

CHRISTMAS DOUBLE ISSUE

Southern Living®

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WHITE
CAKES!**

p. 188

PEACE ON EARTH

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Celebration,
and Joy

12 Fun
& Festive
Cookie
Recipes

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with Coconut
Cream Frosting
and Peace
Dove Cookies

DECEMBER 2020

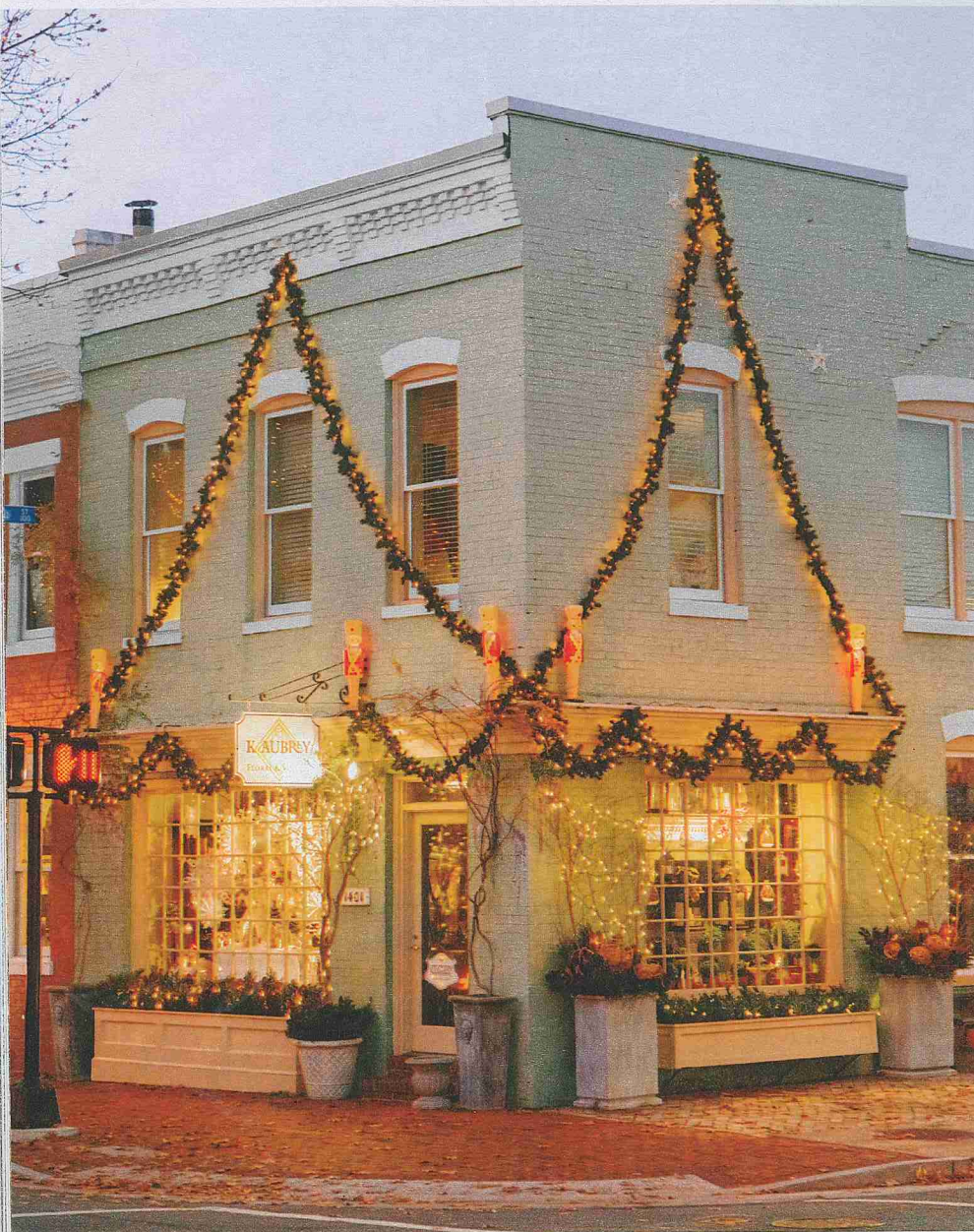
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Holiday Decorating
Inside and Out

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63 Perfect Gifts
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From left to right: As you shop on King Street, enjoy the holiday finery draping its storefronts. Look for door decor on Captain's Row.

