



In 2013, Apex was voted the 9th Best Place to Live in America by Money Magazine, up five spots from its ranking in 2007. Playing a role in those rankings is an ever-growing and vibrant downtown listed on the National Register of Historic Places as well as a variety of fantastic local shops, eateries, parks and family activities. Here, a few of the best-kept secrets that shouldn't be secret at all.

Intro by Christa Gala.

SKIPPERS FISH FRY

By Kurt Dusterberg

At a fish fry restaurant, you may not think about eating healthy, but at Skippers Fish Fry and Market, you can indulge a variety of tastes.

"It's not just a fry house," says general manager Michael Gorham. "We have healthy selections. That draws in a lot of people. We've added grilled and blackened mahi mahi taco. It's a big seller."

Skippers can grill or blacken most anything on the menu, and they cater to

gluten-free diners as well.

Long-time customers appreciate the large portions at Skippers. Fresh fish is brought in daily and uniquely prepared.

"The big thing in this business is each of our fish has its own breading and batter," Gorham says. "It's not just the same for everything."

Most fish platters (served with fries, homemade slaw and hush puppies) sell for less than \$10. Make it an "onion platter" by substituting their popular onion rings. Got a taste for steamers? Skippers has oysters, clams and snow crab legs too.

Skippers may be a couple hours from the ocean, but Gorham says the restaurant has its share of believers from the coast.

"We get people from the beach who are visting, and they ask, 'When are you going to bring one of these out to the beach?'"



DOODLING BUG

By Christa Gala.

Doodling Bug has been offering kitschy, hand-crafted items at the Raleigh Flea Market for years, but this past summer chose Apex as the place to make its retail debut.

Find hairbows for a dollar, hand-painted furniture in bright colors, trendy signs, jewelry and knitted items—from headbands to scarves. It's just one of many unique shops and restaurants to browse downtown.

THE BLISTERED PIG

By Dave Droschak

Steve Adams jokes he can now ride a skateboard between jobs. He literally can. His second restaurant in downtown Apex – The Blistered Pig – is across the street and around the corner from Peak City Grill, which he founded a decade ago.

The Blistered Pig is a neat name, in a neat location, with a neat concept and a neat logo – a large fork accented by a twisted pig's tail.

Opened in Dec. 10, the ambiance of The Blistered Pig – in the rear of the historic Tobacco & Mule Exchange wooden building – fits

HIDDEN GEMS

of Apex



the simplistic menu of mostly North Carolina barbeque, brisket and chicken.

Originally Adams had expanded offerings, but was soon talked down by his chef and partner Franz Propst.

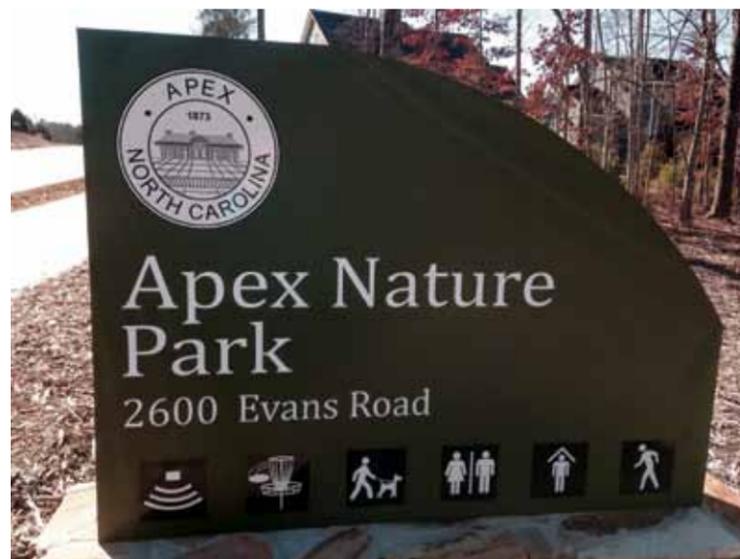
"My idea was proven wrong rather quickly. We went back to his idea of keeping things very simple," Adams said. "They were coming for the BBQ, the brisket and the chicken. I believe if you have good BBQ people will find you. Apex sort of needed its won BBQ place and they have embraced it."

