

## Unique Dining Experiences In Our Small Towns

From Food Expert Heidi Billotto

On the suggestion of a good friend, I recently took the opportunity to eat my way around **Rutherford County, NC**. Fun, historic with lots of great dining and getaway options, Rutherford County surprised and pleased me with all it has to offer. It won't be long till I head back up to enjoy it all over again.

As a Charlotte food and restaurant writer I'm always looking for the next new thing. With a burgeoning culinary community and an assemblage of creative chefs, that "next new thing" is never very far away. Sometimes, however, it's more fun to take a road trip and travel out of my 15- or 20-mile radius of a comfort zone to explore the world, or at least the rest of the state.

By Culinary Expert and Charlotte, NC Food Writer, Heidi Billotto, [heidibillottofood.com/](http://heidibillottofood.com/)

### You Can Fly Me To The Moon If We Can Stop For A \$100 Burger First



Just an hour and half drive away from Charlotte, it would never, ever occur to me to fly into Rutherford County, but people do – all the time.

Their destination: straight for the 5000-foot asphalt runway at Latitude: 35-25-41.6 N ; Longitude: 81-56-6.28 W or in layman's terms, [The Rutherford County Airport](#), aka [Marchman Field](#), just 3 miles north of Rutherfordton, NC.

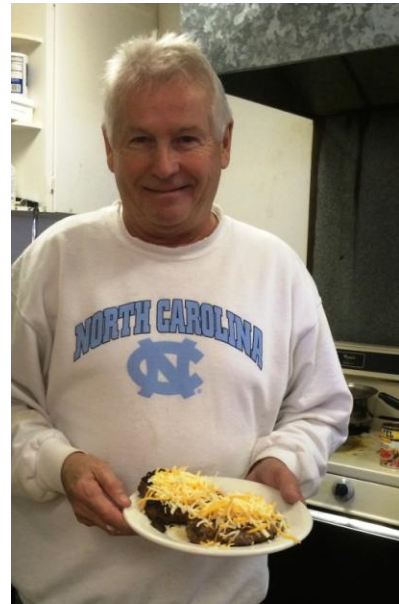
In addition to being the gateway to the county for private and corporate jets, this public airport is also home to [57 Alpha Cafe](#) and the infamous \$100 burger.

Proof that there is always a story behind the story is found in the fact that the man behind the burger has almost as many layers of flavor as the fare he serves to guests.

In a word (or two), 57 Alpha Cafe chef, owner and chief bottle washer, Ron McKinney is a Rutherfordton Renaissance man and a local treasure. He offers burgers and south-of-the-border specialties with sides of lively conversation along with services for aerial photography, info and video on raptors in the area, and local anthropological and archeological dig tours! But all of that's a story for another time. The focus this day is on the food.

McKinney's burgers include the Plane (pun intended) and Cheese—also with bacon. All are made from 100% ground chuck. They are the bomb and will make for a delicious mouthful of a midday repast.

"This isn't McDonald's quarter pounder," McKinney told me. He explained it makes for a better product to do everything fresh and to order. "I don't know how much they weigh," he says. "I just shape them until they feel right!"



Indeed. Hand-patted into shape and pan fried to order, this is the kind of burger where the juices seep into the bun, and flavor oozes into every bite. Why do they call it the \$100 burger? When you consider the cost of jet fuel, that's about the cost of what it takes to fly in...and the burger is an extra \$10.

I went for the burger, but I fell in love with the place itself: a tiny three table dining room with an adjacent porch and picnic tables; and the superb enchiladas made with well-seasoned pork, braised for several hours, then seasoned, shredded and stuffed into a tortilla with an oh-so amazing sauce. It's served with a slice-of-heaven banana pudding!

**57 Alpha** is an off the beaten track place with limited hours (11 am to 2 pm, Tuesday - Sunday), so a bit of planning is required to hit it just right; and it's cash only, so come prepared.

If I had a jet, I'd fly in for lunch every day. As it is, I plan to drive up again soon, and so should you!