Nicole McGrew, who owns Threadleaf boutique. She has been in Alexandria for about 12 years and was originally drawn in by the town's character, which is perhaps most quintessential at Christmastime. Tartan ribbons wind up the Colonial-style lampposts, and wreaths hang in shop doorways and windows, framed by lush pine garlands. At night, the stately Market Square Christmas tree becomes a central attraction.

Given its close proximity to Washington, D.C., Alexandria offers the best of both worlds: small-town charm and urban access. As you drive in from the city, it's almost shocking just how quickly the scenery transforms—before the song playing on your radio switches over, the riverfront highway

gives way to squat brick town houses and cobblestone streets. The flickering gas lanterns feel like 18th-century relics, and they very well might be. This town's architecture dates back as far as 1749, when Alexandria was founded. Some of the brick buildings have been treated to a fresh coat of paint, the pastel blue or creamy white offsetting more traditional redbrick facades; each has its own character.

GETAWAY

All Is Bright in Virginia

Old Town Alexandria is charming anytime, but it really sparkles in December

BY ZOE DENENBERG

PHOTOGRAPHS BY CEDRIC ANGELES

ALTHOUGH IT MAY look the part, Alexandria, Virginia, is not the kind of Hallmark-movie small town where all the locals grew up together and you'll undoubtedly run into your high school sweetheart while picking up a fresh baguette at the neighborhood bakery. The community here is tight-knit, but anyone can join.

"None of us are from here, but we've all lived here a long time," says



Shop Local

At 8 a.m. on a Thursday, **Misha's Coffee**—Alexandria's go-to cafe—is bustling with customers. Business-people pick up their regular orders; friends meet for coffee; a man wearing a vintage-looking tweed suit and a cowboy hat sits at a high-top table, reading the newspaper. And almost everyone holds one of the cafe's tangerine-hued cups.

Danielle Romanetti, owner of the yarn shop **Fibre Space**, sits at the bar, splitting a slice of chocolate cake with a beanie-clad barista. With a color-coded calendar set out before her, Romanetti plans out Fibre Space's upcoming class schedule. Knitting lessons from visiting instructors and project-based courses draw crafters to the store's second-floor loft.

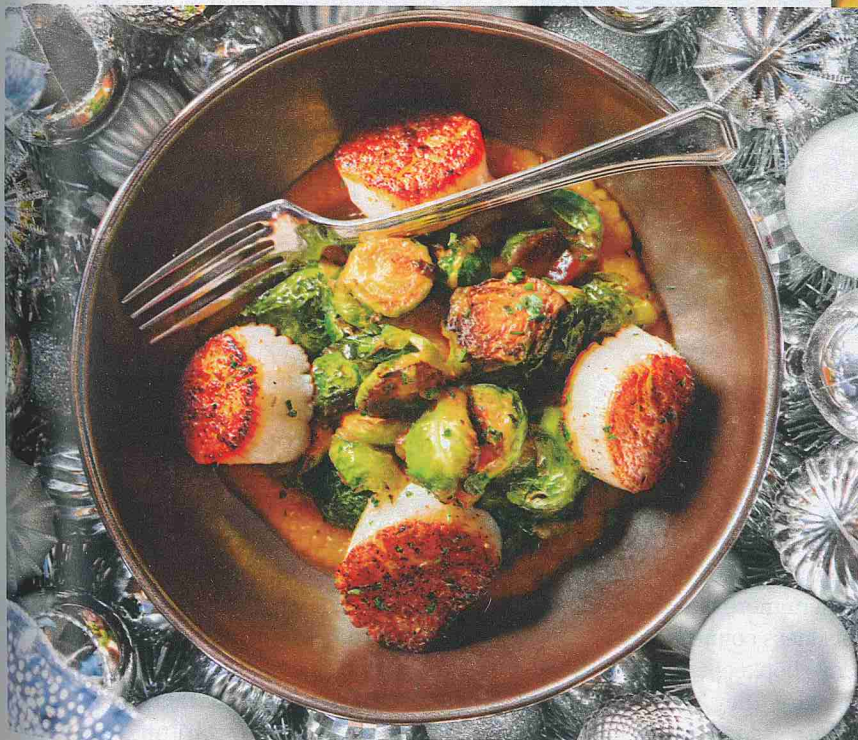
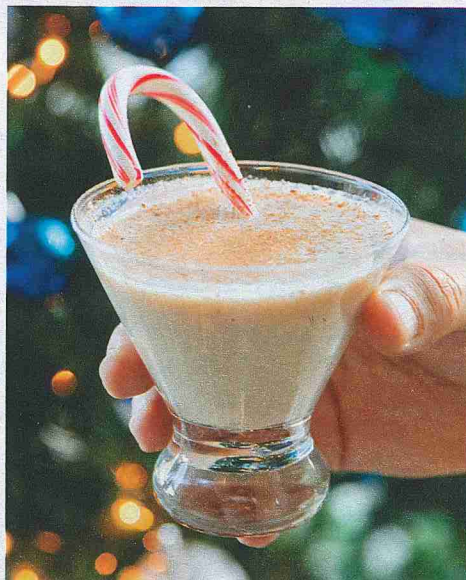
A remarkable number of the shops and boutiques here in Alexandria are independently owned, like Fibre Space.

