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American Journeys

Birmingham Has a Lot on Its Plates These Days

By [SHAILA DEWAN](#)

TRAVELING the South, it's natural to seek out old, quirky restaurants that seem to be the appointed guardians of authenticity: Nu-Way Wieners, Prince's Hot Chicken Shack, Doe's Eat Place, the Cow Pasture Cafe.

But in Birmingham, [Ala.](#), local flavor has taken on a whole new meaning: napoleons of gulf crab meat and toasted pecans, cornmeal-dusted oysters with hickory-smoked mayonnaise, poached farm eggs, pickled cherries, Bourbon panna cotta. The Roman fire god Vulcan, the 56-foot cast-iron guardian of the city, was once relegated to holding a giant bottle of Coca-Cola in place of his spear — today, he might more aptly bear an artisanal cheese plate. Birmingham, domain of mines, mills and furnaces, has been transformed into a center of freshly unearthed tubers, organic urban farms and wood-fired ovens.

With little fanfare outside the world of devoted gourmets, white-tablecloth establishments that rival New York's or [California](#)'s have bloomed like azaleas all over Birmingham. The menus, many of which change daily, are loaded with regional specialties like Cullman new potatoes, Chilton peaches and [Apalachicola](#) oysters. Building their reputation little by little, by now Birmingham's chefs have won praise from Gourmet, Bon Appétit, Esquire and the James Beard Foundation. And, who wouldn't want to try a place called the Hot and Hot Fish Club?

Birmingham, founded on the wrinkled topography of central [Alabama](#) because of its iron, coal and limestone deposits, has rarely come to mind as a tourist destination. More than three decades ago, it lost the competition with [Atlanta](#) to become the capital of the New South, and the downtown streets can have an empty, Hopperesque feel even on weekdays. What's more, the city may always be known for the uglier chapters of its history, when it was nicknamed "Bombingham" and the world saw images of snarling dogs and civil rights protests.

There is more to Birmingham, however. The Civil Rights Institute, worth a solid afternoon, exhibits rare footage of events like the Freedom Rides. In January, the Museum of Art will open an annex dedicated to Alabama folk artists. City Stages, a music festival, draws big crowds, and the Sidewalk Moving Picture Festival has quickly ascended the film festival ranks. And tucked amid the hills (mountains, the natives call them) of the South Side, there is a whimsical fountain in which a ram in shirtsleeves reads to

an audience of attentive critters, presiding over Five Points South, the nucleus of the culinary revolution.

The transformation began with Frank Stitt, solemn and lanky, who fled small-town Alabama as a young man, became a disciple of Alice Waters and other prominent chefs, and then, more than two decades ago, returned to open the Highlands Bar & Grill, on 11th Avenue in Five Points.

The novelist Pat Conroy recalls meeting Mr. Stitt on a flight in the early 1980s and asking about the impressive array of cookbooks stacked on his tray table. Mr. Stitt announced that he was about to open a restaurant in Birmingham.

“It’s a wasteland for good food,” Mr. Conroy told him.

The reply, as Mr. Conroy recalls it in the introduction to “Frank Stitt’s Southern Table,” was cocksure and quick: “It won’t be a wasteland anymore.”

Mr. Stitt was right. “There are two eras of restaurants in Birmingham,” said Evan Lockridge, who with his wife, Deborah, started Bhamdining.com in 2000 as a guide to the restaurant scene. “Before Frank and after Frank. It’s like B.C. and A.D.”

Striving for an atmosphere that would not intimidate guests, Mr. Stitt created a boisterous place where French techniques and Southern ingredients produce dishes like baked grits studded with country ham or foie gras on a cornmeal pancake with quince marmalade. He now owns four restaurants in the neighborhood.

And as other chefs have recognized the city’s appetite for sophisticated food, more than a dozen ambitious establishments have opened — many run by Stitt graduates.

