SOUTH FORKS

Four great places to spend a weekend eating and drinking below the Mason-Dixon Line

TASTE OF HISTORY IN CHARLESTON

Charleston, South Carolina, is turning out some of the country’s best new chefs—James Metcalfe of Bosco’s, executive chef at Charleston Grill, who is one of the city’s most celebrated restaurants, and executive chef at Husk, where he is helping put Charleston on the map among the top dining destinations in the country. The city’s food scene is rapidly evolving, with a growing number of chefs and restaurants offering unique flavors and dishes that reflect the city’s rich cultural heritage.

In the historic part of town, Brick’s recently debuted a new eatery, Mercado, that features a menu with flavors from Mexico and the Carolinas. The restaurant offers a variety of plates, including crispy fish tacos with pickled green tomatoes and cilantro horseradish and mac n' cheese. At FIG, a sister restaurant of FIG, you can enjoy Southern cuisine in a modern setting.

Where to eat now: While King Street is known for its shops and colleges, the northern end is becoming a destination for fine dining.}

April 2015 · Washingtonian · 109

Account: 11256A (2999)

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The city’s national profile has risen with the emergence of native son Travis Cranton, who with cousin Ryan Cranton, opened the Rappahannock at DC’s Union Market and operates a larger version of that classic oyster bar in Richmond, and the recent arrival of Mike Isabella, the Top Chef contestant who brought Graffiti to the city last summer.

Still, it’s the stubborn communal refusal to look elsewhere for assistance—or validation—that keeps things interesting.

― Can’t-miss cocktails: John Maher at the Rogue Gentlemen is so serious about his drinks that he printed up a book, handsomely bound, for his menu. A Maher drink is both bracingly stiff (shadows of the great bartenders of yore) and supremely balanced (in keeping with the taste of the mixological moment). Sip and savour his Dear Hug, made with ten-year bourbon, Perse-Branca, Cynar, and Bénédictine, and halfway through, your tongue will numb silently on looser.

― Best breakfast: Get to Perly’s, park yourself on one of the mint-green stools facing the old-fashioned bar, and take in the buzzy scene of patrons and families with young kids all cramming into a place for a newfangled, artisan-driven deli that would rather you experience it as old-fashioned and unassuming. The good mood only gets better with a smoked-whitewing platter, a cup of good strong coffee, and—no way—just an egg cream.

― Afternoon pit stop: A brother and sister tandem from Boston, Evrim and Evin Dogu—their father operates the small Washington chain Rosemary’s Thyme Bistro—runs Richmond’s best bakery: Sub Rosa, which features wonderfully rustic, hearth-baked breads in addition to croissants, tarts, and Turkish tea in a Any on the menu, plus a cup of rich, dark coffee from the excellent Richmond roaster Lamplighter, provided no earlier than the day.

― Distinctly un-DC dinner: Edo’s Squid is the kind of place you find in a city with a thriving Little Italy—a bit worn around the edges but big-hearted and impossible not to love, even when you need to wait 40 minutes for a table. The dish that speaks to the place’s quiet magic sounds so simple as to be unremarkable: braised squid. It melts in your mouth like butter, while the warm nutmeg cream sauce coats your tongue like fondue. Pay close attention to the list of specials, scrawled on a chalkboard in the bare bones dining room. A recent special of deep-fried sugar toads (also known as northern puffers) was polished off quickly.

― What to do when you’re not eating: The Virginia Museum of Fine Arts is excellent, and small enough that you can explore most of the collection in one afternoon. The Museum of the Confederacy—next to the Confederate White House, where Jefferson Davis lived and directed operations throughout the Civil War—is eye opening. Shockoe Hill Cemetery houses the remains of John Marshall, the fourth US chief justice, and Daniel Norton, creator of the first great wine grape in America.

― Where to stay: The Jefferson isn’t just the most elegant hotel in the city but also one of the most convenient to restaurants and shopping.
NEW ENERGY IN NEW ORLEANS

New Orleans once was a city that knew exactly what it was. The elite assembled at Galatoire’s for three-hour drunken funerals of smooched patuties dipped in bisques or trout amandine drowned in butter. Everyone else went to joints like Pontalba’s or Parkway Bakery & Tavern for pils—crusty French breads stuffed with hot sausage, fried shrimp, or roast beef in gravy. On weekends, families lined up at Auge to Brennan’s, founded in 1992, for cupfuls of monied iced cafe au lait in order.

