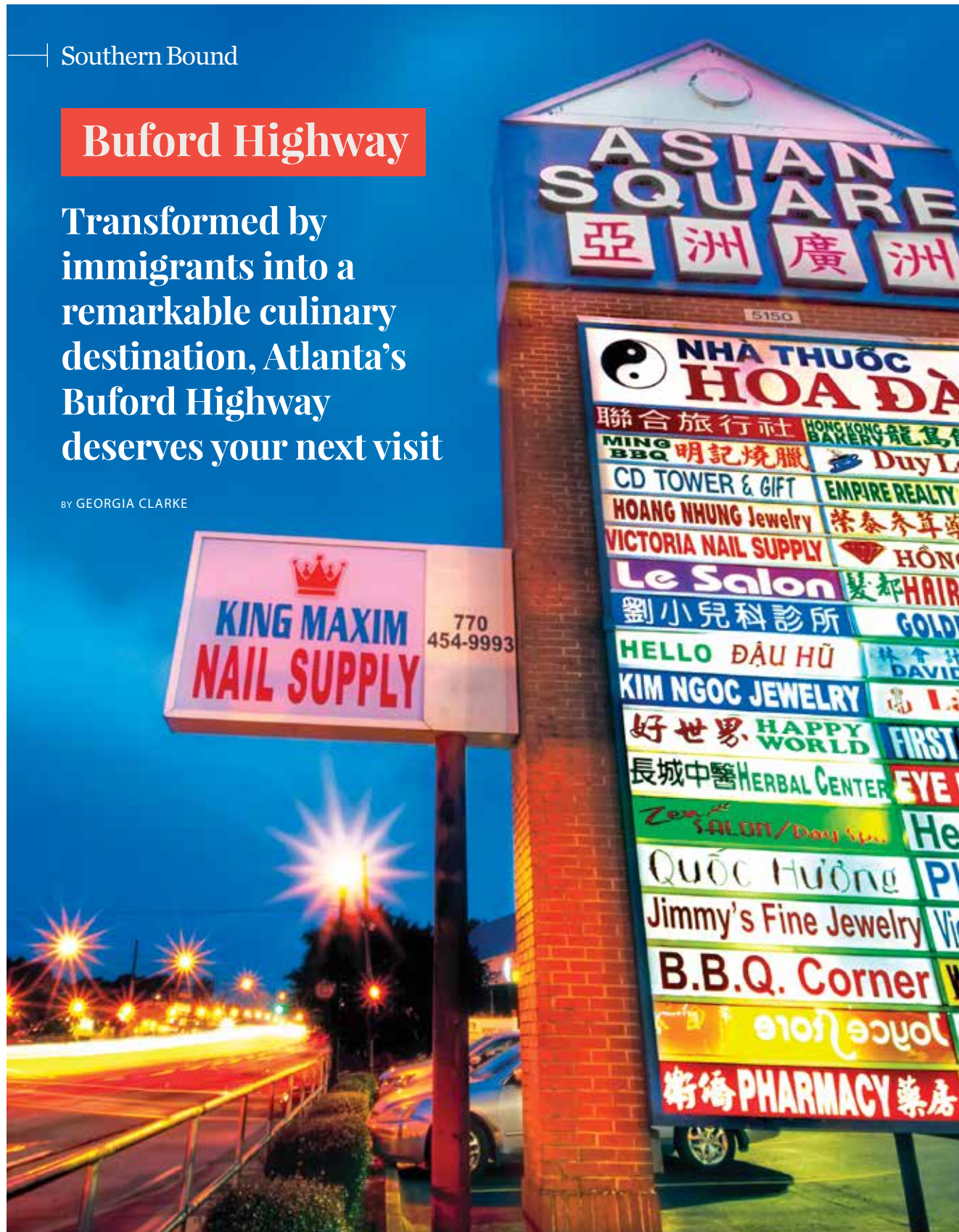


## Buford Highway

Transformed by immigrants into a remarkable culinary destination, Atlanta's Buford Highway deserves your next visit

BY GEORGIA CLARKE



**THIS PAGE** Signage along Buford Highway reflects cultural diversity. **OPPOSITE PAGE** A sampling of Korean fare is enjoyed on a Seoul of the South Food Tour put on by Explore Gwinnett; Food Terminal; Gwinnett County is a hot spot for Korean barbecue; a diner enjoys one of Food Terminal's several soups and other bites found on their expansive menu.



**W**HEN LILY PABIAN AND HER FAMILY MOVED TO BUFORD HIGHWAY IN THE LATE 1970s, it was difficult to find soy sauce at major grocery stores, much less to predict that this suburban 8-mile stretch through Georgia would one day be home to authentic cuisine from more than 20 nations.

