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Quintessential Mobile: Where to Go and What to Devour in the Azalea City

Mobile, the Azalea City, is one full of Southern flavor, style, and personality. Visit Mobile and experience something traditional, yet modern.



(<http://visitsouth.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/mobile-skyline-visit-mobile.jpg>)

Mobile ... how would I describe thee to a newbie? To one who is well-traveled, Mobile, or the Azalea City, is like the darling love child of New Orleans and Pensacola. Born in 1702 under France, Mobile later became part of Spanish-owned Florida, so many of our cultural, culinary, and architectural influences (and grocery chains) hail from Louisiana and Florida respectively. There's a little British thrown into the mix (because we're classy like that) as well, but overall, Mobile is a city of exciting contraries. We are refinement and pizzazz. We are demure, yet flashy. We are subtle but powerful. We're a city to taste. A city to experience. A city to celebrate.

Eating your heart out

Okay, you're in the south. We're going to dish out some Southernisms, but you'll eat them, and you'll like them. That's what my dad used to tell me. Actually, he said, "You'll eat it, or you'll go hungry," but he was raised on a farm where they meant that kind of thing. He meant it, too. I was about 11 when Checkers botched up the order, and my plain burger, ketchup only, came as a loaded beast monster. "Eat it, or go hungry," my dad growled plowing into his own loaded burger (and I kind of think he was eyeballing mine).

I was already hungry, so I bit the burger. As only a disgruntled tween with a bad shoulder-length chop can, I glowered sourly as I ate *and loved* every bite. Of course, it wouldn't be for another 20 years that I'd tell my dad, "You were right." The moral of the story is to eat the burger. I ate it, and because I ate it, I opened my palate up for exciting culinary experiences. As it so happens, I also live in a city where a world of flavor is at my fingertips.



(<http://visitsouth.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/union-burger-mobile-al.jpg>)

Try a delicious burger at Union

Burger bonanza

Because I now fear no burger, I can (and do) tell anyone I meet with confidence that Callaghan's Irish Social Club (<http://www.callaghansirishsocialclub.com/>) in the Oakleigh Garden Historic District is *the* place for a killer bacon cheeseburger so fantastic that you'll be looking for real estate before you finish the last grilled bite (um ... but seriously, save room for the Irish whiskey-sauced New Orleans-style bread pudding). Consequently, it's also *the* place to celebrate St. Patrick's Day and to dine alfresco with a fantastic Bloody Mary ... or to bring your dog and listen to a band play. Callaghan's was where I lunched with family and friends on my much-anticipated 30th "golden" birthday, and, people, I ate the whole thing. I regret nothing.

Of course, if your burger fetish is more refined, I've yet to find a hamburger more exquisite than the Stockyard Burger at Union on Dauphin Street. The Stockyard Burger's lethal savory edge comes from the seared foie gras that accompanies bacon, wild mushrooms, Swiss cheese, and a Dijon mustard aioli. (*Pause for heavenly chorus.*) I don't remember how or why I had the Stockyard Burger for the first time, but I do remember that I wanted it to be my first Mother's Day dinner. I should add that Union's real claim to fame, their steaks, are everything a steakhouse steak should be. My husband had one when we visited on our most recent wedding anniversary, and it was arguably the most flavorful and tender piece of meat I've ever savored.

(<http://visitsouth.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/taqueria-tacos-mobile-al.jpg>)

Tacos at the Dauphin Street Taqueria in Mobile

Casual bites

So in speaking of Union, I would be woebegone to not mention the adjacent Dauphin Street Taqueria and OK Bicycle Shop. The taqueria's interior has something of a dive-bar appeal, which I believe is what caused my in-laws to immediately turn around and leave the first time they visited. Hilarious. They've since been back many times and enjoy dining on the beautiful, covered backdoor

patio (it reminds me of a tropical secret garden). The taqueria is now one of their favorite places to eat in Mobile. I guess a laid-back atmosphere and expertly prepared homemade tacos and other Mexican fare will have that effect.

