

GARDEN & GUN

Published on *Garden and Gun* (<http://gardenandgun.com>)

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by Steve Russell - December/January 2014

Goings-on in the South and beyond

Editors' Choice

New Orleans, Louisiana, December 19

Forget light shows, office parties, Christmas parades, and the obligatory trip to *The Nutcracker*. **Tales of the Toddy** is our kind of holiday celebration. An early Christmas gift courtesy of the creative team behind *Tales of the Cocktail*—the massive five-day drinks festival held each July—this annual afternoon ode to yuletide spirits is held at Generations Hall in New Orleans. The event brings together more than two dozen of the city's top mixologists from cocktail hot spots such as Allegro, Old Absinthe House, and Bar Tonique. Each participating bartender is challenged with crafting a **one-of-a-kind holiday-inspired drink** [1]; both hot and cold libations are fair game. The crowd chooses the winner, so sample as many offerings as you

like before tucking in to seasonal tasting menus from twenty-plus Big Easy eateries, such as Kingfish and Tujague's. Behind on your shopping? No worries. There's even a holiday market with gifts from some of the most eclectic retailers in town. Pretty sure they aren't giving out go-cups at the mall. talesofthecocktail.com^[2]

Alabama

Welcome Homes

In 1993, socially conscious Auburn University architecture professors Samuel Mockbee and Dennis K. Ruth founded Rural Studio to combine the beauty of modern architectural design with budget-friendly materials and a sense of community. More than 150 student-powered projects later, including a small-town library, city hall, and many homes, the program marks its double-decade anniversary with **Rural Studio at 20**, a series of special events that includes a December 6 lecture in Newbern. Notable alumni such as Jack Sanders' founder of Design Build Adventure, an innovative construction collaborative in Austin, Texas will share updates on current projects. Space is limited, so reserve your spot in advance. But you don't need to know a cantilever from a cow pie, or even make the trip to Alabama, to support the Studio's work. The online Adopt a 20K anniversary campaign offers twelve large and small ways to contribute to the building of eight new homes for just \$20,000 each—from donating a single two-by-four to funding an entire project. ruralstudio.org^[3]

Arkansas

Duck City, U.S.A.

That generations of duck hunters have had **Stuttgart** squarely in their sights isn't exactly a secret. Located at the Mississippi Flyway's famous funnel point, the town is the duck capital of the world for a reason. But this season promises to be one for the books. According to Canadian hatch reports, the skies could be even thicker with birds than usual. And a historic change to possession rules this year allows hunters to transport three times the daily limit, as opposed to two, meaning more time spent shotgun to shoulder. In anticipation, we asked two Stuttgart insiders for a few of their favorite hunts and haunts.

At first shooting light you'll find **Marty Simpson**, chairman of the **World's Championship Duck Calling Contest** (held each November since 1936), waders-deep in flooded green timber on Arkansas's **Grand Prairie**. For out-of-towners, he suggests a bunk at the sixteen-bedroom **CrossHeirs** lodge, complete with professional chefs, a huge communal den, and a pool table. Refuel post-hunt with the greasy good breakfast platter at local favorite **Pat's Place**.

If you're after something a bit heartier—dawn was hours ago—**John Stephens**, president of Stuttgart-based Rich-N-Tone Duck Calls, recommends **Sportsman's Drive-In**, where the best cheeseburger in town is stacked so high you won't even notice your spartan surroundings. Swing by **Mack's Prairie Wings** for any last-minute necessities before heading out to Bayou Meto's **Big Ditch**—for public hunting ground, you can't do better. Think a guide will help your chances? Stephens tips his camo cap to **Stuttgart Hunting Club**, aka Slick's, which has been serving hunters for a century. Hitting the target is still up to you. agfc.com^[4]

Florida

Painting the Town

December is art season in Miami, meaning the international art world's elite are headed to South Beach. **Art Basel** (December 5-8), the massive fair now in its twelfth year, attracts hundreds of contemporary artists, dealers, and collectors, not to mention spin-off shows, making it difficult to know where to begin. To help first-timers get down to the good stuff, Megan Riley, director of external affairs for Miami's **Bass Museum of Art**, shares a few must-see stops. **Art Public** takes over Collins Park with outdoor sculptures, interactive performances, and site-specific installations bringing top talent to the masses. For a truly one-of-a-kind show, hit **Untitled**, an immersive pop-up artist market built on the sand. Finally, explore the new **Pérez Art Museum Miami** overlooking Biscayne Bay. Between the sixty-five-foot hanging gardens and the vast permanent collection reflecting Miami's immigrant roots, the museum alone could fill an entire day. Just remember to pay it forward when you spot a Basel beginner next year. artbasel.com^[5]

