

THE SWEET OBSESSION THAT BUILT FLORIDA

story by **LEIGH CORT**

In 1763, a bold and controversial merchant named Jesse Fish planted the seeds of what would become a global obsession. Across the Matanzas Bay from St. Augustine, on Anastasia Island, Fish built his plantation, El Vergel— “the orchard.” There, under the Florida sun, orange trees flourished beyond expectations. For decades, his groves produced tens of thousands of barrels of sweet oranges and juice. By the 1770s, those oranges were carefully picked, wrapped and shipped across the Atlantic, landing on tables in London, where their sweetness captured the imagination of the world. Florida citrus had become a symbol of abundance and possibility.

For nearly a century, North Florida thrived on this golden fruit — until nature rewrote the story. In 1835, an unforgiving freeze swept through the region. The cold crept into the groves, killing trees and livelihoods overnight. What had once been prosperity turned into poverty, and citrus growers were forced to look south for warmer ground. That search led them into Central Florida, where sandy soil, sunshine and freshwater lakes promised a second chance.

Along the shores of Lake Harris, in what would become Lake County, pioneers carved groves from pine forests and palmetto scrub. This was the age of Orange Fever — a rush fueled by hope, risk and opportunity. Farmers and investors, many from the North, poured into the region chasing the promise of citrus wealth. But the dream was anything but easy. Trees took five long years before producing fruit worth selling. Growers battled pests, droughts and isolation. Early crops had to be shipped by boat, often spoiling before they reached distant markets — until railroads finally connected Florida’s groves to the rest of the country.

Then came a man with a vision. In the early 1900s, William J. Howey transformed citrus from a risky gamble into



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An orange grove

a carefully planned industry. On more than 60,000 acres of orange groves, he created what would become Howey-in-the-Hills — a town built entirely around citrus. By the 1920s, Howey’s operation was thriving. Investors could buy into groves while professional managers handled the growing, harvesting and shipping. Oranges weren’t just fruit anymore — they were a business, a lifestyle and an identity.

The town itself felt like a time capsule of the new citrus era. Rolling hills lined with orderly groves, workers moving through rows of trees heavy with fruit and the scent of oranges carried on the breeze. Citrus shaped daily life — from jobs to social events to the food served at the table. Fresh oranges, juice, marmalades and citrus-inspired dishes became staples, influencing Florida dining in ways that still linger today.

Even now, echoes of that era remain. Citrus flavors still define Florida menus, from breakfast glasses of orange juice to desserts brightened with zest. The industry inspired not just agriculture, but culture — connecting land, labor and community.

Howey-in-the-Hills stands as a reminder of a time when oranges inspired towns, fortunes and dreams. From Jesse Fish’s first orchard to the sweeping



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The El Campeon Golf Course in the early years

groves of Central Florida, citrus didn’t just grow in Florida, it shaped it.

As oranges built lives and towns, golf lured growth, too.

In 1917, when Howey made his vision a reality, El Campeon Golf Course became a playground on the original orange grove property. In 1925, Florida Gov. John W. Martin signed the town charter of Howey — then officially changed to Howey-in-the-Hills. This influential businessman’s legacy was made everlasting. By 1927, he completed his luxurious five-bedroom Howey Mansion where he hosted the New York Civic Opera Company and international artists in one of the smallest hamlets in Lake County.

Years passed until the mid-1960s as Chicagoan Nick Beucher’s diversified businesses flourished. He was a respected leader who liked the year-round Florida climate, rare hills throughout the golf course and proximity to Orlando. In a Wall Street Journal advertisement, he read about the sale of Floridian Country Club, an 18-hole golf course in the center of the once booming citrus industry until the 1929 stock market crash. He saw it as a diamond in the rough. The dated 1940s clubhouse and distressed golf course became his

ORANGE

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new passion. For more than half a century, he laid the foundation by creating lodging, dining, golf packages, a golf academy, spa, marina and more. Beucher built the award-winning Mission Inn Resort for guests, friends and his family of six children. It was a hole-in-one as he dominated a century of progress by establishing a resort from nothing that made Howey-in-the-Hills a destination rich in history blessed by their founding fathers.

The phrase “Alps of Florida” is still popular for the luxurious newly updated Mission Resort + Club, owned by MMI Hotel Group. The Sturdivant family immediately recognized the Beucher family’s 60-plus-year history. It’s a gem that radiates timeless elegance spanning more than 500 acres of picturesque landscape. The Resort is a masterpiece that echoes tales of history and adventure, while capturing

the serene spirit of natural Florida. Residing among the distinguished program of the National Trust for Historic Preservation, the current owners are proud of its testament to historical significance.

Today, the orange trail no longer stretches endlessly across Florida’s hills, but its spirit remains deeply rooted in the land. Beneath manicured fairways and resort verandas lies the soil that once carried groves, ambition and generations of hard work. The scent of citrus may be faint now, but its story lingers in traditions, recipes, place names and the quiet pride of a town shaped by possibility.

Howey-in-the-Hills stands as proof that history doesn’t disappear; it transforms. What began as orchards grew into a community, then into a destination where past and present meet. In every sunrise over the hills and every sweet note of orange on a plate, Florida’s citrus legacy lives on, reminding us that even when the groves fade, their impact can still flourish.

Simple Orange Bread Pudding

(Serves 6)

Ingredients

- 4 cups day-old bread, cubed brioche
- 2 cups milk
- 4 large eggs
- 1 cup sugar
- 2 tbsp melted butter (a little for greasing pan)
- Zest of 1 orange
- ½ cup fresh orange juice
- 1 tsp vanilla extract
- 2 tsp orange liquor
- 1 tsp cinnamon
- Pinch of salt

Instructions

1. Heat oven to 350°F (175°C). Lightly butter a small baking dish.
2. Put the bread cubes into the dish.
3. In a bowl, whisk together milk, eggs, sugar, orange zest, orange juice, vanilla, cinnamon, and salt.
4. Pour the mixture over the bread. Gently press the bread down so it soaks everything up.
5. Let it sit for 5 minutes
6. Bake uncovered for 35–40 minutes, until the top is lightly golden and the center is set.
7. Cool slightly and serve warm.



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