I can't get enough of the salsa verde, a tomatillo-based salsa. It's hard to not go to town on tacos like the steak taco made with marinated flank and chimichurri or the chorizo taco served with fennel salad and achiote mustard. My inner vegetarian sometimes wins the "what to eat" struggle (it's real, people), and I get the veggie quesadilla because the cilantro pesto is so good. I realize I'm gushing, but this place's inexpensive menu, hip atmosphere, and pineapple margaritas have made it the setting for more than one Valentine's Day date.

(<http://visitsouth.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/mobile-big-band-society-dancing-bluegill-restaurant.jpg>)

Bluegill Restaurant

Shucks ... oysters & stuff that swims

Of course, I respectfully understand being in the mood for seafood, and darling, you should be. Our fresh, local Alabama Gulf Seafood (<http://eatalabamaseafood.com/>) is (pause for dreamy look to subside) to die for. Gulf shrimp, oysters, crab, flounder ... when seasoned and cooked by local chefs just sing on the plate. Grilled, fried, seared, sautéed, baked, broiled ... there's no way to prepare seafood improperly, unless it's not from the Gulf Coast of course.

Unquestionably, the best seafood is found on Causeway just east of the USS Alabama Battleship Memorial Park (<http://www.ussalabama.com/>). Felix's Fish Camp (<http://www.felixsfishcamp.com/>) is one of my family's favorite places. My Oma lives in Biloxi, and when she comes to town, we can pretty much count on her wanting to go to Felix's, which I'm down for because—when I'm not

pregnant—I'm powerless to resist making raw oysters and the camp salad my lunch. I also enjoy the Original Oyster House (<http://www.originaloysterhouse.com/>) for my raw oyster fix. If I want fried food, a back porch, and live music, then it's got to be the Bluegill Restaurant (<http://www.bluegillrestaurant.com>), which following that one time in July 2012, I'll never visit without also thinking, "More cowbell". More cowbell, indeed.

Speaking of raw oysters, I'd be considered a traitor to not give a nod to Wintzell's Oyster House (<http://www.wintzellsoysterhouse.com/>), a local fave that serves up oysters "fried, stewed or nude" (nude make their happy hour menus). They also have other seafood savories that keep crowds pleased.

(<http://visitsouth.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/noble-south-deviled-eggs-jeff-nelson-studios.jpg>)

Deviled eggs at The Noble South

Traditional, contemporary & locally-sourced slap-your-grandma-kind-of-good eats

While I'm in no way endorsing abusing the elderly, I can say from experience that these traditional, yet contemporary places are the can't-miss best-of Mobile's dining scene (read, my favorite places). So, in 2012 (a couple of months after the cowbell incident), my husband and I got a wild hair and ended up starting a family (I guess we really felt we needed more cowbell). Who knew that an extra glass of wine could result in a full-blown human? (Crazy biology.) Nowadays when we go out, we're like two lifers who bust out of Alcatraz every few months in three-hour intervals. We've become incredibly discerning about where we eat because who knows the next time someone's going to leave our cell unlocked for a few golden hours?

Our go-to is The Noble South (<http://thenoblesouthrestaurant.com>), located on Dauphin and Conception. The Southern-inspired menu driven by local, seasonal ingredients is part comfort food, part innovative upscale cuisine. There's nothing that's not fantastic. I've raved over chef de cuisine Chris Rainosek's braised turnips, Brussels sprouts, and pickled shrimp for nearly two years now. Every time we go, it's absolutely transcendent. Of course, being the parents that we are, we order a variety of appetizers, small plates, and an entrée and proceed to nosh like the order is food over oxygen, because when you're parents of small fries *and* you're at The Noble South, it totally is. On our most recent visit, the couple next to us was a pair of delightful elderly Canadians on the way to New Orleans to take a train back to America's attic. They were having a blast.