Those edible pleasures still survive in New Orleans. They couldn’t be dislodged by French floodwaters, but at the edges toward its 300th anniversary in 2018, the restaurant scene hummed with renewed energy, quickly evolving.

Marquee chefs such as Donald Link, with his modernist bistro, Herbsaint and his stylish Cajun eatery, Cochon, building empire-size dreams. The formerly quirky French Quarter brasserie, opened after $20 million renovation with a chef who makes flawless eggs Benedict in the morning and palm-sugar-roasted duck with wasabi caviar at night.

Recent arrivals and upstart youngsters are adding new flavors to this Creole city. The internationally revered local expatriate “Beach bum” Barry Cameron returned to the bayou and opened a restaurant and bar called Latitude 29, named after Michael Gulotta, after rising to the helm of John Besh’s flagship restaurant, August, unexpectedly embraced Southeast Asian cuisine when he struck out on his own with Xox, his and his around-the-clock, gently-sizzling bistro or neighborhood, you’ll find New York-style pizza at Pizza Delicios, falafels and Beljians try at Beba, and unbridled creativity from a vest of New York’s Mission Chinese Food at Wally’s, h: ~

Where to eat now: Restaurants are complicated animals with a hundred moving parts. At this moment, Coquette chef and owner Michael Stelzer has everything working in sync. This Modern American bistro in the Garden District is currently one of New Orleans’ finest restaurants.

Dinner and a show: In a city that loves its past, chef Philip Lopez sees only the future. His first restaurant, with equal parts science experiment and whimsy, with foie gras cotton candy and sculptures smoked with Culebra cigars. At Square Root, a tasting menu only place, he adds to the complexity and the price). Stationed behind wide, counter-wrapped around the open kitchen, Lopez himself serves the 12 courses, which balance the avant-garde techniques often wrought fully on the chef’s Mexican-American heritage.

test is the test: Instead of most tables at G Snacks, an elegant bistro tucked into an upscale Uptown neighborhood, Owner Patrick Sinaty, a consummate host, oversees the dining room while his “celebrity chef” Sue Zumanick runs the kitchen. Make reservations well in advance.

Fish meets fire: Prince Seafood & Grill, the latest venture from Donald Link in partnership with chef Ryan Prewitt, is unlike any other seafood restaurant you’ll encounter in Louisiana. Fish from the Gulf of Mexico is mainly cooked in a large open-fire grill. Plates such as grilled tuna with slivered asada and catfish with blackened rice won Prince the 2014 James Beard Award for best New Restaurant in America and
Prewitt the prize for best chef in the South (shared with Gautreau’s Sue Zemanick).

Beer from here and beyond: Craft beer has finally taken off in Louisiana. At Avenue Pub, a 24-hour bar with a balcony overlooking the streetcars of St. Charles Avenue, you can sample a large selection of regional brews alongside with impressive collections of Belgian beers and American whiskeys.

Museum-quality bar: The stately, 19th-century wooden bar at Pardon, a restaurant in the new Southern Food & Beverage Museum, once stood in a waterfront seafood joint, before Hurricane Katrina pushed it into the water in 2005. A decade later, you can again belly up to the Brunswick bar and sip a Sazerac. You’re encouraged to carry your cocktail through the museum’s exhibits on Southern foodways.

Walk on water: A half-hour drive from the French Quarter, the boardwalks winding through the swamps of the Barataria Preserve—part of the Jean Lafitte National Historical Park and Preserve—make for good hiking. The visitor center offers helpful tips on what to do if you encounter an alligator (clap and stomp).

Rest easy in the Big Easy: Populist governor Huey P. Long preferred to sip his Ramos gin fizz at the Sazerac Bar of the Art Deco Roosevelt Hotel. Opened in 1923, it underwent a major renovation in 2009 and became a Waldorf Astoria property.

—TODD PRICE
Asheville is having a moment. New Orleans has soulful history. Charleston has storied chefs full of attention-grabbing talent. But this scenic North Carolina city is making a lot of noise as of late.

