

travel & escapes

FORKS & THE ROAD

Faubourg St. Honoré is the fanciest shopping street in Paris — it's where the super wealthy can drop millions in an afternoon. You can, however, stay in the centre of it all and window shop without breaking a sweat. Le Pavillon des Lettres, a luxury boutique hotel tucked behind the St. Honoré, has modern, sleek accommodation but no restaurant or bar to up the price of the rooms. There's an honour bar if you feel the need for a drink at the hotel, but why bother? Bugsy's is just across the street for a quick pint and a short walk away are restaurants that have class without too high a cost. Crom "Exquis owned by chef Pierre Meneau is a case in point. Meneau's father is Marc Meneau, chef/owner of L'Espérance, a two-star Michelin restaurant in Vézelay, Burgundy. (It was a three-star when I ate there, and I imagine the food is still as terrific.) Chef Pierre still goes home on weekends to work in his father's restaurant so some of the dishes, such as L'expérience Meneau, are drawn from that exalted temple of gastronomy. However the son's place is relaxed, a true bistro "gourmand." Items such as the ris de veau are memorable and the chef's "instant three-course menu" is a reasonable 65 euro. Le Market, at 15 Avenue Matignon, a restaurant by world famous chef Jean-Georges Vongerichten, attracts the belle monde with its Asian-French cuisine at family friendly prices. If you really want play the part of the super-rich, have overpriced tea in the Jardin Français in the Bristol Hotel on St. Honoré and people watch. cromexquis.com, pavillondeslettres.com

Margaret Swaine, Weekend Post



ALYSSA SCHWARTZ

From bakeries and breweries to a Costco-scale supermarket that sells locally produced goods, Durham-Chapel Hill's food scene punches well above its weight.

Eat cute

Alyssa Schwartz and her mom find plenty to bond over on a dining adventure in Durham-Chapel Hill — America's foodiest small town

BY ALYSSA SCHWARTZ

If you're the type of traveller who ruminates on every mediocre snack or meal consumed on the road as a regretful missed opportunity, then landing in Durham-Chapel Hill, America's foodiest small town (according to *Bon Appétit*) two hours delayed and within minutes of a thunderstorm feels like very bad news indeed.

My mother and I had big eating plans when we flew into Raleigh-Durham International Airport last July: collect our checked luggage, jump into our rental car and drive 45 minutes out to Piedmont country for lunch at a restored textile mill that makes their own buttermilk mozzarella. It was tomato season in North Carolina and the farm-to-table lunch we had planned sounded quite like heaven.

Alas, it wasn't to be. First weather grounded us in Toronto and then, when we finally landed, lightning strikes meant ground crews couldn't off-load our luggage for another hour. While we waited, my cellphone beeped a flash flood alert along the road we'd planned to take. I called to cancel our reservation.

But then things started looking up. While many of the restaurants that have won Durham and Chapel Hill, two thirds of North Carolina's famed Research Triangle, so much foodie acclaim are closed Monday, Chowhound helped me sleuth out the offshoot of a James Beard-awarded spot known as a "temple of Southern cuisine." It was open, but only till 2:30. Fifteen minutes later, the bags started rolling and ours were first off. We bolted for the car rental amid raindrops fat as cherries, and set off for Chapel Hill soaked but optimistic; according to Google Maps, we were 25 minutes away with 10 minutes' pad time. We had this.

And then another letdown,

when Google steered us into a 1980s-style business park that looked as though it would have a basic sandwich counter, maybe. It was 2:21, too late for a course correction. My mother ran inside to investigate and I turned the car around, ready to accept defeat. But then mom swung back out the revolving door and waved at me to park. Google hadn't led us astray after all. We wound our way down a curving staircase to the basement and there it was: Crook's Atrium Cafe. On one wall, a chalkboard menu listed daily specials such as heirloom tomato salad, fried green tomato BLTs, country-fried steak with collards and shrimp PoBoys. Not the kind of place you'd ever expect to find tucked between the elevator bank and a hall lined with mailboxes in a building full of insurance offices. We slid into a booth, ordered U.S.-style brewed iced teas, and caught our breath.

