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GOOD EATS

Worth the drive

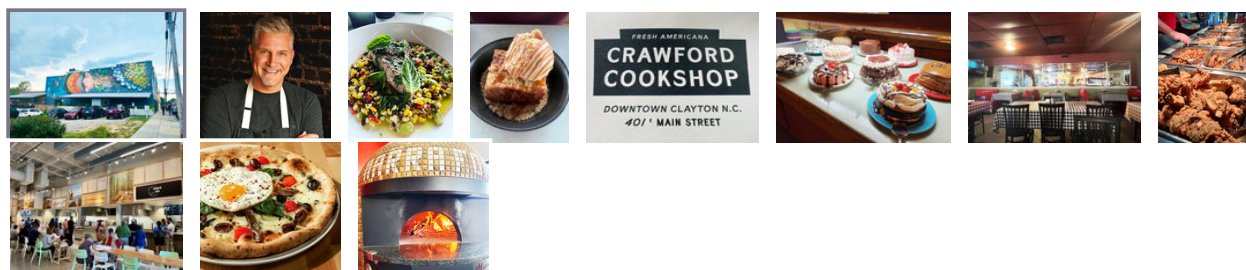
From a hot new food hall off I-95, to a country-style seafood buffet, to the latest eatery from a five-time James Beard semifinalist chef, the pickings are plentiful — and closer than you may think



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Crawford Cookshop is at 401 E. Main St. in Clayton.

JANET GIBSON



Posted Monday, October 3, 2022 9:48 am

By Janet Gibson

Fall road trips are the best. Open your windows or let down the top to feel autumn's first invigorating nip. Turn up the radio and perform your own version of "Carpool Karaoke." And, perhaps best of all, savor the promise of good eats just around the bend.

Food hall excitement

We arrive on opening day — Friday, Aug. 26 — of the Old North State Food Hall to discover hungry people from up and down the Eastern Seaboard. A quick scan of the parking lot reveals license plates from Maine to Florida and maybe a Selma firefighter or two. This means the food hall has already achieved the intended: lure motorists traveling north or south on Interstate 95 to take Exit 97 in Johnston County, plus attract the local folks, too.

Billed as "the nation's first roadside food hall," the 15,000-square-foot attraction is housed in the former JR Cigars outlet building. With 10 dining experiences under one roof, it's an ideal destination if Johnny is craving a big burger and Mom wants curry.

Here's the rundown: Barley and Burger Smashed; Luna (Neapolitan) Pizza; Curry in a Hurry; Aroma de Cuba; The Mac House; Fuku, a fried chicken joint from chef David Chang; My Cielo Taqueria; Cock a Doodle Moo, serving smoked meats and regional fare; Bean and Bubble, for coffee, bubble tea and poke bowls; and Butter Cream desserts. The full-service bar, dubbed Longleaf Tavern, is located in the old JR's humidor.

While it was impossible to try them all in one fell swoop, we made a reasonable dent, including a couple of orders to take home. That was with a little more than 100 bucks spent for the three of us, including tips.

The boys gave high marks to the juicy burgers and hand-cut fries from Beef and Barley Smashed and a big thumbs-down to the sweet tea in the food hall's beverage area, which tasted bland and instant. "If you're going to call yourself Old North State, you better bring your sweet tea game," said the dissatisfied customer.

Moving on ... Green Thai chicken curry and decent naan for me from the friendly folks at Curry in a Hurry. Registering a "6" on the spicy scale, it left me wondering if I could have asked for a "4." The mango smoothie tasted a bit sour. Trashed it, then noticed the butter chicken curry was flying out of the place.

Also observed that the brick oven at Luna was getting a fierce workout. And the results were admirable. Next time! Ditto for Cuban sandwiches, beef ribs, Mexican favorites and craft beers.

Soft ice cream with creative toppings from Butter Cream ended the food hall experience on a high note. But we also took home a spicy chicken sandwich from Fuku and a super-large portion of bacon and truffle macaroni and cheese from The Mac House. The boys bestowed a “10” on both selections.

Open daily for breakfast, lunch and dinner, the Old North State Food Hall is about an hour’s drive north of downtown Fayetteville, barring traffic. The address is 67 JR Road in Selma. www.onsfh.com/.

A country buffet & a bevy of cakes

You may say Meadow the usual way, but in these bucolic parts of JoCo, the popular pronunciation is Meh-duh.

And Meadow Restaurant is the place to be for a country-style buffet that’s worth fasting two days for.

Crispy fried chicken, garden-fresh vegetables, and a salad bar are primo. On Thursday, Friday and Saturday evenings, seafood is added to the mix, such as fried or grilled shrimp, scallops, deviled crab, catfish and trout.

But the real piece de resistance is the homemade cakes, pies and cobblers that are worthy of blue ribbons at the State Fair — reinforcing this family-friendly restaurant as a Southern slice of heaven. All-time favorites in the cake category include strawberry, lemon, coconut, chocolate and carrot.

It’s best to be an early bird to get the top picks. It’s all for about \$20, including the beverage. Tip generously. The women who keep your sweet tea filled and your plates cleared are rare gems.

Also, mark your calendars for the holidays when the magnificent Meadow Lights display and an old-fashioned candy store bring in the crowds just up the road a piece.

The country-style buffet at Meadow Restaurant is served from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. Thursday through Saturday and until 2:30 p.m. Sunday. Seafood is added to the spread from 4 to 8 p.m. Thursday, Friday and Saturday. The address is 7400 N.C. 50 S. in Benson, off Interstate 40. 919-894-5430

Fresh Americana fare from an acclaimed chef

When word spread in 2021 that acclaimed chef Scott Crawford would be opening Crawford Cookshop restaurant in downtown Clayton, foodies rejoiced and haven’t stopped celebrating.

“Fresh Americana” is how the chef describes his curated menus, which utilize the best seasonal finds and tantalize our senses with exceptional color, texture and taste.

During a recent visit, a standout dinner entree is the grilled yellowfin tuna over a succotash of sweet corn and field peas in a salsa verde. The beef and chicken dishes also are creative and palate-pleasing. Our favorite dessert is the warm bread pudding with macadamia nut crumble topped with salted caramel ice cream. Pure nirvana.

The vibe is modern and relaxed, and the service is delightful. A lovely Lab soaks in the positive ambiance on the patio close to our table.

Crawford is a five-time semifinalist for a prestigious James Beard Award for Best Chef in the Southeast. He is known for his refined, artful cuisine and his leadership in the culinary community. His flagship Crawford and Son, in the Historic Oakwood neighborhood of downtown Raleigh, has received numerous accolades. Another eatery, Jolie in downtown Raleigh, is inspired by his daughter and the intimate neighborhood bistros of Paris.

Our bill at Crawford Cookshop came to \$120, plus gratuity, which included three main courses, a cocktail and two desserts. All amazing.

About an hour’s drive from downtown Fayetteville, Crawford Cookshop is at 401 E. Main St. in Clayton. It’s open for dinner only from 5 to 10 p.m. Tuesday through Saturday. 919-585-6055

Keywords

Good Eats, Old North State Food Hall, Meadow Restaurant, Crawford Cookshop

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