Last month, my friend Meredith Hobbs, an Atlanta native with strong opinions on matters like the proper preparation of grits, and I began an eating tour of Birmingham at the best known of them, the Hot and Hot Fish Club. Once a dive bar clinging like a barnacle to the side of a shopping center, it has been transformed by Chris Hastings, the owner and chef and a former sous-chef at Highlands, into a cozy chatter-filled place. The tableware was made by a local potter, the chandelier by a local blacksmith. The restaurant’s name comes from the epicurean club to which Mr. Hastings’s great-great-grandfather belonged on Pawleys Island, S.C., where hot and hot meant freshly caught and freshly cooked.

WE sat at the chef’s table, a bar overlooking the open kitchen, and watched the pastry chef prepare plate after plate of the doughnuts served three ways, a Birmingham favorite. The bartender obliged Meredith with a virgin mojito, and we tucked into the house charcuterie plate, an unctuous duck liver mousse and creamy pork rillettes packed into a round butter dish, followed by a thinly crusted flounder accompanied by anise-scented baby root vegetables. It was all, with the exception of a plate of gussied up pork and beans, delicious. “Stick to the fish,” Meredith said. After dinner, we stopped at the nearby Garage Cafe, one of those one-of-a-kind bars that lend a city self-respect. The courtyard, with stalls once used to store

horseless carriages, is now crammed with architectural artifacts (for sale) and hipsters, students, journalists and politicians (presumably not for sale).

The next evening, we wanted to try a Stitt restaurant and chose Bottega, Italian-influenced and decorated in colors as rich as the notes of a cello. Both Highlands and Bottega are pricey and formal (the food, not the dress code), but consistently flawless in both service and quality. Mr. Stitt's other restaurants are more casual: Chez Fonfon, a bistro with steak frites and a bocce court next to Highlands, and Bottega's little sister, the Café at Bottega, where pizzas bake and meats roast in a brick oven.

We raved over each new plate, particularly the pappardelle with pork shoulder, chanterelles and pancetta. Though Mr. Stitt's food is never precious (with the possible exception of a cocktail known as the Orange Thing), it manages to be inventive, with small plates like baby octopus with chorizo at Bottega or a shrimp and crab salad with persimmon at Highlands.

Birmingham's restaurants have become a lure for people who go on to develop a fondness for the city. Food lovers from Atlanta, [Montgomery](#), Ala., and [Oxford](#), Miss., make pilgrimages there (this year Highlands was named "best restaurant worth the long trip" in Atlanta's weekly newspaper, Creative Loafing), and Mr. Stitt says his restaurants are often used as recruitment tools. "We landed Mercedes," he said by way of example, referring to the plant in nearby Vance. "A lot of these people were probably brought to Highlands or Bottega to convince them that Alabama was a good place to live."

One day Meredith and I took a few hours off from food and poked around the Sloss Furnaces, a defunct iron plant left towering above its slag heaps. We found not only a self-guided tour explaining the process of making pig iron, but an iron pour and a workshop for metal artists, a wine tasting and Shakespeare at Sloss, a staging of scenes that made good use of the leaky passageways and industrial furniture. In warmer weather, there are concerts.

Our best shopping was at the cluttered and ancient Charlemagne Records, up a flight of stairs in Five Points, and the Naked Art Gallery in Forest Park, another shopping district, where we found lamps, jewelry, ceramics, furniture and other functional odds and ends, mostly by local artists.

Try as we might, we never ran out of restaurants. There was the sleekly modern Ocean, which served a perfectly austere Manhattan and a salad of crab and fried green tomatoes; the goop-free Continental Bakery, where the Belgian chocolate and apricot-pecan croissants are for adults only; the Standard Bistro, perched in the hills outside town and turning out superb renditions of classics like barbecue pork sandwiches; and the homemade Bloody Mary mix at Chez Lulu's Sunday brunch.

And there were those we never got to try, like Local, with its intimidating yet irresistible menu (lobster egg rolls with hot Chinese mango mustard?). Our last day found us banging on the door of Johnny Ray's, a local chain restaurant, minutes after it had closed, begging to buy a piece of lemon pie.

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