culinary attractions arrived: Stirrups, a fine-dining steakhouse; The Yellow Pony, an American pub; and Emma's Patisserie, French-inspired — and French-helmed.

The Equestrian Manor now encompasses 300,000 square feet. Four stories house four chef-driven venues, including an expansion of Emma's with extensive seating, gelato and fresh-baked bread that everyone from resort guests in their rooms to "ladies lunch" groups (a few realtors were gathered, grabbing coffee and talking shop during my visit) to locals who stop in twice weekly for loaves enjoy.

There is the Pan-Asian White Willow, a mix of cooked and raw delights that includes cuts flown in from Japan; there is Genevieve's, an Italian fine-dining concept where all the pasta is made fresh; there is the Polo Pony, a 400-seat

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REVIEW BURNT MOUTH PIZZA

The highlight of my year thus far

I can't forecast the Foodie Awards this early, but keep your eyes on these pies

Amy Drew Thompson

I closed my eyes.

It's the first thing I remember as I sit down to describe the moment I tasted Julian De Garden's pizza.

I pay attention, probably more than most people, to that first bite of food. Some are intensely more sensual than others. And when my teeth hit the crust on that pizza, my eyes just ... closed. There was an immediate need for sensory deprivation.

I'd already eaten the thing — bubbly, charred crust, and an absolute riot of color: pink pancetta, orange-yellow bits of pineapple, Christmas red Aleppo peppers, a siren song of fire — with my eyes.

And at first brush with incisors, my body knew I didn't need them anymore. It wanted more bandwidth for the sensations that come with greater intimacy.

The crust, my friends, is where the pizza rubber meets the pizza road. Sure, the toppings matter. And we will dig deeper into these. But when the foundation is flawed, the rest just makes up for it, leaving me wanting for this: the most important part. I want crust I'd eat all by itself.

With its gentle brush of garlic oil and a sprinkle of salt that goes beyond the light flurry of the aged Gouda that De Garden grates atop the pies of his Burnt Mouth Pizza

IF YOU GO
Burnt Mouth Pizza: instagram.com/burntmouthpizza

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Burnt Mouth Pizza's pineapple pie, featuring pancetta, pickled jalapeño, red sauce, mozzarella, aged Gouda, and basil.
LISA WILK/TASTECOOKSIP.COM

Sous chef Mario Squires holds a dish from White Willow, The Equestrian Manor's Pan-Asian restaurant at the World Equestrian Center in Ocala. **STEPHEN M. DOWELL/ORLANDO SENTINEL**

Beautiful pastry from Emma's Patisserie, which now has two locations at the WEC. The second features seats, a team of chocolatiers and house-made gelato.
STEPHEN M. DOWELL/ORLANDO SENTINEL

WEC's Yohann Le Bescond is a regular Food Network competitor and was a semifinalist for the 2025 James Beard Award for Outstanding Pastry Chef. **WORLD EQUESTRIAN CENTER**

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venue that has lightened the Yellow Pony's load considerably.

"There are great equestrian facilities in the world, and there are great hospitality facilities in the world," says Jeremy Gow, senior director of hospitality operations. "We are the first ones to elevate and combine them."

It's hard to argue. Equine sports are not a light-wallet hobby. Those who participate are used to a certain level of hotel.

"Whether it's a trainer, owner or rider who competes at the highest level, we give them the best facility to do so," says Gow. "We wanted to make sure we also gave them things to do and enjoy while they're here."

Expat and expert Yohann Le Bescond, a 2025 James Beard semifinalist in the pastry chef category, was hospitality employee No. 1.

"When I got here, the hotel didn't have a roof yet," he tells me.

Hired in 2020, six months before the equestrian facility opened, he and a team of other chefs helped design the kitchens that would serve the property's well-traveled guests. Emma's, its cases packed with his truly flawless laminated delights, along with danishes, cookies, muffins, more, would be a superstar from go.

"Emma's came with the intent of being this little coffee shop for the hotel," Le Bescond says. "It got traction and became very popular, and the sales started going up and up and up. We started seeing people come for breakfast, lunch and dinner."

The 700-square-foot shop and its small staff do their best — sometimes to the tune of 800 transactions, or 1,600 people, in a day.

At the adjacent Yellow Pony, things were similar. Long waits were not uncommon.

