A DAY IN JoCo

It’s been the butt of jokes but Johnston County, colloquially known as JoCo, isn’t just the Triangle’s country bumpkin brother to the south any more. On the contrary, once you cross county lines, you’re heading to a place that, while still oozing with rural charm, has a lot to offer in terms of culture, entertainment and cuisine.

Consider Clayton, one of 11 JoCo towns and the county’s largest, with its vibrant downtown comprised of longstanding mom-and-pop shops mingled with a brewery, rooftop dining, arts and music festivals and a bustling weekend farmers’ market. There’s also picturesque Benson, and Smithfield, the county seat, serene in its placement along the Neuse River, brimming with history and the hometown to many notable people including actress Ava Gardner and a handful of sports luminaries.

One of the largest counties in the state, JoCo was incorporated in 1726 and named for Gabriel Johnston, the governor of North Carolina from 1754 to 1752. Smithfield earned its place in history books when General Joseph E. Johnston established a Confederate headquarters there in 1865; following Johnston’s defeat in Confederate headquarters there in 1865; following Johnston’s defeat in Battle of Bentonville—the largest land battle fought in the state—General William Tecumseh Sherman converted Smithfield’s courthouse square to a Union headquarters where he later announced the end of the Civil War.

Just minutes away from downtown Raleigh, JoCo is worthy of a day trip. Try great local food and drinks, go shopping, take a tour and visit a museum or two.

DO

Hinnant Family Vineyards

In Pitt Level, you’ll find the largest muscadine vineyard in the state with more than 100 acres of grapes. Wines range from a traditional white scuppernong to a dry blanc de bois. Take a tour to see how the wines are made, then enjoy a curated tasting or wine flight (plus a cheese board) on the front porch overlooking the vineyards. hinnantwinevines.com

155 Bentonville Reenactment

March 21-22
Every five years, the Bentonville Battlefield State Historic Site—the largest state historic site in North Carolina—hosts a reenactment of the Battle of Bentonville, which took place March 19-21, 1865 and marked the last Confederate offensive of the Civil War. You’ll learn the history of the battle between General Joseph Johnston’s Confederate soldiers and General Sherman’s advancing Union troops. Explore additional free programs at the Village of Bentonville: johnstoncountync.org/155th-bentonville-reenactment

Ava Gardner Museum

The fabulous Ava Gardner was born just seven miles away from Smithfield and a museum in the town honors the beloved Hollywood star with 16 permanent exhibits exploring her early childhood and rise to stardom. At an interactive kiosk, visitors get a more in-depth look at Gardner’s life beyond Hollywood. The museum also features a collection of Gardner’s original scripts, posters and personal belongings. avagardner.org

Clayton Sculpture Trail

Explore Clayton’s self-guided sculpture trail, which takes visitors through 15 public art pieces starting at Town Square and finishing at Clayton Community Center. This year, the rotating outdoor exhibit features pieces from artists located throughout the country, including a kinetic sculpture made from repurposed steel and a moving piece that makes music in the wind. Download the map at downtownclayton.org/Downtown-Clayton-sculpture-trail.aspx.

EAT

Redneck BBQ Lab

The Benson-based Redneck BBQ Lab combines science and barbecue to produce some of the best pulled pork, burnt ends, brisket, ribs, and chopped chicken in the state—with a vast trophy collection to prove it. Along with award-winning meats, classic sides, such as mac and cheese, slaw and cornbread, are made fresh daily. Look for the Lab at the Old North State Food Hall opening in Clayton this spring. thereheatedbbqlab.com

Jones Cafe

Since William and Emily Jones opened it in 1956, Clayton’s Jones Cafe has gained a cult following for its hot dogs—Carolina Packer red hots from Smithfield boiled in a secret blend of cooking oils, served with a heap of Stevens Chili (also from Smithfield). The restaurant offers burgers, sandwiches, fries and a full breakfast menu as well, all in a retro-setting complete with red and white checkered tablecloths. facebook.com/Jones-Ca- fe-116290391732380

Cornerstone Cafe & Coffee

The Benson cafe’s drool-worthy menu includes all-day breakfast and a full breakfast menu as well, with red and white checkered tablecloths.

Revival 1869

Located in historic downtown Clayton, Revival 1869 offers a selection of more than 100 whiskies from across the globe, along with seasonal cocktails made from freely squeezed juices and house-made syrups and tonics. Cozy up in a plush chair and enjoy live jazz every Thursday and Saturday night. revival1869.com

SIE

Double Barley Brewing

At this Smithfield brewery, brewmaster Larry Lane creates bold-flavored craft beers with the finest malted barley, hops and yeast. Award winning beers include Field of Dreams, SteakCake Stout, Abby’s Amber Ale, Thrilla in Vanilla Porter and Touché IPA. doublebarleybrewing.com

UG

Ugly Mug Bean & Brew

This family-owned coffee shop is definitely a JoCo staple. Enjoy your hot, iced or frozen coffee drink or smoothie with all-day breakfast and lunch menu. umcoffee.com

InStill Distilling Co.

Before you head home, stop by Clayton’s InStill Distilling to grab a bottle of the distillery’s signature white rum. The liqueur, released last May, is made from a molasses and sugar combo with a light finish of dry syrup, banana and sweet mo- lasses aromas. Take a guided tour of the distillery, too, and finish with a tasting or a cocktail. instilldistill.com

Drinking and driving is a bad idea. Please drink responsibly.