

May 17, 2016
UMV: 23,324,888

Norfolk, Virginia: so much more than military

Norfolk, Virginia, being a big military town, one would expect that its eateries would consist of the golden arches, the Kentucky colonel, and Papa John. Surprise: Norfolk is jammed with some of the funkiest, most creative, imaginative, original, and yes, delicious, restaurants on the East Coast. Nothing wrong with pizza and burgers, but this place rocks, cuisine-wise.

Restaurants, art works, and wine have turned this old port city, home of the world's largest naval station, into a destination town for upscale visitors. The first thing they'll notice is the [street art](#) that has turned grungy brick or plain cement buildings into galleries. Graffiti artists have evidently been given free reign to paint fascinating murals in the downtown area, leaving their signatures at the bottom as Instagram tags (@onietonie). Norfolk encourages this contemporary take on young Rembrandt's by giving the sidewalks around this artwork additional little bands of color to turn them into part of the look.



Julie Hatfield

Even though Norfolk's botanical garden, with its 155 acres of some of the largest collections of azaleas camellias, roses and rhododendrons on the East Coast, doesn't need any gilding of the lily, this year it brought in "Lantern Asia," a stunning exhibition of massive sculptures made from silk, steel and other eco-friendly materials with traditional Asian themes including nature, wildlife, architecture and ancient folklore. As you walk the one-mile circle where the display was set up you find pandas, dragons, a Taj Mahal and animals representing your Chinese birth year. The most amazing structure of the display, which came from China, Japan, India, Thailand, Korea, Myanmar and Singapore, is the four-story-high pagoda made from more than a million Chinese porcelain plates, cups, bowls and spoons that were each hand strung together with string right at the garden site. It will be re-created and re-strung when the exhibit travels next to Australia.

While the lantern display left in early May, you could come back to the garden for everything from the bonsai show and sale and the butterfly house opening in June, to the honey bee festival in August or the Monarch tag and release in September, among numerous other events that beautify an already gorgeous setting.

For an indoor display of beauty that you won't see in any other town, the Chrysler Museum of Art offers not only its collection of 30,000 objects, notably glass, representing the personal collection of Walter P. Chrysler, Jr., son of the founder of the Detroit Chrysler Corporation, but continuously changing exhibitions from other cities. Currently on loan from the Houston Museum of Fine Arts is a glass display by artist Norwood Viviano called "Cities: Departure and Deviation." It's a three-dimensional timeline showing the 400-year-old story of the rise and decline of urban industries. Instead of graphs, Viviano has blown 25 glass "cities" using each form to depict time, population density and moments of change. New York, for example, looks like a giant martini glass, in which the population has grown larger right up to today, while Flint, Michigan, resembles a test tube that closes up tight at the top; jobs have left town, so people have gone, too.

The Chrysler Museum is free, as is the connected Glass Studio across the street, where you can enjoy glassmaking demonstrations or learn to create your own work of art in classes and workshops or, on the third Thursday of every month, watch glass blowing as performance art along with music, drinks and food.

Speaking of food, this town is hopping. Luna Maya, for example, was opened by two sisters, Karla and Vivian Montano, from Bolivia. The sisters continue the tradition of their mother and grandmother by incorporating the unique family interpretation of Mexican dishes. The house specialties, tamales, can be presented in four different degrees of spiciness, from gentle to knock your socks off. The Stuffed Poblanos consists of roasted poblanos stuffed with rice, spicy (to your order) chicken, chorizo, chipotle enchilada sauce and topped with queso, for \$15 and is the coziest, most satisfying meal-in-a-bowl to be found, unless of course, you wander over to Field Guide on Granby Street.

Field Guide offers, along with lunch sandwiches and salads, a selection of rice bowls topped with everything from grilled tofu and avocado to barbecued beef brisket or chickpeas and almonds. The fun of the rice bowls is the choice of sauces: sweet and spicy yogurt, tomato ancho BBQ, Keshy Dijon, Lupo Hot Sauce (a homemade specialty in Norfolk), red or yellow curry. Among its original beverages is the Tennessee Slushy, with bourbon, Coke and citrus, for \$6.

The line outside the little cottage called "Handsome Biscuit" stretches long and feverishly hungry at breakfast time. Here, piled inside homemade sweet potato biscuits, are satisfying combinations of fried chicken, bacon, cheddar, red eye sausage and gravy -- the latter is just one breakfast biscuit, called "Hella Fitzgerald." "Boom Chick" is of course filled to overflowing with chicken salad, pecans, and mixed berry compote. "Hot Betty" is an over easy egg with seared greens, garlic, and that same Lupo hot sauce. Mustard greens are popular here, where you can add a dollop of caviar for \$2 to enjoy along with enormous glasses of orange juice and never-ending pots of hot coffee. And for pb&j aficionados, yes, you can even have a biscuit filled with peanut butter and jelly.

If the line is too long at Handsome Biscuit, a diner-style breakfast place called D'Egg can provide you with every kind of egg dish on the planet. Save room, though, for dinner at Norfolk's probably most elegant eating establishment: Todd Jurich's Bistro. A self-taught chef, Jurich left his native Pennsylvania for Norfolk "because it's warmer here," he smiled. Seafood is king here, but although you can find sautéed Alaskan halibut or roast Scottish salmon, the focus is on the joyous offerings of the local catches: hand harvested Eastern Shore oysters, She Crab soup, Chesapeake Bay soft-shell crab and crab-bacon slaw; pure Eastern Shore heaven.