Buford Highway was constructed back in the 1930s as a federal Works Progress Administration project to connect Atlanta to the northeastern suburbs of Chamblee, Doraville, and Norcross. By the 1970s and '80s, Atlanta's growing Chinese, Vietnamese, and Korean populations, among others, began to settle on the corridor due to affordable and plentiful housing, access to public transportation, and proximity to jobs. The years leading up to the 1996 Summer Olympic Games, which took place in Atlanta, saw an influx of Mexican and Central American workers to the region, and as these communities grew, some immigrants opened up restaurants to share their native cuisines. Soon, authentic eateries slowly emerged, some places serving steaming bowls of pho and others offering lengua (beef tongue) tacos singing with a squeeze of fresh lime.

Lily is an Asian American who currently works tirelessly as the executive director of We Love BuHi, a nonprofit organization dedicated to preserving the cultural mecca that is Buford Highway. Her family is from Taiwan, and when Lily was 5 years old, her family moved to the area by way of New York for her father to attend law school. She remembers Buford Highway's early years as an industrial area filled with white, blue-collar workers and far different from the international dining destination that it is today.

"We'd have to make a 15- or 20-minute trip down to a tiny grocer to find things like soy sauce, and then we would go a good 30 minutes to get to a farmers' market, Dekalb Farmers' Market, just to get the Asian greens that we liked," Lily recalls. "At that time, Buford Highway wasn't all of the restaurants and eateries that we have today; it wasn't this dining experience."

Buford Highway began as a suburban development accented by a seemingly endless stream of strip malls with fast-food burger joints and discount convenience stores, and while the scenery hasn't changed much, the people who occupy the shops have. It's estimated that



## TALK OF THE SOUTH

# 3 Dishes to Try Along Buford Hwy



## 1 SHRIMP CEVICHE TACOS

*Zippy lime-kissed shrimp ceviche plus a healthy amount of creamy avocado top corn tortillas for the perfect fresh-tasting lunch.*

**La Pastorcita**  
3304 Buford Hwy NE

## 2 VIET-STYLE CRAWFISH

*Spicy Louisiana crawfish perfumed with fragrant orange, lemongrass, and garlic reflects owner Hieu Pham's Vietnamese heritage.*

**Crawfish Shack Seafood**  
4337 Buford Hwy NE #170

## 3 DOLSOT BIBIMBAP

*Served in a sizzling stone bowl called a dolsot, bibimbap is a Korean rice dish made with toppings like kimchi, seasoned vegetables, and marinated beef, and this spot does it best.*

**Stone Bowl House**  
5953 Buford Hwy NE



**OPPOSITE PAGE** Food Terminal's industrial-style interior is set up similar to a food hall. **THIS PAGE** (Clockwise) Grilled pork banh mi from Lee's Bakery; Pho at Pho Bac in Chamblee; Food Terminal.



nationalities can be found among the eateries along Buford Highway, and while in other cities, ethnic groups are typically divided by geography, on Buford Highway, you'll find a Korean barbecue restaurant sharing parking spaces with a Guatemalan panaderia.

It's widely believed that Havana Sandwich Shop was the first ethnic restaurant to open on Buford Highway. The restaurant was established by Eddie Bedit, Sr. who immigrated with his family from Cuba to the United States in 1962 with only the clothes on their backs. With the help of his wife, Debbie, and his father, Guido Bedit, Eddie established Havana Sandwich Shop in 1976, bringing the first taste of true Cuban cuisine to the Atlanta area. If you can resist the Cuban sandwich, the crisp, golden-brown empanadas and tostones have attracted a loyal and well-deserved following.

Oriental Pearl Seafood Restaurant is another spot that has been a Buford Highway mainstay for more than 25 years. This Cantonese restaurant specializes in dim sum. If you've had Spanish tapas, you'll be accustomed to the small, shared-plate-style meal, but unlike tapas, dim sum is brought to your table on a pushcart where plates and steamers of dumplings, buns, and various other bites sit in abundance. There's also Lee's Bakery, a Vietnamese spot whose unassuming

strip-mall locale somehow makes their grilled pork banh mi with crusty, house-baked bread and crisp pickled veggies all the more satisfying. In Doraville, El Rey Del Taco is yet another authentic eatery that has claimed its stake on Buford Highway. Open since 2002, they've been cranking out cabeza (cow's cheek), carnitas, and al pastor tacos, to name a few, on house-made tortillas ever since. If you head north toward Gwinnett County, you'll stumble upon the Seoul of the South, also known as the place to find Atlanta's most authentic Korean fare.

In Chamblee, Food Terminal has garnered major attention in the three years they've been open. Chef Amy Wong and Chef Howie Ewe opened Food Terminal in 2017, modeling the restaurant after the iconic food courts they used to frequent when they lived in Malaysia. "Almost every Sunday morning, we would go to the food court and pretty much hang out there all day," says Jane Ewe, manager of Food Terminal, daughter of Amy, and niece of Howie. "There's a big seating area in the middle, and wrapped around the seating area are kiosks and kiosks, and at each kiosk is a chef cooking their own thing. One kiosk might sell noodles, and the next will sell chicken over rice."

Jane immigrated from Malaysia to the Atlanta area in 1999 when she was 9 years old. At that time, there were very few Malaysian restaurants in the area, so when the opportunity

arose many years later to open a restaurant that would showcase their favorite foods, including a number of her grandmother's recipes, Jane and her family, who also own and operate other local spots like Sweet Hut and Top Spice, introduced Food Terminal to Buford Highway's exploding culinary scene.