That's the sound of Asheville, beating the local-food drum, surrounded as it is by farm-rich countryside. The cheesemakers are prolific enough for a Western North Carolina Cheese Trail. And chefs such as James Beard semifinalist Jacob Sessions of Table take full advantage of the abundance in a way that's strictly Asheville.

"Asheville has the unique quality of being in the South without being Southern," Sessions says. Settled by Scotch-Irish isolationists, the city was exposed to little of the outside culture that influenced much of the South's culinary style. "These factors have led us to a place where we, as Asheville chefs, don't really have an original food culture, but rather a culture to which we must be held accountable."

Asheville has taken that pioneering spirit to brewing. It lays claim to more breweries per capita than any other US city. People are hopping the vibrant downtown in kilting boots and drinking brewery in the refurbished South Side, which includes Wicked Weed's newest tasting room, the Funkatorium.

"When we began discussing where to launch Wicked Weed Brewing, Asheville was the only logical choice," says owner Rick Guthy, who came to the city from Los Angeles in the '80s. "Not only because it's a place we enjoy so much but because Asheville is America's craft-beer capital."

There are other reasons to visit. Asheville is surrounded by bike trails and kayak-friendly waterways. The nearby Blue Ridge Parkway travels the spine of...
the mountains, offering sweeping views of Carolina high country and access to nature that draws millions of tourists each year.

**Where to eat now:** James Beard nominated John Fleer steered Tennessee’s Blackberry Farm toward its hyper local ethos. Now he takes a similar approach at Asheville’s Buxton Hall. Try the Mongolian lamb ribs with collard kimchi, or wood-fired squash from nearby Sunburst Farms. Meanwhile, another Beard-nominated chef, Katie Button, a protege of Ferran Adrià and José Andrés, also took a chance with Asheville—her family’s tapas restaurant, Sotto, is booming. Book a table in advance.

**How sweet it is:** The French Broad Chocolate Lounge is a 2,500 square-foot temple of bean-to-bar chocolate, with handmade truffles, sipping chocolates, and other artisanal sweets.

**Drink up:** Wicked Weed Brewing opened its immensely popular two-level downtown pub in 2012. The more intimate Funkatorium specializes in barrel-aged wild and sour brews. Try the Black Angels Cherry Sour, black ale brewed with cherries and aged in bourbon barrels. Locals also head to eccentric West Asheville barhop, as well as to the River Arts District, where Wedge Brewing Company turned one side of a former 19th-century warehouse and its railroad stockyard into a charmingly gritty adult playground. On the other side is the Bull and Beggar, a rustic-mod restaurant where you can sip craft cocktails, but apples, and watch the trains go by.

**Unwind:** Catch live bluegrass or folk at Jack of the Wood, which has pub fare and—of course—local beer. Tired a Flor? Find craft cocktails at MG Road or the Imperial Life.

**Sip away:** The Aloft hotel has stylish, modern vibe in the heart of downtown. For more glamorous digs, the Biltmore Estate offers plenty of luxury on 8,000 acres.

**Best way to wake up:** Head to Early Girl Eatery for a taste of the South. Try the Porky Breakfast Bowl, with farm eggs, local cheese curd, and pulled pork in smoky Benton’s bacon gravy. Or pop into Vortex Donuts for first-rate coffee and doughnuts with ingredients like bacon and beer caramel. — Mac REMY LUMSDEN

**If You Go ASHEVILLE**

**Aloft**
53 Biltmore Ave
828-222-7313

**Biltmore Estate**
Asheville
828-257-3311

**The Bull and Beggar**
27 Buxton Way
828-575-3171

**Coratez**
11 Biltmore Ave
828-258-2012

**Early Girl Eatery**
37 S. Perry St
828-337-9764

**French Broad Chocolate Lounge**
100 Biltmore Ave
828-252-1818

**The Imperial Life**
MG Road
828-677-3711

**Jack of the Wood**
MG Road
828-677-5041

**Rhubarb**
27 Buxton Way
828-575-3530

**Table**
17 Lounge Steam
828-253-8993

**Vortex Donuts**
22 Early St
828-258-7467

**Wedge Brewing Company**
27 Buxton Way
828-575-0771

**Wicked Weed Brewing**
MG Road
828-677-3711

**Wicked Weed Funkatorium**
51 N. Market St
828-575-5997

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