

June 1, 2017

Orlando Business Journal



ORLANDO BUSINESS JOURNAL

Looking to fatten up your wallet? Head to O-town for these jobs

If you like fat paychecks, Orlando is a pretty good place to live — for certain types of jobs, that is.

Just ask the owner of The Rusty Spoon.

In 2003, Kathleen Blake moved to town and took a job as chef de cuisine at Melissa Kelly's Primo in Orlando at the JW Marriott Orlando Grande Lakes, which helped her get to where she is today: owning an award-winning restaurant in downtown.

Since the early days of her career here, Blake said local farmers' markets and foodie events have flourished, as have the number of both independent and resort-operated restaurants.

As a result, there's competition for talented workers, which, in turn, has created a pay bump — unusual in an industry in which most jobs are not high-wage.

"Back in 2003, the starting wage for a line cook was \$9-\$10," Blake told *Orlando Business Journal*. "Now, if I have someone with experience, it's \$4-\$5 more an hour because I have to be competitive with the hotels that also offer a full benefits package."

Blake knows firsthand what it's like to move up the chain of command and she said line cooks often become head chefs, which in the Orlando area earn an average wage of \$61,410, the best in the state compared with Miami's average salary of \$53,310, Jacksonville's \$52,500 and the Tampa-St. Petersburg area's \$46,410.

In fact, several types of jobs — including hotel managers and real estate brokers — earn more money in Orlando than their counterparts do in other major Sunshine State metros areas.

One reason for Orlando's higher wages in some fields may be a simple case of supply and demand in a region that has been pulling in record-breaking visitation numbers during the past several years, said Sean Snaith, director of the University of Central Florida's Institute for Economic Competitiveness.

After all, Orlando is the nation's top destination after welcoming a record-breaking 68 million-plus visitors in 2016, up from 2015's previous all-time high of 66 million, according to the region's tourism bureau, Visit Orlando.



JIM CARCHIDI

Kathleen Blake of The Rusty Spoon



“The answer always comes down to supply and demand, especially for chefs coming out of the tourism and hospitality sectors,” Snaith said. “That affects things across the board, including chefs in restaurants and other non-tourism locations.”

John Rivers, owner of 4 Rivers Smokehouse, agreed.

“The number of restaurants is good for visitors, but it means I need to keep up with the competition,” Rivers said, referring to the industry’s wage growth.

Other positions also benefit from Central Florida’s millions of annual visitors. For example, local hotel managers earn an average yearly salary of \$81,160 here, compared with \$69,380 in Miami, \$54,320 in Jacksonville and \$51,070 in the Tampa-St.Petersburg area.

The continuous record-breaking number of visitors means more demand for quality in the lodging industry, said Rich Maladecki, president of the Central Florida Hotel & Lodging Association.

Orange, Osceola and Seminole counties have more than 400 lodging establishments. In addition, over the last five years, the number of rooms grew by 1,000-1,500 per year.

“The best lodging managers are awarded offices here because of the reputation Orlando has worldwide,” Maladecki said. “We are getting the cream of the crop assigned to these properties because they want those properties to prosper.”

The area’s growth also attracted attention throughout the country. Last year, *Forbes* magazine ranked metro Orlando at No. 3 in the nation for best big cities for jobs. And while many of the jobs being added are minimum-wage positions, the region is starting to see some success in higher-wage jobs connected with the growing technology community and commercial space industry, among others.

“Almost all of our economic indicators for Central Florida are strong. It’s not just that we are adding jobs, we’re actually increasing the wages — something we’ve been working for years to accomplish,” noted Orange County Mayor Teresa Jacobs in her 2017 State of Orange County address in April.

But some jobs in the food and hospitality industries aren’t the only bright spots for Orlando. For instance, real estate brokers here earn a hefty average salary of \$128,560 — nearly double the pay of brokers in Miami, where they earn an average of \$68,930.

Part of the reason for that huge difference may be due to a lack of available land in Miami, said Orlando land broker Daryl Carter, president of Maury L. Carter & Associates Inc.: “A lot of the South Florida region seems like it is built out. They do, however, have the advantage of being on the coast with beaches and water.”

Still, Orlando is home to the University of Central Florida — the nation’s second-largest university — as well as Lake Nona and other high-value submarkets that are cheaper in comparison to Miami for land development, he added.

Meanwhile, metro Orlando also offers the highest salaries among the state’s largest submarkets for lawyers, mechanical engineers, and advertising and promotions managers.

That’s no big surprise to Snaith.



“A number of those positions are impacted by the growth in our region’s economy,” he said. “We’re the fastest-growing metro in the state for job and population growth. All these things are driving the need. When you have construction going on with new projects, it generates the need for contract disputes. It’s the same thing with the engineering fields: More people, more economic activity.”

Read on to see data that shows how Orlando stacks up in other areas compared to other metro areas.

Bang for the buck leaderboard

Raw dollar figures don’t tell the whole story. Workers in bigger metropolitan areas generally earn more money, but their living expenses tend to be equally inflated. What’s really important is what an employee’s paycheck will buy. That’s why we came up with LAPAPP (local average pay adjusted for purchasing power). Below are this area’s jobs with the strongest LAPAPP. If we look at all of the nation’s insurance sales agents, for example, advertising and promotions managers rank fourth in purchasing power.

National leaders for Orlando’s top jobs

Here is a comparison of jobs that pay well in Orlando compared with their corresponding national leaders. Memphis, for example, has the highest locally adjusted average pay for surgeons: The average salary of \$282,680 there climbs to \$307,540 after we make adjustments for the cost of living. The profile for each occupation compares this area with the national leaders in LAPAPP.

Veronica Brezina
Staff Writer
Orlando Business Journal