Food Terminal's menu is made to look like a glossy magazine, and the sections are set up like the kiosks would be, each offering something different and not entirely Malaysian. Jane says Malaysia in itself is a unique place. Given its location in Southeast Asia, Malaysia is generally made up of three different ethnicities—native Malaysians, as well as Indian and Chinese people. And the diversity is represented in the food.

**"They're all unique in themselves, but when you put them all together, you find a whole new level of flavor."**

—JANE EWE

"Malaysian food is very unique in the ingredients that we use and cooking styles, and then Indian food has a lot of spices. Much of the Chinese population is Cantonese, so you also have things like stir-fry," Jane explains. "They're all unique in themselves, but when you put them all together, you find a whole new level of flavor."



**CLOCKWISE** Editor Sarah Ward browses pastry cases at Squisito Bakery & Cafe located in Plaza Fiesta; Korean dishes from JS Kitchen by Jang Su Jang in Duluth; Grandma Wonton BBQ Pork Tossed Noodle is one of Food Terminal's most popular dishes.



That next level of flavor brought on by the marriage of cultures is perhaps the crown jewel of Buford Highway. But it doesn't stop with the taste buds. "The foods you can find on Buford Highway are a catalyst for conversation," Lily says. "And there's a lot of teaching moments that Buford Highway offers as well."

*"It was like a patchwork of pieces of what they brought with them, their migrant story."* —LILY PABIAN

When Lily first moved to Georgia, her family settled on Buford Highway in Doraville in an apartment that neighbored a Korean family who lived below, a Latino family from Uruguay who lived across the pool, and quite a few white families who resided in between. Lily's family and the Latino family formed a close bond—a connection that wasn't necessarily built on

shared language or customs but instead on their experiences being immigrants. They'd share meals cooked by each other and got to taste the ingredients and dishes from their native countries, unknowingly learning a bit more about each other with every bite.

Lily also learned more about her own Chinese culture on Buford Highway. Her father was one of the early founders of a Chinese community center where members would bring bits and pieces of what they remembered from home. "Someone had experience with Chinese opera, so they would sing. Or someone would recite poems or even do some sort of ballroom dancing. It was like a patchwork of pieces of what they brought with them, their migrant story," she remembers. Today, Lily says Buford Highway remains a touch point in teaching her daughters about their family heritage. "These are our customs; these are our traditions. This is food etiquette; this is how you sit at a Chinese table," she says.

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The COVID-19 pandemic has been particularly tough for Buford Highway restaurants and eateries that have been faced with a severe decrease in business coupled with mandated closures and new parameters for serving guests. Yet as months pass, Lily says many have begun to see an uptick in business, which speaks to the resiliency of the restaurant owners. “I think pivot could be the hashtag of immigrants,” she says. “We’ve always had to pivot; it’s an important part of who we are.”

Beyond the location of your favorite meal, Buford Highway is a place where differences are celebrated. It’s a place where immigrants can connect to their culture, and parents can bring their children to teach them about the country where their family began. The South is home to people of all backgrounds, yet there are few locations where you can find as many cultures and cuisines as there are represented along vibrant Buford Highway. On your next trip to or through Atlanta, venture out to Buford Highway. It’s not hard to spend an entire weekend wandering in and out of the many restaurants and markets that make up this international marvel, but if you only have a few hours to spend, let your nose be your guide. ■

We Love BuHi’s efforts in revitalizing and preserving Buford Highway are made possible by donations. Visit [welovebuih.org/donate](http://welovebuih.org/donate) to learn how you can support their mission.

**CLOCKWISE** Plaza Fiesta; rolled ice cream is a dessert that originates in Thailand; Korean barbecue from 9292 Korean BBQ in Gwinnett County.



# UNDISCOVERED LOUISIANA

In a state known for big, bold flavors, visitors will find memorable meals in the most unexpected places. Country market plate lunches, golden fried po’ boys at seafood shacks and hole-in-the-wall barbecue joint briskets offer a glimpse into the Bayou State’s most cherished local secrets.

**LOUISIANA**  
Feed Your Soul.



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## AROUND TOWN

# Where to Play and Stay in Atlanta



Extend your BuHi visit by exploring a few sites in Atlanta. Home to the 1996 Summer Olympic Games, **Centennial Olympic Park** is a walkable park in the heart of Atlanta. Stretch your legs and snap a photo with the iconic Olympic rings sculpture before making the quick drive to **Ponce City Market** for some retail therapy and good grub. With more than two-dozen options, from sweet treats at **Root Baking Co.** to Indian street food at **Botiwalla**, you’re sure to find something delicious. Next, venture over to **Martin Luther King, Jr. National Historical Park** to see the famous civil rights activist’s childhood home and church. Finally, for a splendid night’s stay, retreat to **The Georgian Terrace** located just across the street from the famed **Fox Theatre**.