

Orlando, FL

Summers 1987 -

Another entry that defies dating + qualifies as separate only because of the plethora of activities I undertook within + just outside the city limits. Orlando was + is to Fort Orange what Jackson was + is to Brookhaven, only magnified. A unique mix of standard big city (with murders + carjackings to match) + family paradise (Walt Disney + Co. + In.) terraformed into the marshland. Due to circumstances largely outside of my control (I was a preteen!), the vast majority of my memories originate from these artificial locales.

My legendary whining/begging skills combined with what I suppose were Charlotte's undeveloped motherly instincts meant that my wants dictated many of our forays into Orlando. All the standard all-American destinations were there: Magic Kingdom, Epcot, Adventure Island, Busch Gardens (technically in Tampa, but it fits), + Sea World. At the time I'm pretty sure I loved it, but in hindsight I'm not sure why in many cases. Sweltering heat + 100% humidity, combined with my textbook case of childhood obesity to turn me into a red faced ball of sweat + wheezing. Crowds that pushed the physical limit on persons per square feet certainly didn't help. For a kid who didn't do roller coasters or "scary" rides, some of the trips were just elaborate wastes of time + money that I can't help but feel a

twinge of guilt for as I recall them.

More memorable to me by far were the pricey restaurants that always accompanied the theme park journeys. Emeril's restaurant was a multiple time favorite, & what I consider my official introduction to "fancy" food with my potato & truffle soup & my foie gras-infused wild rice. Wolfgang Puck's carte was more overwhelming, with a nice piece of tuna (my first time to have it rare) atop an unremarkable salad & a plethora of tableside crumb-hungry birds. Emeril's Polynesian-themed Tchoup Tchoup was a dud for the rest of the family (terrible service) on our first trip, but was always a winner for me with their mammoth portions & "let's sweeten everything" approach to seasoning. Subsequent trips (not sure why Charlotte & Buddy went again) proved much more pleasing to the crowd. California Grill - seated atop the Disney equivalent of a skyscraper - will always be the first restaurant where my grandma did not have to salt her food, & probably a leading cause of my pre-hypertension at the ripe old age of 17. Not that I'm complaining.

The other memorable perennial stop was Church Street Station, the odd blend of amusement park, museum, & shopping boutique that stretched across downtown Orlando, offering - honestly? - not much that I recall other than an Indian memorabilia store where I bought a tomahawk. Don't ask.