



# THRIVING THORNTON

*Orlando's version of Greenwich Village.*



Hue has won most of the available city and statewide dining awards, and the atmosphere and service are first rate. Opposite page: Hue boasts a primo corner spot in Rampy's condo building.

It's a warm weekend afternoon, and late in the day, the foot traffic streaming along the sidewalks of Thornton Park is changing. As day-tripping families depart the Lake Eola playground at the west end of Washington Street with tuckered-out tots in tow, young hipsters and salt-and-pepper-haired empty-nesters begin "the crawl," cruising for familiar faces at the open-air tables of The Beacon, Cityfish, Hue, 310 Lakeside, Wild Side, Aroma, Anthony's or Dexter's, choosing tonight's roost for appetizers and cocktails. Unlike the crowds of the entertainment districts to the south or shopping meccas to the north, many of Thornton Park's pedestrians are residents. They live here. And they're walking to cocktails and dinner. That, in itself, makes this place nearly unique.

It didn't happen by accident. Thornton Park is old by Orlando standards, with bungalows and Spanish Revival-style houses dating back to the early 1900s. But like many downtown neighborhoods, it had lost its sense of community and vitality until New Urbanism arrived, courtesy of visionary young developers, including Craig Ustler, Phil Rampy and Steve Kodsí.

"What appealed to me about Thornton Park was that it has great bones," Craig Ustler says. "Brick streets, proximity to Lake Eola, big oak trees, manageable blocks, good old houses and bungalows, a diversity of people. It's real and it's urban. Phil Rampy really started the neighborhood revitalization in the early 1990s, naming the neighborhood, putting it on the map, making it a real place. Services and restaurants came in, namely Dexter's Restaurant in the mid '90s. All of this momentum set the stage for Thornton Park Central. Phil and I partnered on the project and saw it as the opportunity to take the next big step for the neighborhood. And it worked. TPC [Thornton Park Central] was the bridge between the traditional and quaint Thornton Park and the multi-family and high-rise South Eola District. The city, starting with Mayor Bill Frederick, cleaned up Lake Eola and made a commitment to 'clean and safe.' Then some creative entrepreneurs took over and built/rebuilt a great place."

The opening of Thornton Park Central – a mixed-use project incorporating office space, condos and retail at the corner of Washington Street and Summerlin Avenue – in 2002 helped

turn Thornton Park into an enclave of trendy eateries, boutiques and residences. Mature oaks shade bricked side streets bristling with modest historic bungalows; mid-rise condos along Central Boulevard and Eola Drive are the magnet in the middle; and high-rise residential buildings border both the Park neighborhood and downtown proper.

The crowds generated by those buildings haven't fallen off much, despite the real estate recession. A recent report by a real estate analyst found that two-thirds of the 3,236 downtown condos that have come on the market since 2001 have been sold. Of the unsold units, 40 percent of them are in a single building, 55 West, on the other side of downtown along Church Street.

Ustler and Rampy's Thornton Park Central opened with 100 percent retail occupancy. All of the office space was leased shortly after, and there are currently only a few condo units available. Steve Kodsí's Sanctuary and Star Tower are both close to sell-out, and at an average price-per-unit of \$590,000 and \$631,000 respectively. That contributed to a total sale of downtown condos of \$646 million between 2001 and 2008.

Those kinds of numbers have attracted numerous restaurants and retailers. For both the bungalow dwellers and the tower people, that has contributed to a walkable urban district. Residents can stroll out their front doors and run into their neighbors walking groceries home from the supermarket or taking in the sunshine and fresh air over a brunch-time mimosa.

The rooted, vibrant atmosphere draws in scores of visitors to stroll, window shop and dine. During the week, lunchtime crowds flow in from the offices at Thornton Park Central, me-



dia company Fry Hammond Barr at the end of Washington and the towers along the north edge of Lake Eola. At night, the sidewalk tables fill up for cocktail hour and beyond. Weekend evenings start early – about 4 pm – and gain momentum as the strains of live music begin to ripple through the trees, not culminating until the wee hours.

If you question whether Orlando is, as Gertrude Stein famously said about Oakland, a place with “no there, there,” just stop into Burton’s pub or Wild Side, have them pull you a pint of locally crafted Orange Blossom Pilsner and watch the eclectic go electric as the night wears on.

**WHERE TO SHOP:** A great place to vector in on the Thornton Park vibe is **Urban Think! Bookstore**, located next to Hue restaurant on the Central Boulevard side of Thornton Park Central. Urban Think! is less a bookstore than a portkey to higher consciousness. (If you’re not sure what a portkey is, polish up on your *Harry Potter*.) The book selection isn’t huge, but it thoughtfully encompasses a wide field of interests, ranging from global warming and reprints of Faulkner, Saul Bellow and Sinclair Lewis to a volume of funny pictures of dogs a la Lolcats and *The Runaway Bunny*. Urban Think! holds poetry jams and consciousness-raising lectures, but it’s also host to two other mini-businesses: **Art Angels** sells

gift baskets and fresh flowers, and **Infusion Tea** – a branch of the College Park tea shop – offers the expected high-end teas along with beer and wine.