Georgia

Get Lucky

For an extra boost of good fortune this New Year, add the **Seminole pea** to your hoppin' John pot. Cultivated exclusively on a thin strip of marshy coast below Savannah, this tiny mahogany-colored pea with a rich, nutty flavor was the go-to New Year's legume for centuries. The variety had dwindled to the brink of extinction by the early 1990s, until local farmer John Stevens (now deceased) championed its revival. Today, Meredith and Laura Devendorf, who worked alongside Stevens, tend four acres of Seminoles at **Dunham Farms**, their family's coastal Georgia plantation turned inn in Sunbury. Pick up a bag of the heritage peas at the property's store anytime before New Year's Day, or order them online. The bags come in two sizes, complete with a mix for serving a crowd of ten or twenty. All that's missing is a heaping helping of greens. dunhamfarms.com^[6]

Kentucky

Horse Play

Galloping into the void between a horse show and a rodeo, the **Snowball Series Mounted Games** (December 7-8, January 4-5) at the Kentucky Horse Park, in Lexington, features a series of quirky competitions for riders and their mounts. Relay races and speed tests dominate, with teams making mad dashes to win whimsically named events such as Hug a Mug, Rubber Ducky, and Speed Weavers. In the Windsor Castle race, a group of riders strive to assemble the pieces of a small castle, dunk a ball into a bucket, and steer their steeds while vaulting on and off their saddles. Open to participants of every skill level, the laid-back games combine the showmanship of traditional eventing with a more free-spirited sense of fun—but don't let the offbeat antics fool you. There is some serious talent at work here. kyhorsepark.com^[7]

Maryland

Seafoodies

Don't worry, the National Aquarium's seafood-focused **Fresh Thoughts Sustainable Dining Series** isn't pulling ingredients from the tanks. The after-hours, four-course feast

overlooking Baltimore's glittering Inner Harbor seeks to edify diners on responsible fishing practices that will help preserve our oceans. The first of five 2014 dinners takes place January 21 and includes a cocktail reception followed by a meal of fresh seafood prepared by chef Joe Cotton of the aquarium's Harbor Market Catering. Both the chef and conservation experts walk guests through each course. It's forks up at 6:30 p.m., but arrive a bit early to tour the aquarium's five levels, including the new Blacktip Reef exhibit. aqua.org^[8]

Mississippi

Vibrant Vision

The Gulf Coast contemporary artist Carl Joe Williams describes his works as "symphonies of colors." Indeed, the paintings and sculptures that flow from his New Orleans studio imbue everyday scenes with the majestic glow and geometric patterns of stained-glass windows—even if his canvases are repurposed doors or wooden pallets. A gifted musician, Williams often folds music into his art, creating sound installations to accompany his paintings or letting a specific rhythm direct the composition. Experience the effect when the Ohr-O'Keefe Museum of Art, in Biloxi, mounts **Carl Joe Williams: Shades of Perception**, an exhibit of twenty-five works in its Gallery of African-American Art. A reception will be announced closer to the December 10 opening. georgeohr.org^[9]

North Carolina

Table Talk

It's hard to avoid an Ashley Christensen eatery in Raleigh—the multitasking chef has opened five buzz-worthy spots since 2008, including Poole's Diner and Fox Liquor Bar—but it still takes guts to name your new restaurant **Death & Taxes**. Turns out the moniker is inspired by the building's former occupants—a funeral home and a bank. The menu, however, has roots in a trip Christensen took to Uruguay with a pack of Southern chefs and pit masters known as the Fatback Collective, and centers on wood-fire cooking and shared platters of meats, seafood, and vegetables. "Cooking with wood and coals has such a beautiful simplicity and results in such singular flavor," says Christensen, who has equipped Death & Taxes with an open kitchen so diners can witness the cooking style firsthand. Waiting for a table? Head to the basement bar—built around the preserved bank vault—for craft cocktails and a cellar-like vibe. ac-restaurants.com^[10]

Oklahoma

Cowboy Up

By the time North America's top cowboys and cowgirls qualify for the International Professional Rodeo Association's **International Finals Rodeo** (January 17-19), held at the State Fairground Arena in Oklahoma City, they've most likely spent a good chunk of their previous winnings on aspirin and bandages. No matter; they'll pull on their boots once more to finally settle who's the best of the best in eight rollicking events—bareback riding, saddle bronc riding, bull riding, steer wrestling, team roping, tie-down roping, and for the cowgirls, barrel racing and breakaway roping. With a total of \$225,000 in prize money on the line, the action never stops. ipra-rodeo.com^[11]

