

Posted: Thursday, November 29, 2012 4:45 pm

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As we learned in the two previous features of this series, the Roanoke Valley has a great deal to offer travelers who enjoy history, natural beauty, the arts and more. The last day of my visit was one of the best, as it was when we embarked upon one of the Roanoke area's claims to fame—the awe-inspiring Blue Ridge Parkway.

Exploring the blue ridge parkway

One of the most recognized roads in the country, the Blue Ridge Parkway extends 469 scenic miles from Virginia's northern Shenandoah Valley—the Roanoke Valley is located approximately 120 miles from the northern end—winding its way through the storied Appalachian Mountains, coming to rest in North Carolina at Great Smoky Mountains National Park.

But a drive along the Parkway, which is the most visited site in the National Park system, encompasses much more than spectacular views, beautiful forested areas and enchanting side roads and trails—all found within a whopping 47 Natural Heritage Areas. It is rich in Appalachian history and culture that still today lends to a unique ambiance of magic and mystery that makes a visit here a truly remarkable and memorable experience.

The early history here dates back to the Native American populations—the Tutelo, Saponi and Monacan tribes of western Virginia and the Cherokee Indians of North Carolina, who were experts at navigating the dense landscape, ultimately forging an agriculturally sustainable lifestyle. Once the Europeans came and settled in the area, the region soon encompassed 19th-century log cabins and other homes, transportation centers, community outposts and other structures and entities as well.

The advent of commercialization and industry also played roles in the history and development of the Parkway, including the railroad, water travel, goods trading and expert craftsmanship. In the 20th century, the development of vacation resorts and supporting amenities began to bring more exposure and visitors to the area—the more well-to-do at first—eventually leading to further development of the Parkway as a major scenic motor road and natural national treasure.

Today, visitors can find numerous visitor centers, historic structures and trails, significant peaks and outlooks and other aspects that offer distinct insights into this celebrated region of America. If you embark upon the Parkway, an absolute must-stop is at one of the most photographed sites along it—Mabry Mill. Located at Mile Post 176.1, the site is a restored gristmill, sawmill and blacksmith and woodworking shop where visitors can enjoy the stunning beauty and peaceful ambiance as well as “old time” activity demonstrations, including spinning, basket weaving and other mountain skills.

Time to Wine and Dine

Our next stop was at something that is near and dear to my heart (and stomach!): Chateau Morrisette. Situated in a breathtaking region of the Parkway between Mile Posts 171 and 172 and boasting absolutely amazing panoramic views, Chateau Morrisette—founded in 1978 and owned and operated by the Morrisette family, who has lived in this area for generations—is one of the largest wineries in the state. From its early beginnings as a small vineyard, it has continued to grow, today encompassing over 150 acres of vineyards (on site and from growers throughout the Commonwealth), a massive wine production facility producing wines in almost 200,000 gallons of oak barrels and stainless steel tanks, yielding more than 60,000 cases per year in 19 different varieties.

The facility itself, which also encompasses a voluminous hospitality center, gift shop and tasting room, is an architectural marvel and attraction of its own. Spanning over 32,000 square feet with 135,000 board feet of Douglas fir recycled timbers, it is recognized as one of the largest salvaged timber frame buildings in North America. Despite its size, the ambiance here is definitively European, warm and inviting, and the staff treats each and every visitor—whether wine aficionados, those desiring to learn more about wine or others who just want to come and enjoy the natural surroundings—like family. Additionally, they offer a variety of themed music and other events throughout the year.

In addition to sampling and purchasing wines and shopping for wine accoutrements for home, the *pièce de resistance* for me was dining at the Chateau's restaurant, an unbelievable experience in a relaxed old-world setting that is both low key yet elegant at the same time. The focus here is on combining the finest regional ingredients with organic and fresh produce, meats, fish and seafood and other products, including breads, artisan cheeses and so forth, to create aromatic and flavorful dishes inspired by the South.

Open for lunch, dinner and Sunday brunch, starters and sandwiches on the menu include duck egg rolls filled with chopped house collard greens, julienne carrots and duck confit and served with their homemade blackberry BBQ sauce (very unusual and tasty); roasted fennel and white bean gratin; crawfish beignets made with crawfish, Tasso ham, corn and scallions and served with chow-chow, Black Ridge tartar sauce and spicy mustard; and wild boar sausage made with cranberries and apples and served on a bed of collard greens tucked into a fresh Costanza roll with Hopping John rice. And that's just a smidgen of the mouth-watering menu!

The Chateau serves the most marvelous shrimp and grits entrée I have ever had—huge black tiger shrimp sautéed with Tasso ham, Cajun sausage and tomatoes finished with a light shrimp broth and served over smoked Gouda grits. It is un-freakin'-believably good! Other choices include crab-stuffed salmon, cinnamon chili-rubbed pork tenderloin, seared beef tenderloin tip and ginger lime fried chicken, just to name a few. All of this is paired with award-winning wines from around the world and excellent service.

Gastronomic Adventure in Roanoke

If culinary diversions are right up your alley, then the Roanoke Valley is sure to satisfy, as it possesses the highest number of restaurants per capita than any other area in the state. As such, there are more places and varieties of food to explore than there is space to write in this feature series. Nevertheless, there are several I want to mention that are worth your time and attention.

Among them is Carlos Brazilian International Cuisine, featuring Brazilian, French, Italian and Spanish dishes; Norah's Café, a quaint, Black family-owned café located inside of the Taubman Museum of Art; Macado's (three locations in the Roanoke area), known for their extraordinary overstuffed sandwiches and unique pop culture memorabilia and local artifact décor; Rockfish Food & Wine, serving upscale Southern fare; Martin's Downtown Bar & Grill, which has also been voted Roanoke's Best Live Music Venue; and Local Roots, a farm-to-table restaurant whose passion is serving food fueled by a philosophy they call "S.O.L.E." (Sustainable, Organic, Local, Ethical), just to name a few.

From historic attractions to excellent culinary fare, jaw-dropping natural beauty, a rich history, warm and welcoming people and a great deal more, the Roanoke Valley is a wonderful travel destination.

Resource List

- Blue Ridge Parkway 828-298-0398, www.blueridgeparkway.org
- Chateau Morrisette 540-593-2865, www.chateaumorrisette.com
- Mabry Mill 276-952-2947, www.virginia.org/Listings/HistoricSites/MabryMill
- Norah's Café 540-204-4154, www.taubmanmuseum.org/main/dineshop/norahs-cafe
- Roanoke Valley Convention and Visitors Bureau 800-635-5535, 540-342-6025, www.visitvablueridge.com