Thornton Park is not yet overrun with boutiques, but those that are there are worthy. **Zou Zou**, also in Thornton Park Central on the Summerlin side, won’t be confused with either Neiman Marcus or T.J. Maxx. It has been mentioned in *Lucky* magazine repeatedly and carries coveted designer goods. Bright Taka cotton voiles compete with Op Art-inspired, paisley-print mini-dresses and Treesje handbags. **Marie-France**, on Washington just east of Summerlin, is no less eclectic. It offers clothing, shoes and jewelry that go from casual to cocktail elegant at a comfortable price point. The jewelry – much of it made by local artisans – is grouped by color, and there are lots and lots of shoes. The guys aren’t excluded either. **Urban Body** on Summerlin has of-the-moment retro styles, including jeans by MEK and styles from Z-Brand to Drifter. **Obsession** on Central near the Paramount opened last fall next door to the original location of Art Angels. Mannequins fronting the glass facade showcased a flowing white dress with an abstract yellow flower pattern at the hem and a tan canvas shirt with purple-and-tan floral print cotton top.

We wouldn’t ordinarily point out a supermarket as a shopping magnet, but the **Publix** on Central at Lake Avenue is worth mentioning because it has been a political football at the heart of the debate over the practicality of downtown development. The first full-service food store to open in downtown in decades, it has been cited by the proponents of change as a necessary part of the residential revival of downtown Orlando and Thornton Park. It has just as often been derided by naysayers as an empty gesture. All we can say is, it wasn’t empty when we visited. It’s not a traditional Publix; there’s no bright green logo outside, but there is a sculptural, brushed steel “P” over the door. Inside, the magazine rack is a good indication of what Publix management – well known for tailoring stores to the tastes of their location

– thinks of Thornton Park: The expected news weeklies share space with *Mother Earth News*, *Wired* and *Pilates Style*.

**WHERE TO EAT:** There are many good options in a very small area. Going back to the anchor point, Thornton Park Central, Craig Ustler’s Urban Life Management has had a solid, long-lived hit with the über-hip **Hue**. It has won most of the available city and statewide dining awards, and the atmosphere, service and progressive American/fusion food are all first rate. A clutch of high-top tables line the corner of Central and Summerlin, providing the perfect perch for people-watching while savoring a deftly rendered sea bass or one of its signature drinks. **Cityfish**, another Urban Life restaurant, is just down the block in the old City Market space. It’s long on seafood, with an emphasis on fresh imports. Around the corner at Summerlin and Washington, Anthony’s serves up a variety of Italian specialties alongside what some people claim is the city’s best pizza. Diagonally across the corner, **Wild Side BBQ** is the hot place. Really hot, as in barbecue, chili and peppery pasta. There’s seating inside and out, and most days around sundown, the tables are crowded with cocktail sippers. Just east on Washington, the historic house is now **Aroma Italian Café**. The setup hasn’t changed: The living room of the bungalow has a couple of comfy chairs; there’s a wine bar set up to the right in what would have been the dining room; and there are tables in the back. On weekend evenings, there’s live entertainment provided by a family of musicians: “Until you’ve heard Pink Floyd on violin, guitar and accordion, you haven’t really lived.” The Thornton Park wing of the **Dexter’s** empire is just up the street serving the same tasty menu as the others. The offerings continue to evolve, but one thing that doesn’t change is the upscale crowd bent on having a good time.

Three blocks away just south of Central, the ground floor of the Sanctuary houses a trifecta of cool: **The Beacon**, **Sanctuary Diner** and **Graze**, the last two under the deft supervision of standout



chef Jephania Foster. The South Beach-chic interior of Graze belies a menu that can get down to earth – nachos or grouper sliders for lunch – and then take it up many notches with daily dinner specials, such as pumpkin ravioli or grilled beef fillet with smoked blue cheese and chipotle au gratin potatoes. You can drink enjoyably in any of the three, but Graze needs to put a warning “for residents or those with a designated driver only” on its awesome \$12 mojito pitchers! A few blocks away on Central, **310 Lakeside** occupies the space vacated by Sam Snead’s, only it’s lighter, brighter and quieter in its new incarnation. The terrace tables still have that unobstructed view of Lake Eola, and 310 is probably the area’s top contender for “most upscale gator tail,” with its delicious blackened gator tail served with remoulade. The main menu has familiar favorites, most notably a thick Black Angus burger, fettuccine carbonara, New York strip steaks and Maple Leaf Duck Breast glazed with pomegranate. Having 100 wines by the glass has made Eola Wine Company, located on the corner of Central and Osceola, a favorite pit stop for oenophiles throughout the metro area. There’s a wide range of retail bottles available, too, and customers are encouraged to buy a bottle, have it corked and lounge, talk and people-watch. And eat a few appetizers. Since most of the patrons don’t have to drive to get home, the normal urban hustle of downtown slows perceptibly to a more urbane pace. And that is what Thornton Park’s champions were always hoping for.

“It’s Orlando’s version of Greenwich Village,” Ustler says. “Phil and I comment all the time on how the neighborhood has grown up. Am I saying we’re perfect? No urban place is perfect – that’s what makes it so much fun – but Thornton Park is on the right track.”

*Clockwise from top right: Patrons dine outdoors at Hue restaurant; waiter at Graze; relax with a book and a cup of tea at Urban Think! Bookstore; savoring seafood at Cityfish. Opposite page: street scene at Cityfish.*