Yard signs with uplifting slogans (such as "Buy Local" and "Spread Kindness, Build Community") pepper the streets. Fibre Space is one of many neighborhood businesses that are focused on cultivating community.

Stitch Sew Shop is a fabric store that doubles as a workspace, where artists can reserve a sewing machine by the hour. At **Threadleaf**, a women's-clothing boutique, McGrew hosts after-hours talks about slow fashion and natural fibers. Formerly an Obama-administration lawyer, she founded Threadleaf with a clear sense of purpose: supporting clean and sustainable fashion, a

Clockwise from top:

A seasonal cocktail at Hummingbird; Threadleaf owner Nicole McGrew; Hummingbird's tasty scallops and Brussels sprouts



**From left to right:**

The Alexandrian is a cozy base camp. The letters in Killer E.S.P. stand for "espresso, snacks, and pie."

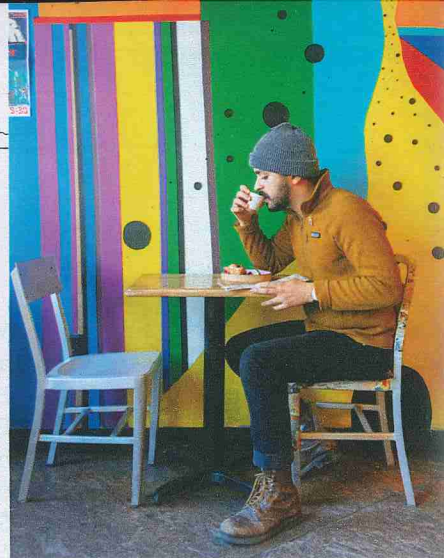


mission she has pursued in her personal life for years.

"It bridged the gap between my love of fashion and my concern for the community and policy issues," she says. Walking around Threadleaf, McGrew can tell you exactly where each piece came from, who stitched it,

and how the materials were sourced. She's on a first-name basis with most of the designers she features, speaking about them more like close friends than business connections.

Many shopkeepers here share a similar story: They left corporate jobs to pursue a second-wave career in



something that began as a personal passion. While working in international finance, Victoria Vergason spent much of her free time hopping among flea markets, auctions, and antiques stores. Over 25 years, she collected thousands of vintage cocktail pieces that now line the walls at **The Hour**, her one-of-a-kind barware shop.

"Old Town Alexandria has continued to cultivate the small-shop owners," Vergason says. "Everybody looks out for everyone else. It's a community, and it's like a family." (While Vergason's store is temporarily closed, she has expanded her online offerings.)

Get in the Spirit

Some of Alexandria's annual holiday festivities, including a boat parade on the Potomac River and the Scottish Christmas Walk Parade, had to be suspended this year, but they will be back. And the city has found plenty of alternative ways to celebrate.

Through the end of this year, more than a dozen Alexandria stays are participating in a **Flex Getaway Hotel Package**, which offers special nightly rates and lets you cancel with 24 hours' notice. That's a nice bit of reassurance for travelers right now, so ask about it when you book.

Once you settle in, there's so much to explore. The city's tourism office has produced a **2020 Instagram holiday guide** so you won't miss a



single iconic photo op, as well as a Yuletide self-guided walk. But you might prefer to simply meander.

Get a cup of hot chocolate from **Dolci Gelati Cafe** on Fairfax Street, which is just a couple of blocks from Alexandria's up-and-coming waterfront. This is a perfect spot for the holidays—or any day, really. Don't miss **Torpedo Factory Art Center**, a former munitions plant that's been converted into three floors of galleries, shops, and studios.