While I feel the need to throw in that Chris Rainosek developed the Dauphin Street Taqueria's menu, I should also toss out that our city's *most* renowned fine-dining establishment, Noja (<http://www.nojamobile.com>), has also done a similar service to local foodies by opening Saisho (<http://saishomobile.com>). The Ethiopian chef de cuisine of Noja has a Japanese wife, which inspired the modern gastropub's menu. Located on Dauphin Street, Saisho is like Smokey Joe's—it's where all the hip and groovy people go. If you didn't catch that reference, then you need to dig into more theater, or just hit up a Joe Jefferson Playhouse (<http://joejeffersonplayers.com>) or Playhouse in the Park (<http://playhouseinthepark.org>) (next to the Mobile Museum of Art (<http://www.mobilemuseumofart.com>)) play next time you're around town.

So, that said, if you find yourself questing for the perfect Sunday brunch (or anytime lunch) followed by a stroll about the Oakleigh District with a subsequent tour of the Oakleigh House (<http://www.historicoakleigh.com>), then Kitchen on George (<http://kitchenongeorge.com>) (as in George Street) has your number. I love this place. Nestled on the corner of George St. adjacent to coffee and sweet shop, Cream and Sugar (<https://www.google.com/search?client=safari&rls=en&q=cream+and+sugar&ie=UTF-8&oe=UTF-8>), Kitchen on George offers an elevated menu of provocative, yet comforting cuisine that's positively incandescent. A few weekends ago, my husband and I experienced the chef's infamous "it beat Bobby Flay's" fried chicken. A bona-fide (and darn good) fried chicken lover and maker, I've never had anything so lovingly brined and breaded and fried in my life. It was so tender and flavorful, I felt like it loved me back.

(<http://visitsouth.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/haberdasher-cocktail-mobile-al.jpg>)

Cocktail magic at The Haberdasher

Tickled drink ... err, pink

Sorry if I go on and on about the food. It's just Mobile's culinary scene has so much to offer, and the value of food must not be disregarded. As Erma Bombeck once said, "Seize the moment. Remember all those women on the *Titanic* who waved off the dessert cart." I'm pretty sure she meant *eat* the moment.

So, to divulge one of my favorite little indulgences, the best craft cocktail experience in town worth mentioning is at The Haberdasher (<https://www.facebook.com/thehabmobile/>). Owned by a very engaging gentleman from South Africa, The Haberdasher is the kind of place Hemingway might go to "drink to make other people more interesting" or where Fitzgerald might toast "to alcohol, the roes colored glasses of life." Sorry. I can't help but quote two of my favorite modernists when a bar of their caliber is presented to me.

(<http://visitsouth.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/mobile-museum-of-art-exhibit.jpg>)

Mobile Museum of Art

Go, see & do

There's more to do around Mobile than one well-versed traveler can advise for a day or a weekend or a week, but I'll at least do you the favor of indicating some of my favorite places and spaces.

So, I think we're well-established that downtown is sort of the most "Mobile" you can get, but just as one ventures to Magazine Street and beyond in New Orleans, one must venture to West Mobile. In this case, I mean head to the Mobile Museum of Art (<http://www.mobilemuseumofart.com>) located on Museum Drive in Langan Park. The largest exhibition space in the area, the Mobile Museum of Art boasts a permanent home for nearly 10,000 works while offering space to touring exhibits. My minor was in Art History. My final semester, we had to select our papers at the beginning of term, and Albrecht Dürer was on the table. I nearly fought a (rather cute) boy over Dürer. I beat him. I never got asked on a date, but who cares ... I had German artist Dürer.

A year after that project, an exhibit featuring Dürer's Apocalyptic engravings was shown at MOMA. I cried when I toured the exhibit; it was one of the most memorable moments of my life. Since then, I've been a fan of MOMA, which has been increasingly prominent in terms of events and exhibits.

My other favorite to-do related to the arts is to hang out around downtown during the second-Friday art walks where everyone—the Cathedral Square Gallery (<http://www.cathedralsquaregallery.org>), the Alabama Contemporary Art Center (<http://www.alabamacontemporary.com>), the Mobile Art Council (<http://mobilearts.org>)'s Skinny Gallery, and other exhibition halls—swings open their doors for visitors.

Got kids?

