



Wilton Manors: South Florida's LGBT Epicenter

By: Carlos Harrison

PARTY MODE

Wilton Manors, South Florida's most famous gayborhood, combines a small-town atmosphere with all the amenities of urban life — South Florida Gay News.

[Wilton Manors](#) has a lot to offer: walkability, waterways, and wildlife - as in the kind that lives in the wild, and the kind that *is* wild.

And then there's the candy.

"We have candy from 87 different countries. The first two racks beginning here have mostly the candies that were famous in America from 1806 to the mid-1990s. Then 75 types of homemade chocolate covered items, 115 types of black licorice, 100 types of dark chocolate bars ..."

The list goes on, delivered by [To The Moon's](#) owner, Antonio "Ralph" Dumas, as he leads customers along the packed shelves of candies. This time the customer is Tara Jackerson, who came in, she says, to buy her dad a gift. "I wanted to get him something authentic."

"Well, where's he from?" Dumas quickly asks, and, as soon as she answers, leads her to a section with candies from the Northeast. "If he's from Brooklyn he'll know these."

Boxes, bags and bars of candy fill the floor-to-ceiling shelves along one wall and a head-high row across the aisle. There are Oh, Henry bars and Tootsie Rolls, of course, and hard to find brands like Bean Boozled, Junket and My T Fine - over 13,000 kinds in all.

There's also Jiffy Pop, raisin crackers and Sanders fudge, and sodas you might have thought had long



ADD TO FAVORITES

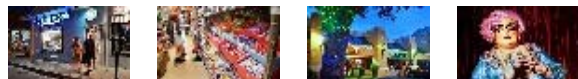


PHOTO



To The Moon, the candy and collectibles store, sits on Wilton Manors' main thoroughfare, Wilton Drive. The street is the heart of the city, the center of activity and, if the steady stream of customers is any indication, a sweet tooth's heaven.

Credit: Peter W. Cross for VISIT FLORIDA



places in this article



Fort Lauderdale

disappeared: Sun Drop, Cheerwine, RC Cola, Moxie. The rest of the store is crammed full of novelties, classic toys and collectibles - Gumby and Pokey, Bozo the Clown party favors and, among the rows of tin school lunchboxes by the front door, the Pink Floyd "Dark Side of the Moon" box Mandarin Toledo came specifically looking to buy.

"My boyfriend loves Pink Floyd so I wanted to get it for him."

The candy and collectibles store sits on Wilton Manors' main thoroughfare, Wilton Drive. The street is the heart of the city, the center of activity and, if the steady stream of customers is any indication, a sweet tooth's heaven. It's also "the epicenter of the gay community in South Florida," says resident Jason Gonzalez.

That's what attracted roller derby promoter and Wilton Manors resident Derrick DeRosa, who goes by the stage name Bear Lee Human. "I did the classic 'move to Florida and come out,'" he says.

DeRosa stands as large as his pseudonym suggests. Still, in Wilton Manors he found something missing in other places he'd been. "It's nice to be able to walk down the street holding hands with my partner and not have people yell things out."

According to the 2010 Census, Wilton Manors is the country's "Second Gayest City" - at least in terms of couples. It has about 140 per 1,000, putting it second only to Provincetown, Mass.

It began about the time DeRosa first moved there, about the time [Georgie's Alibi](#), the first major gay bar, opened in a boarded-up bank branch up the block from where To The Moon now stands.

More Gay and Lesbian establishments followed. The city now is home to the [Pride Center](#), a community center that hosts "safe-space" meeting groups, activities and support for the LGBT community; the annual [Stonewall Pride Festival and Parade](#), which attracts some 30,000 people yearly; and the expanded [Stonewall National Museum - Wilton Manors Gallery](#), an LGBT-focused cultural institution with historic artifacts, digital archives, and visual exhibits aimed at promoting understanding.

The curving sweep of Wilton Drive is lined with cleverly - some might say, suggestively - named establishments proudly displaying their rainbow flags, figuratively and literally.