The first President's estate, **Mount Vernon**, will hold its annual Christmas Illuminations, a spectacular fireworks show on December 18 and 19. Each year, Mount Vernon hosts Aladdin the camel for visitors to greet, just as George Washington once did to impress his holiday guests. (Although the Mount Vernon by Candlelight event has been canceled for 2020, general daytime programming will go on as planned.)

Eat, Drink, and Be Merry

This year, many Alexandria restaurants, like **Vola's Dockside Grill**, have added heaters to their outdoor spaces. They aim to chase away the winter chill

and give more guests the opportunity to dine alfresco beneath the night sky. Whether you bundle up at an outdoor table or cozy up to one inside, you'll have abundant options.

At **Vermilion**, the city's upscale culinary destination, a nearby diner scans the menu and says, "I'll eat anything they put in front of me here." She ultimately settles on the ricotta gnocchi—a wise choice.

Alexandria's dining scene is

diverse, with plenty of noteworthy restaurants sitting prominently on King Street, but to find some of the area's local favorites, venture just outside Old Town. Start the day in the Del Ray neighborhood at **Stomping Ground**, a breakfast joint where you can build your own biscuit sandwich, or head to **Junction Bakery & Bistro**, a daytime gathering spot known for its Cruffin (a croissant-muffin hybrid, that's seasonally flavored and—if



From left to right: Urbano 116 is the spot for flavorful Mexican food.

Chadwicks restaurant on Strand Street is practically an institution in Alexandria.





For the Good Dogs on Your List

Say "happy holidays" to your best friend with delicious, bacon-style treats!



Available at a Store Near You!



Market Square is a popular place for tourists and locals alike.



you're lucky—topped with a pillowy swirl of torched marshmallow). Down the block, **The Evening Star** has all the makings of a laid-back date

night. The bistro pairs eclectic appetizers like Chicken Fried Oysters with adventurous main dishes that are sure to please.

For lunch, head to **Chop Shop Taco**. You'll have no trouble at all finding this electric-pink building featuring an interior wall painted with a bright, tattoo-style mural. The former garage now holds a hip taco spot, where the succinct menu offers creative fusions. The brisket is flavored with star anise and za'atar red onion, and the crispy flounder is drizzled with a thick mango sauce. If you happen to be on Alexandria's waterfront at lunchtime, be sure to try the American fare at local favorite **Chadwicks**, where pimienta cheese is on the list of burger condiments.

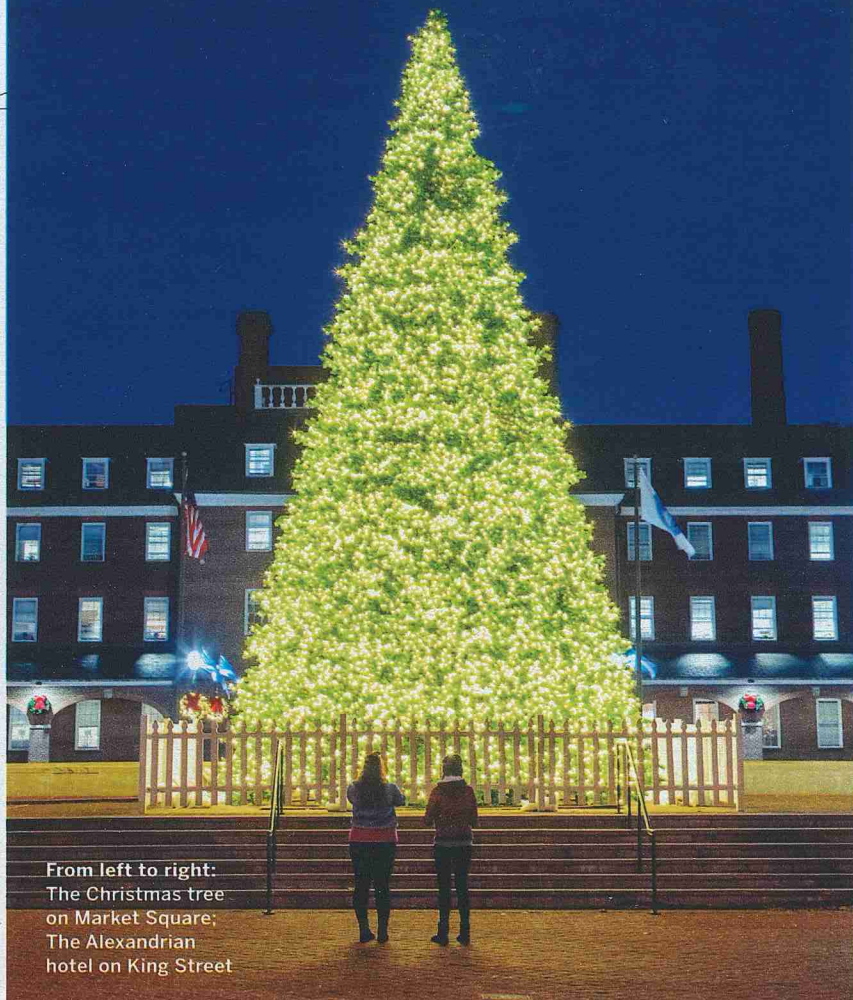
Of the city's many hidden gems, **Captain Gregory's** is perhaps the most under the radar. Just inside the entrance to **Sugar Shack Donuts**, a rustic wooden wall slides open to welcome you into this intimate speakeasy. The cocktail menu changes too often to catalog, but one mainstay is