Turns out, we needn't have panicked. Just around the corner from our hotel was Sandwhich, a shop singled out by *Vanity Fair* several years back in a roundup of best sandwiches across the country and open all day. Because here's the thing about the foodiest small town in America — there's thoughtful, high quality food everywhere you go, including unlikely spots like dank corporate basements.

From bakeries and breweries to a Costco-scale supermarket that sells a shocking abundance of locally produced goods, Durham-Chapel Hill's food scene punches well above its weight. In Durham alone, there are about 700 restaurants

— in other words, you could eat out twice a day for nearly a year without repeating. Mind you, you don't earn the kind of praise this area has reaped for mere abundance. It's a spirit of reinvention, paired with a rich farming heritage (thanks to low property taxes and strong government agricultural programs, many farms are several generations old), that have quietly set the foundation for a terrific and unexpected culinary scene.

There's no better introduction than Southern Season, a 60,000-square-foot grocery store in a strip mall minutes from the Chapel Hill campus; and yes, it's the rare supermarket — if you can even call it that — that belongs on your must-visit list. Pick up a bottle of wine or a six-pack from one of the two-dozen or so local

atre upstairs, local culinary stars and visiting celebrity chefs lead hands-on cooking classes. At Weathervane, the adjoining restaurant, my mom and I stuffed ourselves further with pimento cheese fritters served with hot pepper jelly, thick-cut potato chips drizzled with smoky housemade barbecue sauce and crab cakes with smoked corn tartar sauce.

Of course, the area's foodie gems aren't all located in sprawling strip malls or hidden in office basements. "Food scenes die without good physical spaces," said Sam Poley, the communications director for the Durham Convention and Visitors Bureau, told me one afternoon as we strolled around Brightleaf Square, a cobblestoned development full of restaurants and bars built inside century-old tobacco warehouses. Blocks away, in an area known as the "DIY district" for all its repurposed buildings, we spent the next couple of days eating and sipping our way through more tasty exercises in creativity and reinvention.

We loved Fullsteam Brewery, with its "plow to pint" beers, made from locally sourced grains and ingredients such as North Carolina sweet potatoes, foraged stinging nettle and Cackalacky Hot Sauce (made in Chapel Hill), and Geer Street Garden a diner set inside a gorgeously restored old Gulf service station. Across the street at Cocoa Cinnamon, a Kickstarter-funded coffee shop that got its start as a coffee bike (think food truck, then swap the truck for a tricycle), baristas blend a rotating mix of single origin beans with ingredients such as powdered maca, a Peruvian root related to the radish, ginger, and black lava salt for the most surprising (and delicious) after-lunch pick-me-up you'll ever have.

Which, in hindsight, makes my fears that first day all the more laughable. In America's foodiest small town you're guaranteed not to run out of options — but you might be tempted to extend your trip to taste just a few more.

Weekend Post

There's high quality food in unlikely spots, like dank basements

IF YOU GO

Getting there Air Canada offers several direct flights a day from Toronto to Raleigh-Durham International Airport.

Stay

■ **Chapel Hill:** The Southern Colonial-style Carolina Inn offers the exact antebellum charm you'd envision visiting these parts, and it's located a quick stroll from the UNC Chapel Hill campus and shops and restaurants of Franklin Street. Rooms from US\$139. carolinainn.com

■ **Durham:** Formerly a retirement home for elderly women which was built in the 1920s, the King's Daughters Inn offers a lovely alternative to Durham's plentiful — and somewhat generic — executive hotels. Rooms from US\$190. thekingsdaughtersinn.com.

Eat

■ **Crook's Atrium Café.** 100 Europa Drive, Chapel Hill

■ **Southern Season's** outhurseason.com

■ **Cocoa Cinnamon** cocoacinnamon.com

■ **The Black House Straw Valley** strawvalleyfoodanddrink.com