The Blistered Pig doesn't sauce its Q. However, you'll notice a green and red sauce on each table. One is jalapeno-based with a kick, aged 30 days by Propst; the other is a Western North Carolina version. "It's not as sweet, but it is not 'puckered-up' vinegar either. When I eat our BBQ I have both sauces," Adams said.

You can order meat here by the pound if you like, and all pork, beef and chicken are pasture raised.

The Blistered Pig is cozy with 110 seats inside and an additional 50 on the rear patio weather permitting. There is a large fireplace off to the right as you enter the restaurant, and a fire pit outside.

"The inside fireplace was personal to me," Adams said. "I wanted something that was big, beautiful and warm. It really adds to the atmosphere. There is something about a fireplace that never gets old."



APEX NATURE PARK

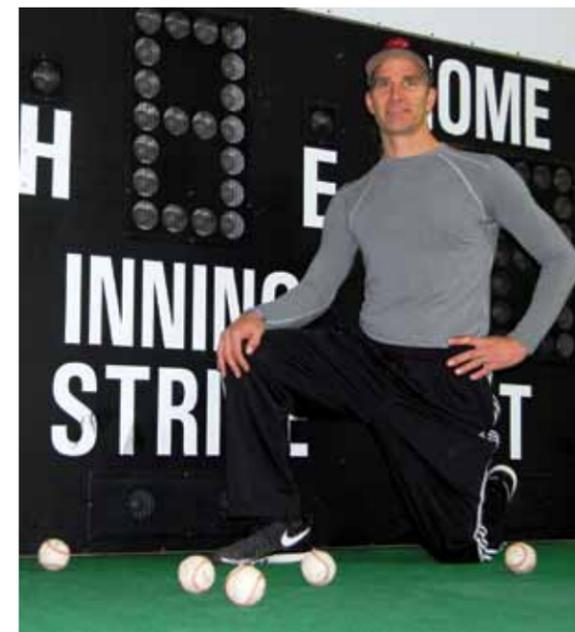
By Christa Gala.

We think a disgruntled Mother Nature had something to do with the "hidden gem" status of the Apex Nature Park. At 160 acres, it should be hard to miss, but the grand opening in early 2014 for Apex's newest town park, on Evans Road, was rained out, followed by nearly two months of icy, inclement weather.

A cooler summer invited residents to discover movie nights in the amphitheater, sand volleyball courts, soccer fields, lighted tennis courts, a playground, dog park, walking trails and picnic shelters.

The piece de resistance is an 18-hole disc golf course, the first one in Apex, built deep into a forest of hardwoods, incorporating streams and handily crafted bridges. It's surprisingly secluded and a beautiful spot to log some family time and burn off a little energy. Whoops and hollers echo through the woods, as well as the jingle of the chains on the baskets as other players make their way through the course, but often you'll feel like the only one there.

Visit apexnc.org/naturepark.



K-ZONE ACADEMY

By Dave Droschak

Technical training in sports – both physical and mental – seems to be moving faster than a 95 mph fastball these days.

Case in point is K-Zone Academy off Investment Boulevard in Apex, where brain power is as important as bat speed when it comes to a cutting-edge baseball training facility headed up by Dan Kopitzke, a former Division I player, whose business moniker is "Superior Baseball Athlete."

There are as many ropes, large "rubber bands" or medicine balls at K-Zone Academy as batting cages as athletes here from as young as 8 years old to professional players strive to improve their games and "beat their competition" with powerful training techniques and state-of-the-art mental techniques.

One tool Kopitzke has on hand is the HitTrax, the world's first and only baseball simulator. The piece of equipment provides a combination of analytics and entertainment that has never before been available to indoor facilities.

"We use it every day in our training," Kopitzke said. "We use the feedback to help the player know how they are doing. Are you hitting line drives? Are you hitting ground balls? Are you pulling everything? How hard are you hitting the ball? It has all kind of calculations to determine whether it was a hit or an out."

On the mental side, Kopitzke utilizes a device called the V Flex, which helps batters determine if a pitch coming their way is a ball or a strike – and worth swinging at or passing on.

"We are getting past the eyes and getting into training the brain," he said. "And we enforce that with the other activities we do. If you were to talk to Ted Williams, the

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greatest hitter of all time, his No. 1 thing was to get a good pitch to hit. That's where we start. Mechanics are important, building a good swing is important, but it is low on the totem pole for us; it's getting the right pitch, being at the right place at the right time."

