

A VISIT TO THE CLUB CONTINENTAL

story and photos by LEIGH CORT

Once Upon a Time in 1923 ...



Oh, the glistening swells of the St. Johns River from my River Suite at The Club Continental! Quickly settling my luggage

in the closet and opening the doors to the balcony, the soft breezes and expansive two-mile-wide river invited me to sit down and let the cares of the day vanish. It was easy to imagine this extraordinary spot being a place where once Indians fished, leaving behind arrowheads and treasures that might still be discovered on the shore today.

There is a century of family stories hiding in the stone and stucco walls, buried in the lush courtyard, scattered through rose gardens and towering live oak trees, some forgotten through generations of ownership of Mira Rio, which eventually was named the The Club Continental in 1966.

On its sprawling property, Winterbourne and other elegant family homes were handed down and cherished by generations of Johnsons, Fergusons and ultimately Masees. Great-grandparents, sisters and brothers, cousins, parents and a rich tapestry of prominent people followed in the footsteps of each generation before them.

When Mr. B.J. Johnson, who owned The Palmolive Soap Company at the turn of the 20th century, looked for a vacation spot to nurture his family away from the cold Wisconsin weather, Orange Park was where they wintered each year. It became their permanent

residence since Palm Beach and Miami had not yet become popular resorts. How significant that the railroad coming south along the East Coast had a spur directly to Orange Park and its soon-to-be bustling future.

The intricate family trees flourished for half a century until Jon and Frica Masee purchased Mira Rio — a waterfront showplace — and incorporated it as a private social club in 1966. Today, their daughter Ms. Karrie Masee proudly owns and manages The Club Continental as a lovely historic Inn — seven suites in the mansion itself and 15 accommodations of River Suites built more recently in 1992. Its Mediterranean style reflects the original home — and together they offer guests an authentic glimpse into the charming past with luxury accommodations. For club members and inn guests, private dining paired with The Club Continental's amenities are the best kept secret in Northeast Florida!



The grounds of The Club Continental inspire visitors to drop out of the buzz of traffic and the commonplace.

At The Club Continental, a romantic and intimate destination unlike other hotels or resorts, there is a feeling of privacy and relaxation for travelers today. Whether journeying far or just searching for a very special nearby getaway, its spot on the St. Johns River under the grand live oak trees invites you to walk slower, stroll the manicured lawns, find a chaise lounge near the beautiful pools, listen to the wind in the trees, play tennis, sip a lemonade, read a book or simply drop out of the buzz of traffic and the commonplace!

Breakfast is served daily to inn guests and club members with a riverfront view, beginning the day with a choice of chef entrée and a help-yourself selection of breads and pastries, fresh fruit, cereal and beverages. The Club Continental's Executive Chef Sheldon Harris has been at the helm of the kitchen for more than 30 years. Culinary tastes and trends shared by members and guests continue to influence his creative dinner menus that are served Tuesday through Friday evenings only to inn guests and club members. He cherishes his career that has become his life. If a guest loves a particular dish, he will do his best to make it happen with a respectable advance request. Chef's culinary team has been an integral part of the Club Continental "family" of staff — many with decades of dedicated service to the Masee family since they began in the hospitality industry.

Most evenings at the alluring little bar, guests enjoy conversation with Fred, a bartender whose stories often trace some of Orange Park's history

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and people. And if you're selecting Wednesday to visit, Roger Wood's extensive musical repertoire at the piano is reason enough to stay overnight and perhaps linger a little bit longer after dinner.

I never tire of discovering the charm of The Club Continental and the collections of family photos and memorabilia that trace the story of its heritage throughout the inn. Grand and formal family portraits, images of happy times past, all transport you to a century of unforgettable family members who held dear to the legacy of their lives in Orange Park.

Delving into Orange Park history (once called Laurel Grove Plantation), is a pastime to research fascinating stories while vacationing at Club Continental. The little town lured people with its healthy climate and therapeutic springs while playing host to the rich and famous as well as the poor and humble. Steamboats brought notables like President Ulysses S. Grant, William Astor and Harriet Beecher Stowe. In addition, the area had one of the early integrated schools in the South!

Imagine "old Florida" and the rise of wealthy families building enormous manor homes, winter homes and family compounds; many successful visionaries modeled their homes after grand European mansions. They borrowed lavish architectural details drawn from a variety of styles of America's Gilded Age from Beaux Arts to



Bartender Fred's stories harken back to the history and people of Orange Park.

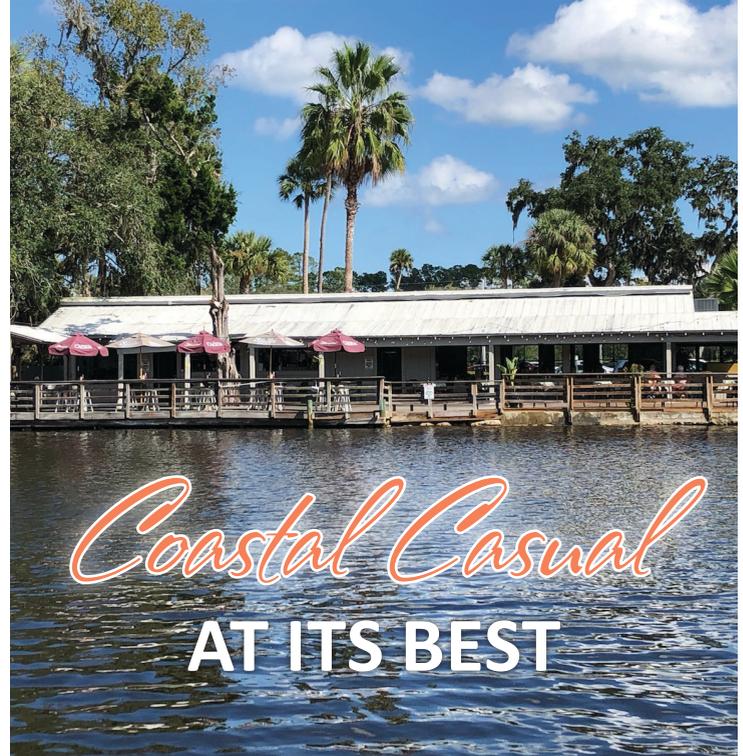
Renaissance Revival. The Club Continental reflects the range of grand style similar to others throughout the country that are only open for tours. How fortunate that Karrie Masee keeps her home opened to guests today plus hosting corporate, social and wedding parties. It seems like a fairy tale, but when you arrive it is truly "Once Upon a Time in 1923"!

For further information, go to ClubContinental.com.



This ornate pool can be seen on the grounds of The Club Continental.

THE CLUB CONTINENTAL IS A LUXURY HOTEL, EVENT VENUE AND PRIVATE CLUB LOCATED AT 2143 ASTOR ST., ORANGE PARK.



Coastal Casual
AT ITS BEST



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