

## COOKING

From page M19

about my tortoiselike pace. “But cutting the vegetables the same size is crucial.”

I layer my evenly sliced potatoes in a Le Creuset then “drown” them in cream. More cream and more butter, I soon understand, are the secret to French cooking. Clarke puts the potatoes into the oven and the pot of ratatouille on the stove then drops a hunk of raw beef in front of us. “Choose your flavoring,” she instructs. I feel like I’ve been tasked with a “Top Chef” challenge. My fellow students all go with the classic steak tartare accoutrements — capers, cornichon, Dijon, mustard, parsley — a combination that has never appealed to me.

“A recipe should not dictate taste,” reminds Clarke. “Trust your own palette. If you think it tastes good, you’ve succeeded.”

I decide to give my tartare an Italian twist, mixing my chopped filet with pesto, Parmesan, basil, toasted pine nuts and sun-dried tomato. When we sit for lunch on the wisteria-shaded patio, I can’t help but feel impressed by our work. The preparation was surprisingly simple, and the result is absolutely delicious. I share bites of my Italian tartare and grin as my fellow cooking mates compliment the flavors and texture.

Our kitchen time — usually four to five hours a day — gets broken up with daily excursions to fishmongers, butchers and markets, as well as fairy tale-worthy villages. Success in the kitchen, I learn, is heavily dependent on the quality of your ingredients.

One day, Held drives us 20 minutes to Antibes. We’re each given 50 euros and instructed to purchase a vegetable we’ve always wanted to learn to cook. The produce in France seems superior to anything I’ve seen even in my neighborhood Whole Foods. I grab a head of romanesco, a psychedelic-looking cross between cauliflower and broccoli; someone else selects a bunch of wild aspara-



Courtesy photo

Time to eat at La Pitchoune, former vacation cottage of Julia and Paul Child and current home of the Courageous Cooking School.

gus; and Held grabs squash blossoms. Before we leave, we stop at the butcher and watch as he decapitates a plump poulet noir, a black-footed chicken from Burgundy. “Dinner!” Held says.

That afternoon we divide into team coq au vin and team beef bourguignon, two dishes that have always seemed beyond my culinary capabilities. I try to cheat and ask Clarke which is simpler, and she assures me both are “easy” and identical in technique.

“They’re both peasant dishes,” she says. “Nothing complicated about them. It’s really just a choice of working with chicken or beef.”

I decide to go team coq au vin and hours later find myself massaging a whole chicken. Clarke walks me through how to find just the right place to “dislocate” joints and avoid “shrapnel” as I break the bird down into eight pieces, leaving the skin on for extra flavor.

“Don’t listen to Julia,” is one of Clarke’s favorite sayings. We may be cooking in the recipe

queen’s kitchen, but that doesn’t mean her taste and methods reign. Traditionally, at this point in our dish Child would have added bacon and mushrooms to our pot of chicken. But Clarke prefers to pan-fry the mushrooms and add them later so they don’t lose flavor. I admit, I would agree. We also break tradition and add white wine rather than red to the dish. “No one wants to eat a purple-grayish bird,” Clarke explains.

Our final evening, Held leads us through an al fresco Champagne tasting, a fitting way to celebrate all we’ve learned. We raise our glasses and toast the freewheeling spirit of Julia. And I add an extra “cheers” to Held and Clarke for helping a timid cook find her courage in the kitchen.

*Jen Murphy is a writer based in Boulder, Colo. She contributes regularly to the Chronicle’s Luxe Life magazine, as well as writes the Wall Street Journal’s “What’s Your Workout?” column. She previously was travel editor at Food & Wine magazine.*



Courtesy Robin Soslow

This fall, El Dorado, Arkansas, debuted Murphy Arts District, or MAD, in a bid to become “the Festival City of the South.”

# Southern swagger

## S.C., Arkansas towns get reboot

By Robin Soslow  
FOR THE EXPRESS-NEWS

Whether you’re looking for culture, cuisine, live music or a healthy break from the big city, these Southern towns offer plenty new to see, hear and do.

### Greenville, South Carolina

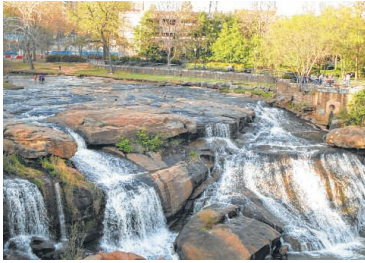
This city park feels like a dream: a tranquil river studded with grand rocky waterfalls, a curvy-cool walking bridge, colorful tiered gardens walled with stone, romantic shade trees, a performance stage. And it’s just steps from a storybook downtown: tasty, trendy yet affordable restaurants and bars with delightfully decorated indoor and terrace seating; galleries and boutiques (even a custom jeans shop); free street concerts several times a week; and sidewalk sculptures that spin, shimmer and make you smile.

Welcome to Greenville. The South’s new cultural and outdoor hotspot is powered by passionate chefs, artists, bike

designers, moonshine distillers, gourmet smoothie crafters and other entrepreneurs. Locals and Europeans who moved here to work for Michelin and BMW received the support needed to succeed. Now America’s fourth fastest-growing city, Greenville makes a happy new vacation spot.

A few blocks from the river at a pretty campus called Heritage Green, a free art museum displays works by all three Wyeths and revered nature painters. Interactives fill the children’s museum. The history center’s surprises include an exhibition of superhero posters. An old Coca-Cola bottling plant now holds the new Carolina Music Museum, displaying restored, playable 18th- and 19th-century pianos and harpsichords.