K-Zone Academy has monthly memberships for sale or something called a SBA Flex Card, where credits that can be applied to specific training sessions. There are also hitting leagues and much more.

"What helps make us unique is we measure everything we do," Kopitzke said. "So kids always know where they stand; there isn't any guessing, no subjectivity to it. The measurements will tell them if they are moving in the right direction. Baseball is a game of statistics, so having all the numbers and the data is important."



TEQUILA DALE'S

By Dave Droschak

What's in a name?

Well, when referring to Tequila Dale's wing sauce and salsas, it's a bit complex.

For starters, there is no alcohol in the ingredients. And there is no Dale either. That's a combination of first names of Apex couple Dave and Val Creager, inventors of the product that guarantees to "Shake Up Your Food."

"We're tequila fans first off, so when we're in the kitchen cooking we're usually sipping on tequila instead of a glass of wine or a beer," the couple said. "That's how that all got started."

Dave began bringing the wing sauce cooked on the couple's stove top to adult hockey tournaments, and the guys fell in love with it during tailgating parties. "They would put it on burgers, steaks, chips ... anything," he said.

Still, bottling sauce was the furthest thing from the couple's mind. They were toying with opening a restaurant

and were also trying to have a baby. The night before putting money into in vitro fertilization process Val broke the news to Dave that she was pregnant.

"So we decided to chase our dream," she said. "That's kind of what we're always been about, following our dreams and doing something that is exciting and different and seeing where it would go. It's about the journey."

The wing sauce is sweet, with mild heat and a lot of complex flavors. The salsas are equally tasty with an all-natural version hitting the shelves at Whole Foods in Cary.

"I feel comfortable we do have a product that stands out, not just from a label standpoint but for the taste," Dave said.

"We don't call our customers customers; we call them fans because they keep coming back," Val added. "We have people that email us and tell us they're addicted to it, that they have to have it."

And the name?

"Anytime you have something that catches people's attention it's a good thing," Dave said. "Our worry was it might be a negative because people are thinking there is tequila in it ... and a lot of people don't drink alcohol. But it has turned into a fun name and a fun thing for folks to talk about ... and a name they remember."



DALLAS FAMOUS CHICKEN N' BISCUITS

By Kurt Dusterberg

As the name Dallas Famous Chicken n' Biscuits would suggest, you shouldn't compare it to a burger joint.

"But we have good burgers," says long-time owner Ray Hartlaub. "It's as close to home cooking as your going to get these days. It's not mass-produced food that's all the same. It's comfort food that is good for the soul, from meat loaf to collard greens to cornbread."

Dallas is open for breakfast and lunch. Stop in during the morning, and you can enjoy a variety of southern favorites such as biscuits and sausage gravy, grits, bacon, eggs and more.

At lunch time, the old-time favorites keep coming. Where else can you find pork chops and country-style steak?

Got a taste for beefaroni? You're in luck.

The odds and ends that provide the decor are as diverse as the menu. Take a quick look around and you'll spot a rooster-crossing sign, a framed portrait of Abraham Lincoln and a couple old apothecary bottles.

"I don't know what to call it," Hartlaub says. "It's a mish-mish of 30 years of junk on the walls that people have given us. We have pictures of people we don't have a clue about hanging around here."



DOWNTOWN APEX

By Christa Gala

Apex's vibrant downtown is no secret, thankfully, but you'll find a lot of special touches tucked here and there that go unnoticed but speak to the dedication of those living and working downtown.

- The Little Free Library: A quaintly crafted mini-house holds and "lends" books, relying on a community honor system. Take a book to read while you stop in at the coffee shop, and return it on your way out. Or keep it, and replace it with a few you'd like to share. Apex folk are honest; so far the little lending house is always full.
- You'll also find a big chalk board with the invitation "Write on Me," complete with chalk and an eraser. Go for it!
- Don't miss a piece of recent history at the Apex Service Memorial, commemorating those who lost their lives in the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks. The steel cap on top of the marble pillar is an actual piece of the antenna from Tower 2 of the World Trade Center. It was donated by the wrecking company in charge of Ground Zero demolition.

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