

FEATURE

16 Under-the-Radar Southern Food Destinations

By Zagat Staff | March 23, 2016



American dining is about much more than big-city chefs and fussy small plates; in fact, sometimes it's in those smaller, off-the-beaten path destinations where you find the most soulful experiences. In the first installment of our new series, we're exploring the best under-the-radar dining destinations across America. Our first stop is the Southeastern United States — a region that produced some of the only indigenous cuisines that exist in America today. From Cajun and Creole specialties to

Lowcountry cooking of the Carolinas to droolworthy BBQ joints, the Southeastern U.S. is stacked with hidden gems from Mississippi to Florida. Here are 16 destinations to visit on your next Southern road trip.



Greenville, SC

Greenville is often overshadowed by the Antebellum glamour and decadent Lowcountry dishes of South Carolina's major food center, Charleston. What it lacks in population and James Beard awards, it makes up for stunning Blue Ridge Mountain scenery, small-town charm and fantastic fare. It's like the perfect lovechild of Chucktown and Asheville.

Walk down Main Street's idyllic mile-and-a-half drag that houses well over 100 mostly locally owned restaurants including seasonal Roost Restaurant, regional American Grocery and a number of spots owned by multiple Beard dinner participants Table 301 Restaurant Group: Soby's New Southern Cuisine, Nosedive, Passerelle Bistro. In between meals, stop have a drink at Dark Corner Distillery, a production center and tasting room making handcrafted moonshine right on the strip.

The city is so hot that's it's been attracting satellite locations of Asheville favorites like Tupelo Honey Cafe and soon-to-come, nationally acclaimed Biscuit Head.

Although Southern cuisine is obviously the most widespread, the city flaunts international appeal, as well. Snack on Mediterranean small plates with influences spanning from Spain and Italy to North Africa and the Middle East at chic riverfront spot The Lazy Goat. Slurp on noodles and fragrant broth at one of several pho shops. Visit a sushi joint or Jamaican restaurant, then head over to one of excellent bakeries like French patisserie Le Grand, as well as cupcake and dessert bar The Chocolate Moose.

– Sara Ventiera



Photo by: Couper Co

Athens, GA

Some might associate this college town squarely with sports and music (it's the hometown of '90s band R.E.M., among others). But prolific chef, restaurateur, cookbook author and television judge Hugh Acheson (*Top Chef*, etc.) launched his future restaurant empire with Five & Ten, a restaurant in the Five Points neighborhood that combined Southern seasonality and tradition with a Continental emphasis on technique and refinement. But since that opening in 2000, Athens has grown into a respectable foodie destination in its own right.

Get breakfast at Mama's Boy or a Spanish-inspired meal at The National, or you could have one of the town's most iconic dishes by tucking into a Golden Bowl – a surprisingly satisfying jumble of fried tofu, veggies, rice and nutritional yeast – at The Grit. And Athens has recently gotten into the game of brewing, serving as home base for Terrapin Beer and Creature Comforts, both available at beer bar Trappeze.

Dig into quirky Pan-Latin at Cali 'n' Titos and its related La Puerta del Sol, while dive bars like the Manhattan, the World Famous and Flicker draw artistic crowds.

– *Christopher Hassiotis*



Winter Park, FL

Set just miles away from the mega-malls and theme parks of Orlando, Winter Park couldn't feel farther from the tourist-filled home of Disney World. Historic hotels, charming shops and Spanish moss-covered oak trees line the Downtown streets.

The town itself may be small, but the restaurant scene is killer. The city is home to two of Florida's top toques, husband-and-wife team James and Julie Petrakis. They've garnered national acclaim and multiple James Beard "Best Chef" nominations for their upscale new American restaurant The Ravenous Pig and their newer Southern-influenced public house, Cask & Larder. Last spring, they teamed up with charcuterie magician Rhys Gawlak for laid-back, snout-to-tail sandwich shop Swine & Sons Provisions.

John Rivers, the man responsible for making Central Floridians crazy for Texas-style 'cue with 4 Rivers Smokehouse (there's a Winter Park locale of the chainlet), has continued expanding upon the city's already fantastic canon of Southern cuisine when he opened the Coop, a picniclike place featuring legit fried chicken and comfort staples. Sunday mornings, there's upbeat brunch go-to Dexter's of Winter Park.

High-end Indian is available at local hot spot Mynt by restaurateur Sonny Corda, offering dishes like smoked baby eggplant in peanut-sesame-coconut sauce. And for plant-based diners, Ethos Vegan Kitchen can throw down on a national scale.