There's [The Pink Submarine](#), [Double Dippers](#), with the slogan "Come in and taste the rainbow," [Gaysha](#)



[New World Sushi Bar](#), and [Out of the Closet](#), a nonprofit, second-hand goods shop benefitting medical care for patients with HIV/AIDS. It has men's and women's clothes, couches and golf clubs. And, it has hard-to-find-items that made it the perfect place for a woman who preferred to give only her first name to shop for black leather peep-toed pumps that her son can wear to his LGBT prom.

"It's the only place you can find heels in a size 11," she says.

The accepting ambience has led South Florida Gay News to name Wilton Manors "Best City"- twice.

"South Florida's most famous gayborhood combines a small-town atmosphere with all the amenities of urban life," it wrote the second time, in 2013.

"It's difficult to go anywhere in Wilton Manors and not assume everyone is gay. I kind of have to check myself every once in a while and say, 'Quit assuming everyone is gay, Jason,'" says Gonzalez, who DJ's weekends at [Sidelines Sports & Video Bar](#), a popular "gay and gay-friendly" watering hole and dance spot on the drive.

Wilton Manors, though, is also happily "straight-friendly."

"There are places that gays don't feel comfortable," says Rick Wootten, a clerk at Out of the Closet. "I would say the opposite is not true here. Breeders are treated equally."

It's also comfortably compact and walkable, at any hour of the day or night.

"It's a safe community to live in. You can go walking on the streets in the middle of the night and no one will bother you," Stacy Leigh, the manager at [New York Grilled Cheese](#), says between customers.

And with the many restaurants, bars and shops centered compactly along the city's main thoroughfare, that's an appealing draw for non-residents like Danielle "Dani" Houle, who rode her bike to [Juice Blendz](#).

"It's just a great place, with lots of lunch places," she says.

As the crowd on Saturdays and Sundays prove, one of the favorite late-morning places to gather is amid the tropical greenery and colorfully laid-back at [Rosie's](#) — for locals and visitors alike.

Rick Hale, visiting on a long weekend from Tampa, stopped in before the drive back.

“It’s a little island,” he says, “with great food. Every time we’re in Lauderdale we come to Rosie’s.”

But there’s more to Wilton Manors than food and shops. It’s home to nearly a dozen family-friendly parks, a weekend farmer’s market next to city hall, and a nature trail that winds through a mangrove-lined preserve on a raised boardwalk, offering a pristine view of primordial Florida.

Of course, Wilton Manors is not called the “Island City” for nothing. The city is surrounded by forks in the Middle River, making it a true island, and home to a host of water- and wildlife.

“We’ve got kestrels, ospreys, cormorants, ducks, ibises, egrets, and at least four, maybe five varieties of heron,” says Kenny Myers, owner of [Atlantic Coast Kayak](#), which rents kayaks and paddleboards for the seven-mile blue trails loop that wraps around Wilton Manors. “We have iguanas up to five feet long, and there are at least four manatees that are resident in the river all the time.”

That’s what attracted Mike Pappas, a visitor from Chicago.

The views include the wildlife, natural mangroves, and “really nice homes,” says Mike Pappas, who took a kayak about halfway around the city. His favorite, though, was something unexpected: “A dog we were convinced was a statue. It was a pointer dog, and it was perfectly still, pointing at an iguana or something. And we were saying, ‘How clever!’ It was perfectly aligned with the water. It looked like a statue – and then it moved.”

Most trips take place in the daytime, but Myers also offers sunset tours, with a guitarist playing atop a paddleboard in a lagoon and coconut cocktails to greet the approaching night and the nocturnal wildlife.

But nighttime also brings the other kind of wildlife, for which Wilton is well known.

There are cabaret shows and female impersonators at Georgie’s Alibi, the weeknight karaoke and weekend dance parties at [Bill’s Filling Station](#), the everybody’s-welcome-atmosphere at Sidelines sports bar, and more.

Basically, says DeRosa, “It’s cool during the day. But at night it’s electric.”