South Carolina

Grub Crawl

With inspired chefs and a roster of new field-to-fork restaurants, Greenville is the latest Southern city to earn a reputation as a breakout dining destination. Not sure where to start your culinary exploration? Greenville History Tours' new food tour, **Tastes of the South**, provides a palate-pleasing sampler of the scene. Held every Saturday, the two-hour midday excursion takes twenty participants on a walking tour of five of the Upstate city's top spots in the historic West End neighborhood: Soby's, High Cotton, Ford's Oyster House, Breakwater, and Smoke on the Water. Each stopover includes a visit with the chef and a tasting of elevated riffs on iconic Southern dishes such as fried green tomatoes, shrimp and grits, gumbo, and pulled pork sandwiches. By the time you take that last bite, you'll be an expert on Greenville cuisine—and very well fed. greenvillehistorytours.com^[12]

Tennessee

Blues Idol

Aspiring bluesmen searching for that big break no longer need barter their souls for a place in the spotlight. Instead, more than two hundred up-and-coming blues acts make their way to Memphis for the annual **International Blues Challenge** (January 21-25). Over the last thirty years, the event has grown into the country's biggest showcase for blues musicians seeking a wider audience—notable alumni include the likes of Edlen Brent and Susan Tedeschi. Clubs up and down legendary Beale Street host performers for the quarterfinal and semifinal rounds on Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday nights. Finalists take to the main stage at the historic Orpheum Theater on Saturday night to compete for cash prizes and guaranteed gigs at festivals across the country. The whole thing is simply so much fun, it's hard to imagine anyone having the blues. blues.org/ibc^[13]

Texas

Personal Shopping

Clothiers **Sid and Ann Mashburn** have amassed an army of loyal customers devoted to their particular classic-with-a-wink style, so it was only a matter of time before they expanded beyond their flagship Atlanta storefronts. The new Houston satellite—located on prime retail real estate at the corner of Westheimer and River Oaks—occupies a restored mid-century modern shopping center. To transform the space, the Mashburns enlisted the design talents of Atlanta residential architect Stan Dixon. "We love Stan because he is not a traditional commercial designer," Ann says. "We want to make our stores feel like home." Inside the combined his-and-hers shop, you'll find everything from Ann's signature shirtdresses for the girls to fine Italian suits and dress shirts for the guys. If you need a quick hem or a tuck, the store's in-house tailor is happy to arrange a fitting. Look for additional locations in New York, Washington, D.C., and Los Angeles in 2014. sidmashburn.com^[14]

Virginia

Broad Strokes

Painter Ryan McGinness is famous for his Warhol-esque affinity for pop culture symbols—from graffiti to corporate logos to everyday signage. So when the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts commissioned him to create an installation based on the 5,000 years of art in its extensive

collection, it generated some serious attention. The resulting sixteen-panel painting, aptly titled *Art History Is Not Linear*, debuted in 2010 and remains one of the museum's most talked-about pieces. Now, a new exhibit reveals the start-to-finish creative process behind the project. Occupying three separate galleries, **Ryan McGinness: Studio Visit** (January 25–October 19) offers a glimpse into McGinness's approach, including his early sketches of many of the works represented in the painting's 200-plus icons. As a bonus, the show surveys McGinness's Virginia Beach roots and early artistic endeavors, bringing the story truly full circle. vmfa.state.va.us^[15]

Washington, D.C.

Sud-Sational

As beverage director for D.C.'s popular Neighborhood Restaurant Group (ChurchKey, Birch & Barley), Greg Engert has proved he knows a thing or two about beer?good beer. He's taking the suds-centric approach to the next level with **Bluejacket**, the just-opened brewery housed in a 7,000-square-foot former boiler factory. Veteran hops master Megan Parisi crafts fifteen made-in-house brews, including a handful of IPAs, a rotation of seasonal blends, and Belgian-style beers and lambics?plus five additional cask ales. Try the tasting room or reserve a table in the 200-seat dining room, where offerings range from smart bar snacks to rib-sticking mains such as rotisserie chicken with pretzel stuffing and beef short ribs with Gruyère spaetzle. bluejacketdc.com^[16]

West Virginia

Super Soaker

Even when snow is piled high outdoors, the natural mineral pools in Berkeley Springs hold steady at a balmy 74.3 degrees, just as they have since Native Americans and early colonists such as a young George Washington "took the waters" there centuries ago. The annual **Spa Feast** (January 24–26) provides an introduction to the staggering number of relaxation-related services in a town that boasts three times as many massage therapists as lawyers. Not only do the spas offer discounts, but a Saturday expo at the Ice House arts center also lets attendees sample massage, reflexology, facials, you name it, for \$1 a minute. Afterward, visit the downtown shops or reserve a seat at the Highlawn Inn's multicourse wine dinner. If you're not too relaxed, that is. berkeleysprings.com/newtbs/spa-feast^[17]