So, I realize I'm barely scraping the surface, but I also know I could jam out a novella on how to really dig into Mobile. I'm honestly just sharing the highlights that make me the happiest. Since I had kids, obviously, my tastes have changed. I'm no longer looking to be chill with a Rolling Rock in a dive (cough, Haley's) on Saturday night. I get my kicks during the daytime, and if you're anything like me, then you'll appreciate these handful of kid-friendly to-dos (that I regularly love with my children).

(<http://visitsouth.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/dauphin-island-heron-landing-ss.jpg>)

Dauphin Island

Island time

Mobile is a mere 30-45 minutes (depending on where you start the clock) from Dauphin Island. Not only do we have the amazing Dauphin Island Sea Lab Estuarium (<http://www.disl.org/estuarium/>), but there's also, you know, the beach (my oldest is three and asks *daily* if we're going to the beach). Aside from that, if you're just vying to keep things loving, you can always take the ferry over to Fort Gaines (<http://dauphinisland.org/fort-gaines/>). This is a fun day of touring cool historic battlegrounds on the beach. I suggest bringing a picnic lunch and making a day of it (bring sunblock, too).

(<http://visitsouth.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/gulf-coast-exploreum-kid-visit-mobile.jpg>)

Gulf Coast Exploreum

Exploring at the Exploreum

So, if you're not kicking it on island time and you've got kids between the ages of 18 months and 90, then you'll love the Gulf Coast Exploreum and Science Center (<http://www.exploreum.com>), which is not only a stop on our beloved Oyster Trail (<http://oystergardening.org/index.php/about/oyster-trail>) (look for giant painted oyster shells around town), but it's also ridiculously fun with activities, crafts, and learning experiences for kids of all ages. Lillianne has been going since she was two and had a blast playing in the exhibits. There's also a kiddy play area and an IMAX theater that provides hours of entertainment for all.

(<http://visitsouth.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/carpe-diem-coffee-drink-swirl-mobile.jpg>)

Carpe Diem Coffee & Tea Co.

Family Play date at the Park

Of course, if you love being outside and just want something simple, head up Old Shell Road. Swing by Carpe Diem Coffee & Tea Co (<http://www.carpe-coffee.com>) for a killer cup of coffee (might I recommend the Tanzanian Peaberry medium blend?) and then keep going to Lavretta Park located on Old Shell. The kids can run amok while you kick it in the shade. Afterward, walk across the street to the unassuming hole-in-the-wall Food Pak International (<http://www.foodpakmobile.com>) for the most incredible muffaletta Mobile has to offer (their gyros, hummus, and baba ghanoush are also unfathomably delectable). Let the owner persuade you to get a bottle of wine, some exotic spices, or dear Henrietta's goat cheese for the road. Those are all things I can't seem to leave without.

So, where does one stop gushing about one's city? I could go on, you know. I could talk about the artists and authors who epitomize our Southern effervescence, or I could invite you to discover some of my favorite places and to stroll Dauphin Street. Stop in the shops, talk to locals. We'll give you the whole story ... where to go, what to do, what to eat. We love having you here, and we won't steer you wrong. We're distinctly southern without an iota of irony. We're authentic and unique. We're everything you want right off the interstate, so why not curtail that beach trip for an hour or so ... or a day or two ... and experience the city that my grandfather visited and decided he never wanted to leave (and so he stayed).

Looking for your next great Southern adventure? Mobile has the spice,

personality, and history to keep you hooked for life. Be sure to check out our VisitSouth 12 Reasons (<http://visitsouth.com/12-reasons/>) page for more fantastic vacation destination ideas!

Mobile skyline and Gulf Coast Exploreum photos by Tad Denson, courtesy of Visit Mobile (<http://www.mobile.org/>); Union and Dauphin Street Taqueria photos courtesy of Dauphin Management, Inc.; Bluegill Restaurant photo courtesy of Bluegill Restaurant; deviled eggs photo courtesy of The Noble South; cocktail photo courtesy of The Haberdasher; Mobile Museum of Art photo courtesy of MMOA; Carpe Diem photo courtesy of Carpe Diem Coffee & Tea Co.

◀ Previous post (<http://visitsouth.com/2016/07/31/top-5-ways-to-explore-new-orleans-plantation-country-swamps/>)

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