One of the most interesting things, however, is that this tony facility's guests were not merely those staying here or competing. The locals came, too.

Undeniably, Ocala's horse community has its ultra-wealthy, but the broader population is diverse. And having a place for them to enjoy, too, was something both Gow and Le Bescond say WEC ownership both hoped and planned for.

The Equestrian Manor matches its big sister in grandiosity — if chandelier porn were a thing, this place is a living, breathing centerfold — but even with its Tara-like staircase, a favorite for wedding portraits, and whimsical portraits of animals (dogs, mostly, though exotics make appearances around the resort, as well), the space is accessible. Weirdly easy-going.

A young family in T-shirts and sneakers walks through the grand foyer as if on cue, its friendly husky begging for attention and giving kisses as they pass. Laughs and good spirits all around.

"Horses and dogs are a natural pair," Lea Brayton, WEC's senior manager of resort marketing, says as they pass, noting that WEC is a pet-friendly prop-erty for sure.

Resort executive chef Stephan Holland came to Ocala two years ago with an impressive resume, having worked alongside household names like José Andrés and Nobu Matsuhisa.

He'd been living internationally, but WEC's interest — and what they had to offer — piqued his own in return.

"It was interesting," he tells me. "The horses. The beautiful property."

The rural setting, away from the big city, was an appealing option for raising his two boys.

He calls the addition of The Equestrian Manor a paradigm shift for the property.

"We've had great restaurants and great chefs here, but this was a real opportunity to put Ocala and Marion County on the map and really bring great talent to create this destination."

The food and beverage team grew by roughly 200.

Approachability was key, he says.

"Of course we wanted to grab the international guests' eyes, but also locals, who don't want to venture off too far with their cuisine. We have this delicate balance: extreme approach-ability (something visible in the absolute mountain of nachos you'll find at the Polo Pony) along with twists that are more

Reservations are not unwise, but the nice thing is that they have space for last-minute groups.

"We had 40 people show up this week, a Viper (car) Club that was driving through and had some challenges where they'd originally planned to stop."

They parked all their cars up front, he says. I can only imagine the impromptu show this afforded guests as the group enjoyed its lunch.

Chef's Dinners, too, welcome both guests and locals. Prix fixe menus, some priced well under $100, are a fixture. There are regulars staffers know by name.

"There's one couple who has a standing 5:30 reservation every Friday at the Polo Pony," Gow tells me.

As for out-of-towners, they come, too.

"It's funny," says Gow. "We have customers from Orlando or Naples; this was their getaway spot that nobody knew about ... but it's grown organically, and now some of them come every year in groups of 20 or more. Others come for getaway weekends, coming to nature instead of the beach."

WEC has partnerships with local spots like The Peeps Foundation, just across the street.

"They raise miniature dwarf ponies, and we send guests there with their kids who get to feed them and play with them and support a nonprofit," Gow says. "Crystal River isn't far. If you like outdoors and nature, there are so many nearby amenities."

Though WEC's calendar has grown from 22 annual horse events to more than 40 (there are dog shows and others here, too), the growing Ocala Food & Wine Festival, which the property hosts, is one of the hospitality team's favorite ways to host newcomers. Held this year Nov. 6-8, it brings foodies from around the state, whether just for the day or the entire weekend.

"It's not just WEC, which is why it's Ocala Food & Wine," Gow explains. "We wanted to partner with local restaurants. We want to show off Ocala as a food destination, as we've seen some great restaurateurs opening and the community continuing to grow, to elevate around what we've brought. The staff here, too, just has a ball. They love it so much."

Le Bescond would likely second the statement.

"This is a place where people can enjoy a horse show spending as little as $7 for a slice of pizza or $2,000 on an event table," he notes.

iCuisine chef Roland Lacroix is pictured at the World Equestrian Center in Ocala. (Stephen M. Dowell/Orlando Sentinel)Attending events, by the way, is free to the public.

"We sell doughnuts by the dozen here," the world-class pastry chef tells me. These, right alongside the "thousand leaves" of his mille-feuille, which shatters on the tongue, an explosion of French butter, of luxury.

"They are $14 a box," he says. "We have to have something for everybody. Because everybody is welcome.

For more information, visit worldequestriancenter.com.

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A bone-in cut, beautifully medium rare, prepared at the WEC.
STEPHEN M. DOWELL/ORLANDO SENTINEL