the Pine Smoked Old Fashioned. (Sit at the bar to watch the skilled bartender flame a pine board with a blowtorch, catching the smoke in an Art Deco glass.)

Old Town's walkable streets promise caffeination and cold libations around every corner. Pop into **Killer E.S.P.** on King Street for just that: a killer espresso, snack, or pie. At **Urbano 116**, you can start celebrating Cinco de Mayo a few months early with their signature margaritas and carnitas tacos served on striking blue corn tortillas.

The good times extend to the weekends at **The People's Drug**, and you'll want to arrive early to secure a seat. The tiny bar draws inspiration from its past life as a corner pharmacy and lunch counter. Sandwiches and snacks, from edamame to truffle fries, arrive in unpretentious cardboard boats and are made for sharing.

The Potomac River provides Alexandria with prime access to fresh fish. Of the seafood locales, **Columbia Firehouse** (located in a restored 19th-century fire station) stands out for its ambience. This



From left to right:
The Christmas tree
on Market Square;
The Alexandrian
hotel on King Street

restaurant specializes in seafood and classic tavern fare, but the true prizes are the complimentary peppered honey biscuits—all mere bread baskets pale in comparison. For a more formal seafood experience, reserve a table at **Hummingbird** in the waterside **Hotel Indigo**. Try the escargot steeped in garlic butter, the pan-seared scallops, and the signature Hummingbird Cake.

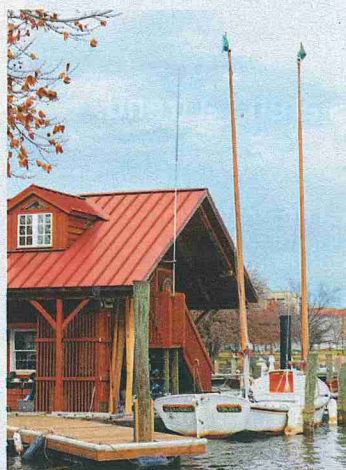
End the night with a beer on draft (preferably Port City Brewing Company's seasonal Tidings ale, infused with coriander, cardamom, and ginger) at **Daniel O'Connell's**, a lively Irish pub. Or treat the kids to a sundae at **Pop's Old Fashioned Ice Cream**.

No matter your choice, be sure to walk down King Street at night, when

string lights hang from the trees and bands spontaneously set up by the Market Square Christmas tree. It's rare to find a city that looks just as beautiful in the dark.

Editor's Note: COVID-19 may cause closures or other unforeseen travel developments. Be sure to check the current status of your destination before finalizing your trip plans. **SL**

City Marina on
the Potomac River



Where To Stay

If you're making it a weekend getaway, book a room in one of these hotels

THE ALEXANDRIAN

The cozy firelit lobby at this hotel, which is in a prime spot on King Street, will make you feel like you're home for the holidays.

HOTEL INDIGO OLD TOWN ALEXANDRIA

This city's only waterfront hotel, the Indigo opened in 2017. It's conveniently located a couple of blocks off King Street.

KIMPTON LORIE HOTEL & SPA

Although it's farther away from "Christmas central," this lovely place is right near the Amtrak and Metrorail stations.