— Sara Ventiera



Photo by: Alleia

Chattanooga, TN

Packed with dining options and boasting a revitalized Downtown, Chattanooga's a dining gem. There's more to the city's culinary landscape than just being the birthplace of MoonPies. More than most towns around, Chattanooga is embracing its local food resources. James Beard Award semifinalist Daniel Lindley's restaurants like 5th & Taylor and Alleia are top draws, while funky dives like Good Dog and The Bitter Alibi make sure the city retains local flavor, and treats like Milk & Honey and Farmer's Daughter rep local farms in their food.

-- *Christopher Hassiotis*



Lake Charles, LA

Other parts of the Pelican State have their culinary specialties, but here in the heart of Cajun country, it's all about the boudin. This pale sausage (pronounced "boo-Dan") comes out the tradition of boucherie, the day Cajun-French families would butcher a whole pig; boudin provided a way to use up every last pig part. And, since this is rice-growing country, some of that was thrown in to stretch the pork.

Though once viewed as a poor man's food, boudin's stock has risen in recent years. These days, there's a thriving network of mom-and-pop joints in Lake Charles and beyond specializing in this homegrown product, each with a slightly different recipe. Smoked and spicy varieties are common, and so are artery-clogging yet delicious fried boudin balls. Creative spins might include boudin stuffed with alligator or crawfish. Visitors to Lake Charles should check out the Southwest Louisiana Boudin Trail website and map for the best places to indulge in this local specialty.

In between sausage binges, don't skip a visit to the Bayou Rum distillery in nearby Lacassine. You can sign up to tour the slick facility to learn how the spirit is made from Louisiana sugarcane, followed by, of course, a tasting.

-- Jenny Miller



Tupelo, MS

The modest town of Tupelo's made its name a number of ways over the years — as a stopover on the way to Memphis or New Orleans, for example, and also as the birthplace of Elvis Presley. And though the town still pulls most of its tourists on a pilgrimage to see where the King spent his early years, it's becoming more and more a place worth visiting for its food as well, with well over 150 restaurants packed into a few square miles. The Blue Canoe turns out big-city Southern cuisine and offers a sizable microbrew selection, while the Neon Pig — a butcher, convenience store and food counter — sources locally for its out-of-sight burgers and nightly specials.

Harvey's, Woody's and Park Heights satisfy the craving for an old-school steakhouse, while Main Street's Kermit's Outlaw Kitchen and the nearby Johnnie's Drive-In play up the Americana factor. And you wouldn't be this close to Memphis without barbecue: Crossroads, Papa V's, Bishop's and Bar-B-Q By Jim all warrant a visit.

-- *Christopher Hassiotis*



Bentonville, AR

Bentonville, Arkansas has long had notoriety as the birthplace of Wal-Mart, but it was not until 2012, sparked by the opening of the Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art (funded by Wal-Mart heiress Alice Walton) that the culinary scene took shape, driven by talented chefs and locally sourced fare. Today alongside gastropub Tusk and Trotter, helmed by an alum of France's acclaimed La Mirande, and the High South style of Eleven, located in Crystal Bridges, you'll find The Hive (pictured), serving James Beard semifinalist and Arkansas boy Matthew McClure's "refined country cuisine": hominy grits with mascarpone and parsley, crispy pig ears and the like. The buzz has also attracted the RopeSwing development group, who among other ventures is collaborating with Iron Chef Arkansas winner Matthew Cooper on The Belfry, set to serve contemporary fare in a historic 111-year-old church Downtown.

– *Vanita Salisbury*



Photo by: Lanterr

Chapel Hill, NC

This small town plays big in its food scene, boasting some of the best chefs in the Southeast. No, really – two-time James Beard finalist chef Bill Smith serves up Southern classics at Crook’s Corner and Best Chef: Southeast 2011 Andrea Reusing creates Asian-meets-NC-magic nightly at Lantern. Then there’s legendary soul-food stop Mama Dip’s, drinks at The Crunkleton, one of *Southern Living’s* Best 100 Bars, and a classic milkshake from Sutton’s Drugstore on Franklin Street.

Home cooks have it good here too. There’s an emphasis on clean eating – you’ll find no shortage of green juices and kombuchas in Chapel Hill cooler cases – and locals shop at co-op Weaver Street Market (one location is on Market Street, the other in neighboring Carrboro) or at the Chapel Hill Farmers Market, or regional local-focused chain The Fresh Market. Additionally, this university town boasts a Whole Foods Market of its very own, proving that it is indeed the Berkeley of the South.