Pleasure and pro cyclists pedal the 21-mile Swamp Rabbit Trail, a rail-to-trail project leading to the cute town of Travelers Rest. Five miles from downtown, Paris Mountain, a stray peak of the Blue Ridge, offers hiking and a high-elevation surprise: its own Lake Placid.



Courtesy Robin Soslow

**Greenville, South Carolina's city park features a tranquil river studded with grand rocky waterfalls.**

Fueling the easy with the Lazy Goat's artful small plates, Pomegranate on Main's Persian delicacies, Anchorage's local farm fare and Swamp Rabbit Cafe's homespun goodies. Lodging includes the European-inspired bicycling-themed Swamp Rabbit Inn, opened by one of many Chicagoans who've relocated here. Hoteliers are racing to keep up with demand. The close-by international airport and free downtown trolley add to Greenville's friendly atmosphere.

That curved bridge, named Liberty, is held in the air by a single cable. It crosses over the river and gardens to another pleasant surprise: a tall red sculpture resembling Gumby.

**El Dorado, Arkansas**

Fortune-seekers built the town after prospectors struck oil by the Ouachita River in 1921. Now music-lovers are coming for El Dorado's new act.

This fall, aiming to be "the Festival City of the South," El Dorado launched MAD, its Murphy Arts District. A 2,000-seat music hall, cabaret lounge and Griffin, a farm-to-table bistro, have revived a century-old auto showroom. At its outdoor 8,000-capacity amphitheater, Brad Paisley, ZZ Top, Chase Bryant, Smokey Robinson and others have showcased the superstar acoustics, lighting and stage.

El Dorado civic leaders such as philanthropist

Madison Murphy recruited pros from the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, Marvel Comics and House of Blues to transform the sleepy town into a rocking goldmine. This National Main Street award-winner's new foundation was paved by Vertis and Richard Mason, who moved from South Texas in 1975 to restore derelict properties. From Texas they brought the flying horse sign that tops Laredo Grill and antique rail cars housing the diner at country-cosmopolitan Union Square Guest Quarters.

"No One Knew Where Woodstock Was, Either" proclaims posters around the town, which reminds me a bit of Marfa. Between MAD and PJ's coffeehouse/beer 'n blues hall, residents Sue Pitts and Rick Williams say, "There's great music most evenings, and we're glad visitors are coming to hear it."

**Hot Springs, Arkansas**

This town has tapped its spectacular natural pure springs since the 1800s, and its Bathhouse Row of intriguing architecture backing up to spring-studded hills earned National Park status. For the last decade

or so, those buildings have been restored and reopened as modernized spas, a history center where therapy cabinets and cannonlike jets look downright scary, and recently, Superior Bathhouse Brewery and Distillery — the world's first brewery to use thermal spring water as a key ingredient. You'll detect chocolate roasted malt in the Great Rock Bock.

A skyscraper once filled with doctors who long ago wrote prescriptions for thermal spa treatments recently reopened as The Waters. Its clinical-looking hallways and marble staircase were preserved, but the rooms have been beautifully redesigned and enlarged. Historic Arlington Hotel, where Capone vacationed and oversaw illegal moonshine operations, is gearing up for a

\$50 million renovation. A new wellness wave has flooded the city. Hiking and biking trails have been expanded; routes switchback up lovely shaded slopes. The owners of new Spa City Cycling rent bikes and lead road and mountain rides.

Refueling choices now include elevated cuisine. The Avenue's chef is already winning awards for sumptuous Southern delicious-meets-nutritious creations sourced from fresh local ingredients, such as chilled carrot soup with cilantro, smoked mushroom polenta and coconut milk ice cream with lime curd.

The Gangster Museum of America now runs tours in bigger quarters with working roulette wheel and slot machines (called "gaming," not gambling, to stay on the right

side of state law) and cool selfie stations (clutch a "Chicago Typewriter" machine gun while posing with Al Capone). And while The Ohio Club now features a new gang of local performers, the huge mirror-mantel with its life-sized wooden maidens and other decor retains its Prohibition speakeasy allure.

About that authentic spring water: Each day, a million gallons averaging 143 degree flow from dozens of springs on Hot Springs Mountain. The waters originate from ancient rainfall that seeped into the earth picking up minerals along its journey. Bottoms up!

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**UPCOMING**

**African American Book Festival 2018:** George Washington Carver Museum, Cultural and Genealogy Center, 1165 Angelina St., Austin, austin.texas.gov/carvermuseum. This festival will honor classic African-American works, highlight contemporary novels, and feature speakers representing a wide range of titles, genres and areas of writing. Free and open to the public. 9:30 a.m.-5:30 p.m. June 23.

**SAVE THE DATE**

**Bastrop Patriotic Festival:** Fisherman's Park, 1200 Willow St., Bastrop, bastropchamber.com. This red, white and blue celebration will offer a variety of games, contests, food and music, a car show, a pet parade and a fireworks display to close out the festival. 7 p.m.-midnight June 29; 10 a.m.-10 p.m. June 30.

**El Paso Ice Cream Fest:** Downtown Convention Center Plaza, One Civic Center Plaza, El Paso, 915-534-0600, icecreamfestep.com. Features local, regional and national ice cream brands, food vendors, retail vendors, live music, photo ops and family games. \$5-\$15. Noon-8 p.m. July 1.

bands, swing dancing and The Cotton Club. Features live musical performances, poetry readings and dancing. \$35-\$50. 7:30 p.m.-1 a.m. June 30.

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