**57 Alpha Airport Cafe**  
Rutherford County Airport  
828-286-1677





## Forest City's Finest



Our drive-by, fly-by in Rutherfordton fueled us for the short drive to [Forest City](#) where the plan was to eat...again. (I did I mention that I'm a food writer!) The object of our intentions: [The Fountain at Smith's Drugs](#). I have heard about the town and the legend that is The Fountain at Smith's Drugs for years, as a good friend of mine, James W. Walker, grew up in Forest City and has shared stories and his memories many times over.

Back in the day, Smith's Drugs, originally called Smith's Cut Rate Drugs, was the place to be. Back then, locals called the landmark destination "The CutRate."

Smith's is still the place to be. You'll find it packed daily with young and old, locals and tourists alike, at tables, in booths and sitting on vintage bar stools (the kind that make a 360-degree twirl!) at the counter. Everyone will be sharing stories, catching up on the news of the day and enjoying the food. I couldn't wait to dive in to it all.

With three of us at the table, we were able to share several specialties for which Smith's has garnered quite a reputation.

"Be sure to get the pimento cheese," James had texted when I told him of our travel plans. Done. The ooey-gooey, warm melted cheese sandwich came to the table with the rest of our order: a fried-just-right livermush sandwich, a perfectly cooked burger, and a ham sandwich with bacon and cheese, all accompanied with fries and drinks – delish!

All of Smith's sandwiches are served on fresh baked bread, baked by Forest City locals. Everything was delicious beyond my expectations! If you are in Forest City this summer, time your visit to Smith's to coincide with a local [Forest City Owls](#) baseball game and watch the four-time summer league champs strut their stuff.





**Smith's Drugs of Forest City**, 139 E. Main Street Forest City, NC 28043, **828-245-4591**

## Rock On And Then Relax

About 20 minutes west of Forest City is the town of **Chimney Rock**. The Lake Lure/Chimney Rock area makes a great three-day weekend destination. Visit this well-known tourist spot to enjoy the heights, but once you are back at ground level, take time for lunch.

**Medina's Village Bistro** on Main Street in Chimney Rock Village is highly recommended. Everything here is homemade and delicious. The atmosphere is comfortably casual, and the service is spot on.

For lunch, we sat out on the front patio to dine al fresco and people watch. We enjoyed rich and creamy homemade clam chowder alongside a crispy, pressed Cuban sandwich and a tender, fresh fish sandwich special; both sandwiches were very nicely done.



Behind Medina's is an area known as **The Gathering Place**. If you are visiting in the summertime, plan to hang around after dinner at Medina's to enjoy an array of Thursday night concerts, all from 6 to 8 pm.

**Medina's Village Bistro**, 430 Main St. Chimney Rock, NC 28720, **828.989.4529**





Photo Courtesy of Esmeralda Inn

Looking for a place to rest your weary bones and eat as well? Choose the gorgeous [Esmeralda Inn and Restaurant](#) as your home away from home if your Rutherford County visit lasts more than a day.

A large elegant log cabin, it could best be described as “rustic refined.” The place is very welcoming, starting with the inside lobby and adjoining restaurant interiors, which are elegant yet warm and inviting. They call visitors to sit and stay a while.

As the inn and restaurant are popular locations for wedding and rehearsal dinners, the restaurant at The Esmeralda is closed to the public on Sundays and Mondays. Reservations are a must any other night of the week to guarantee a table will be waiting for you.

The team of Esmeralda chefs uses as much local products and supports local area farms as much as possible; this is a big plus for me. The dinner we enjoyed was superb.

We started with wonton stuffed with cheese and served with chili sauce.

Appetizers followed in the guise of fried oysters and fried green tomatoes; then came a tasty bruschetta with cilantro, tomatoes and slightly spicy chopped peppers atop a two-bite toast.

Entrées of roast quail and mountain trout, both perfectly done, rounded out our meal.



A dessert to share was the icing on the cake!

[The Esmeralda Inn and Restaurant](#)  
10 Main St, Chimney Rock, NC 28720  
**828.625.2999**

Need Assistance? We can help!  
**Welcome Center in Lake Lure**  
800.849.5998 or 828.287.6113  
2932 Memorial Highway (US-64/74)  
Lake Lure NC 28746  
[RutherfordTourism.com](http://RutherfordTourism.com)