-- *Stephanie Burt*



Decatur, AL

This town's location on the banks of the Tennessee River means that in addition to the expected regional barbecue, you'll also find a good amount of seafood offered in charming dockside settings. The regional favorite Big Bob Gibson's two locations top local lists for barbecue, while Hickory Stick and Whitt's also smoke a mean hog. Simp McGhee's looks further south for inspiration, serving Cajun and Creole classics alongside steak and oysters, while the Albany Bistro pulls on European and Southern traditions for contemporary upscale fare (pictured). A strong Mexican population means excellent restaurants like Camino Real and El Palomino, and the Hard Dock Cafe makes for a great sunset meal, situated smack dab in the middle of the river.

Head across the river to the Limestone Bay Trading Company for Southern fare in Mooresville. Nearby Muscle Shoals and Florence also have a number of restaurants worth a visit.

-- *Christopher Hassiotis*



Columbia, SC

Known more for college football and state politics, this city is nevertheless on the verge of a breakout when it comes to good eats. What was once the holdout of barbecue, sleepy meat-and-threes and plenty of bar fare for the college set is transforming through a small yet committed group of individuals. Spurring the movement was urban farm City Roots, growing more every year and now hosting farm dinners through its Farm to Table Events spin-off. Downtown spots Bourbon and Motor Supply Co. Bistro, along with local brewer River Rat Brewery, are celebrating a growing sense of place, and basement-bar The Whig makes local basil cocktails while newcomer The Warmouth offers catfish stew.

A strong Slow Food chapter has shored things up, along with the year-round Soda City Market, which has become one of the most attended farmer's markets in the state, and now big names are being attracted to the city, from Oak Table, a sister of Indigo Restaurant's Group award-winning Oak Steakhouse in Charleston, to Rise Gourmet Goods & Bakeshop from NYC's Sarah Simmons of City Grit and Birds & Bubbles.

-- *Stephanie Burt*



Mobile, AL

Hugging the Gulf of Mexico, it's no surprise that seafood is a focus here. Beautiful oysters (when you can get them) from Murder Point Oysters a short drive away in Irvington show up on the best Mobile tables during the season, and old-school Wintzell's Oyster House has it all, from oysters to shrimp to Redfish Bienville over Cajun rice.

Farm-to-table, a worn out phrase elsewhere, is still relatively new in Mobile, but no one is doing it better than chef Chris Rainosek of The Noble South Downtown. The deviled eggs are topped with salty roe, the vegetables sides strong enough to make a meal of their own and the seasonal fish always a go-to entree choice. It's evident he has strong relationships with his fishermen and farmers.

Beyond seafood, Mobile, home of a decadent Mardi Gras festival of its own, is also the home of decadent Southern desserts, including the cake balls of Cream & Sugar Cafe in the Oakleigh Garden District, anything at Pollman's Bake Shop and, if you want to eat your dessert for breakfast, bananas Foster French Toast at Spot of Tea.

-- *Stephanie Burt*



Photo by: Megan Teague

Greensboro, NC

In the heart of the Piedmont's rolling green fields, the city's best food comes from building on this proximity to the farms. The Greensboro Farmers Curb Market is extensive enough year-round to shop for the week on a Saturday morning, offering everything from slabs of award-winning Goat Lady Dairy cheese to fresh flowers, heirloom vegetables and responsibly raised meat from its 60 annual vendors (with more seasonally). Local chefs tap into this bounty too, including author and chef Jay Pierce of Marshall Free House, who is back in Greensboro after a stint in Charlotte, chef Leigh Hesling of Green Valley Grill (GVG) and Print Works Bistro, who enthusiastically promotes heirloom vegetables on local television, and even baker Maxie B's, who uses many local foodstuffs, including milk from Homeland Creamery.

Although wine still rules this more traditional town — GVG has extensive *Wine Spectator* awards, for example — brewer Natty Greene's helped anchor a Downtown restaurant revitalization, which is gaining steam now, with restaurants such as 1618 Seafood Grille opening a second Downtown location. 1618 is also where you'll find a strong cocktail list to match its menu, one of Greensboro's most innovative. Still, Greensboro is a town that embraces the classic but nevertheless knows how to do it well.