Norfolk is proud of its local wines and just held its 10th annual Spring Town Point Virginia Wine Festival in a park on the waterfront along the Elizabeth River, to a sellout crowd. The townsfolk like to make it an all-day event, bringing their own gourmet picnics to the tables set up near the tasting tents. The lines to taste are long and slow, because once you're at the front, you taste all of the five or so wines available at each tent, leaving those behind you to wait longer than they should. It might be better to have guests come up for one wine at a time, returning when they wish for another and leaving more people to get to the front of the line.

There's no line at the Mermaid Winery on 22nd Street, which offers a sit-down tasting of five different wines from their own small lots of wines from Virginia and California grapes to wines from all over the world. If you order a tasting here, called a "flight," it is brought in metal flower vase-like stands with each glass in its separate holder. The West Coast Wine Flight, for example, includes a Chardonnay from Silver Buckle Cellars in Lodi, California; a pinot noir from J.k. Carriers in the Willamette Valley, Oregon, a cabernet sauvignon called Chasing Lions from Napa Valley, California, a syrah blend from Grochau Cellars "Guild Lot #10" in Columbia Valley, Washington, and a mourvedre from Groundworks in Paso Robles, California. A good idea during your "flight" might be to order the cheese plate from Mermaid, which name, incidentally, has been adopted for this town which sits along the river that opens eventually into Chesapeake Bay and finally into the Atlantic Ocean. And yes, you can order a meal here as well as a cheese plate, to go along with all that good wine.

Norfolk is the city where begins the Intercostal Waterway running all the way down to Florida. It's a lovely trip down, but seeing what's offered right here at the start of the whole thing, it might be a good idea to stay awhile right at Milemaker O and enjoy the scene before rushing off to the south.

The art, food, wine and ambience in Norfolk, Virginia, works



Photo 1 of 12

Softshell crab at Todd Jurich's Norfolk Bistro is wonderful *(Julie Hatfield)*



Photo 2 of 12

Chrysler Museum of Art dresses up Norfolk's downtown *(Julie Hatfield)*

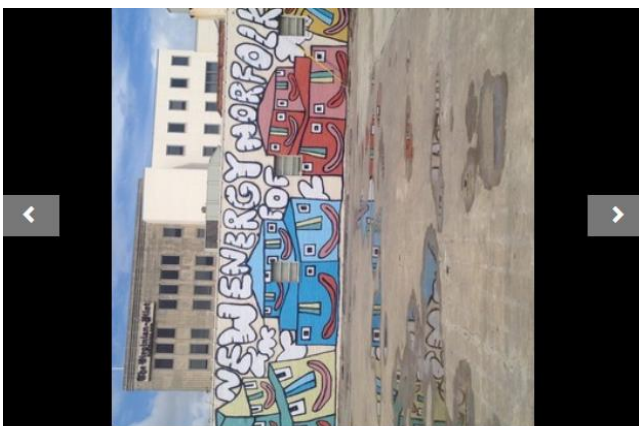


Photo 3 of 12

Norfolk enjoys its artistic graffiti *(Julie Hatfield)*



Photo 4 of 12

She-crab soup from Todd Jurich's Bistro - yum *(Julie Hatfield)*



Photo 5 of 12

A Norfolk back street is brightened with street art *(Julie Hatfield)*



Photo 6 of 12

Glass "people" outside Norfolk's Chrysler Museum *(Julie Hatfield)*



Photo 7 of 12

Formerly ugly buildings are dressed up by Norfolk artists *(Julie Hatfield)*



Photo 8 of 12

Tiffany flower vase at the Chrysler Museum of Art *(Chrysler Museum of Art)*



Photo 9 of 12

Even Bob's Gun Shop can be prettified with some street art *(Julie Hatfield)*

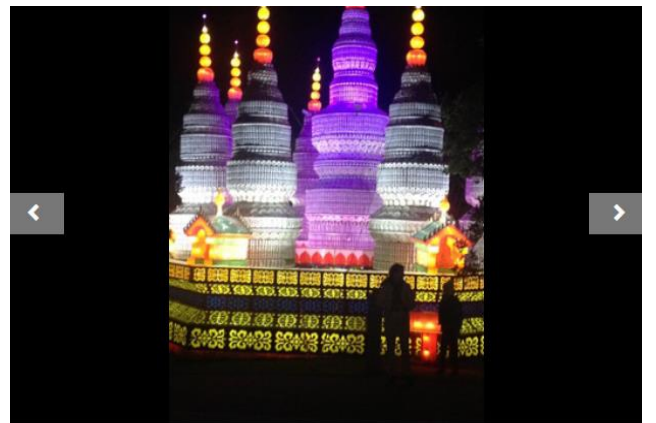


Photo 10 of 12

Pagoda is made from thousands of Chinese plates and cups *(Julie Hatfield)*

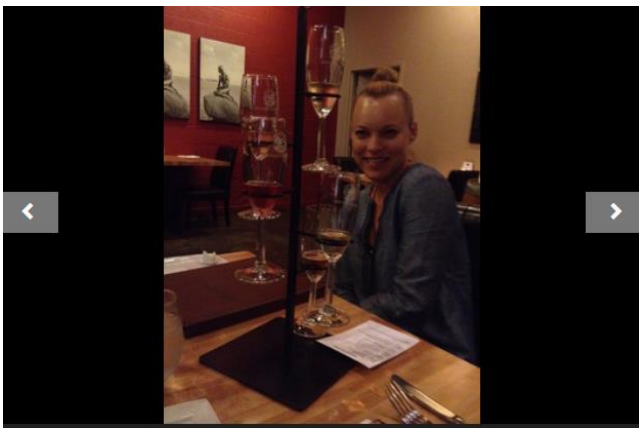


Photo 11 of 12

Writer Helen Gifford enjoys a Mermaid Winery "flight" (*Julie Hatfield*)



Photo 12 of 12

Chef Todd Jurich at his eponymous bistro (*Julie Hatfield*)