— *Stephanie Burt*



Photo by: Andrew Cebulka

Sullivan's Island, SC

Located minutes from the historic Charleston peninsula, this island has a laid-back elegance that shines through in its elevated beach fare. Visitors pack their coolers with gourmet sandwiches from the Co-Op or wait until after swimming and visit Poe's Tavern, a mainstay on the island for years that was one of the first in the area to serve house-ground beef (so you can get that burger rare). Another locale welcoming sandy feet is Fiery Ron's Home Team BBQ, one of three Home Teams in the area. This one is open-air with a perpetually busy bar serving plenty of frozen Game Changers cocktails and smoked wings, but the consistently excellent barbecue menu attracts a diverse crowd, from families to retirees.

Other well-known island mainstays include local favorite High Thyme Cuisine, but by far the most representative of the island's easy elegance is the Obstinate Daughter, a relative newcomer on the Sullivan's scene but helmed by well-known Charleston chef Jacques Larson, whose approach to local seafood is primarily inspired by the Italian coast. Griddled octopus, oysters and wood-fired pizzas are go-tos, and dessert at the downstairs Beardcat's Sweet Shop can introduce the whole family to the joys of gelato made fresh with local ingredients.

— *Stephanie Burt*



Photo by: Chris Jay

Shreveport, LA

Less than a three-hour scenic drive from Dallas, Shreveport and adjoining Bossier City are big draws because of their many casinos. But they're also foodie destinations with plenty of Creole and Cajun favorites if you know where to look, plus lots of good ol' Southern comfort food. Shrimp and grits from Abby Singer's Bistro is spot-on and Ernest's Orleans Restaurant and Cocktail Lounge is home to marinated crab claws, a signature dish that draws people from all over the region.

Cajun and Creole influences can be found even in unlikely places, like Kim's Seafood & Po-Boy, a spot for both shrimp and catfish sandwiches and Vietnamese food made with crawfish. Craving a muffaletta *and* pizza all at once? You're in luck at Cascio's Market Bistro, home to the Pizzaletta, a delicious cheesy hybrid. Boudin balls, made from the popular Louisiana type of sausage, are worth a stop at Bergeron's Boudin and Cajun Meats. Fried seafood, of course, is extremely popular and Shockley's Fish n' Fixins has some of the best catfish in town (pictured above), while Herby-K's is famous for its flattened shellfish known as the Shrimp Buster.

The many drive-thru daiquiri spots are also a novelty that seems strange to nonlocals, but they're potent and often come with crazy names, especially at any of the Cajun Daiquiris locations. Just make sure to wait until you get back to your hotel before imbibing.

-Steven Lindsey



Photo by: Montaluce

Dahlonega, GA

At about an hour and a half north from Atlanta, Dahlonega's a little town in the Blue Ridge Mountains that draws crowds. They come particularly in the fall for the foliage, and for apple picking, but people are increasingly making the trek to the region for the dining. A number of wineries in the region turn out passable sips and pair that with excellent dining – check out Montaluce Winery, for instance, or Wolf Mountain.

The Downtown area of Dahlonega's quaint and walkable, and features spots like Corkscrew Café, which spotlights local wines on its menu, Yahooola Creek Grill, specializing in locally sourced ingredients and made-from-scratch American fare, and the Back Porch Oyster Bar, which receives shipments daily of fish flown in fresh overnight. Dahlonega and the entire North Georgia region, from Cleveland to Helen, and from Brasstown Bald to Lake Burton, offer great hidden-gem barbecue spots and roadside food stands.

-Christopher Hassiotis



Apalachicola, FL

If people beyond the region know the name of the town Apalachicola – situated where the river of the same name meets the Gulf – it's because of the famous Apalachicola oysters. Raw bars and Southern fare are what you come to Apalachicola for, and you'll be offered a number of choices, many situated dockside, providing alfresco dining with a scenic view.

Up the Creek Raw Bar has both covered and open-air outdoor seating, as well as an expansive indoor dining room, and oysters arrive shucked with wet river silt still on shells, a testament to freshness. Hole in the Wall, Boss Oyster, The Tap Room and Papa Joe's Oyster Bar & Grill all offer uncomplicated oysters and seafood. Antonio's on the Bay takes a creative and European-influenced modern approach to its cuisine, while Latin flavors pop at Tamara's Cafe Floridita and Cafe con Leche. The Owl Cafe, Apalachicola Seafood Grill, Caroline's River Dining and Gormley's turn out great seafood too.

-Christopher Hassiotis

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