

# Culinary Coordinates

North Carolina's Triangle region caters to the foodie palate

By Jeff Heilman

**F**ounded in 1959 by affiliates North Carolina State University in Raleigh, Duke University in Durham, and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Research Triangle Park, with its own zip code, is North America's leading and largest high technology research and science park. The Triangle region is also an address apart for dining and drinking, with a dynamic scene propelled by talent and innovation.

Of the eight North Carolina chefs nominated for the 2016 James Beard Award Best Chef: Southeast, four hailed from the Triangle. Serial Raleigh chef-restaurateur Ashley Christensen, who won in 2014, made two semi-finals, for her Death & Taxes (Best New Restaurant) and Poole's

Downtown Diner (Outstanding Chef). The region also produced two Outstanding Baker semi-finalists.

From craft beer and Piedmont BBQ to fine-dining, farmers markets, farm-to-table and ethnic cuisine, the Triangle's gastronomic geometry has many sides for memorable menu planning.

## Raleigh

Local influences and global flavors lead the culinary charge in North Carolina's capital, where the international audience drawn by the city's educational, technology, medical and scientific communities also means international cuisine.

"While traditional Southern cooking may come to mind, Raleigh is developing quite a reputation for diverse dining," said Ryan Smith, director of communications for Visit Raleigh.

Among the surprises: Bida Manda, one of the few true Laotian restaurants in the country, and Neomonde, a cafe founded in 1977 by four Lebanese brothers. With private dining options including the Palace Room for 60 guests and outdoor Hanging Garden for 350, Moroccan restaurant Babylon is notable for its design and decor. Owner Samad Hachby imported tiles,



mosaics, tin lanterns and other elements to re-create an authentic version of home in his update of the century-old Melrose Knitting Mill.

Independent chef-driven concepts only enhance Raleigh's genuine taste of place. Incorporating a restaurant and grocery store, butcher shop included, 80-seat Standard Foods is

an homage to the region's artisanal roots. Earning his fourth James Beard Best Chef nomination this year, Standard Foods' former chef, Scott Crawford, was also previously executive chef at Heron's—the sophisticated restaurant at five-star, meetings-capable Umstead Hotel & Spa in Cary, just west of Raleigh. Here, new Executive Chef Steven Greene was also Beard-nominated for Best Chef this year.

As part of its "Rooted in Raleigh" campaign, Visit Raleigh is leveraging its culinary story (see this month's "Cities to Watch" feature, page 25) to attract group business.

"Our convention sales department has utilized a number of our culinary standouts at tradeshow, client events, site inspections and sales missions," Smith said. "Ashley Christensen and Scott Crawford are among the chefs we are planning to

THE DURHAM HOTEL



take to key markets for restaurant or venue takeovers, and this month we are highlighting our various BBQ styles at Six in the City, a curated event with five other destinations in Washington, D.C.”

## Durham

Following last year’s second annual Taste festival, a curated gathering of some 40 Durham and Chapel Hill chefs, restaurateurs and beverage experts that was held at the Durham Armory, the *Huffington Post* commented that “Durham proved once again what an amazing food city it is becoming.” News flash—the culinary scene here has long been amazing, even before *Southern Living* crowned Durham the “Tastiest Town in the South” in 2013, following even earlier accolades from the *New York Times* and *Bon Appetit*.

“Durham’s food scene roars,” said Sam Poley, director of PR and communications for the Durham CVB and a former Durham chef-restaurateur. “The cadre of imaginative chefs and celebrated restaurants here has garnered a long list of fans who



DURHAM FARMERS MARKET

have fallen in love with food and dining experiences that are comfortable and convivial, while being at once true-to-style and unique. With options ranging from low-key but high-flavor food truck experiences to award-winning fine dining, Durham is definitely a destination for diners.”

Durham’s culinary stars were out again for the 2016 Taste event. Andrea Reusing, James Beard Best Chef winner in 2011 for Lantern in Chapel Hill, delivers her locally sourced, North Carolina-inspired menus throughout downtown’s boutique Durham Hotel. These include The Restaurant at the Durham and the open-air rooftop lounge, available for small private parties.

Other hotel restaurants include the Counting House at the 125-room boutique 21c Museum Hotel, which comes with 10,500 square feet of art-filled exhibition and event space, and the AAA Four Dia-

mond, Forbes Four-Star Fairview Dining Room at the romantic Washington Duke Inn & Golf Club.

Four-time Beard semi-finalist Phoebe Lawless produces wondrous pies and other baked goods at Scratch, with catering available. Spanish tapas meet Southern style at 2016 Beard nominee Matthew Kelly’s celebrated Mateo Bar de Tapas, private space included. Kelly’s other restaurant, Vin Rouge, is a classy French bistro with flexible group space.

With meeting space for 50 and private dining for 24, Nana’s, opened in 1992, is a cherished local favorite for hearty tasting menus and seasonal fare.

## Chapel Hill

Surrounded by farms that supply meats and produce to local restaurants and five nationally recognized farmers’ markets, Chapel Hill, on the Triangle’s western edge, continues to flavor its own well-heeled culinary reputation.

“Travelers purposely seek out Chapel Hill to experience its exceptional food,” said Patty Griffin, communications director for the Chapel Hill/Orange County Visitors Bureau.

Luminaries include internationally acclaimed Lantern, from the previously mentioned 2011 James Beard-winning Chef Andrea Reusing. Opened in 2002, her Asian-influenced temple is for locally sourced delights like lemongrass-grilled pork chop and steamed wild fish, with the adjacent Lantern Table private dining room, community kitchen and a four-season garden among versatile group options.

Recognized by James Beard in 2011 as an “American Classic” and called “sacred ground for Southern foodies” by the *New York Times*, Crook’s Corner is a must for sensational seasonal fare, craft cocktails, outdoor patio events and more.

Il Palio, the state’s only Four Diamond Italian restaurant, reopened last September after its first major renovation in almost three decades. Located at the Tuscan villa-inspired Siena Hotel, the transformed restaurant, which caters meetings and events at the hotel, features an open kitchen and chef’s table. Also expanded and revamped is Crossroads Chapel Hill, the restaurant at the University of North Car-



THE RESTAURANT AT THE DURHAM

olina’s historic 185-room Carolina Inn, featuring regionally sourced Carolina cuisine and seven private function rooms.

Opened in 1975, Southern Season Cooking School is a local institution offering classes and teambuilding for groups. Other top coordinates with private space include Weathervane, City Kitchen, 411 West Italian Cafe, and for events, tours and tastings, the legendary TOPO—Top of the Hill Restaurant, Brewery and Distillery, “the social crossroads of Chapel Hill.”

Just south of Chapel Hill, Fearington Village is a former dairy farm converted into a country village-style development in 1974. Opened in 1980, the Relais & Chateaux Fearington House Restaurant is the nation’s sole green-certified AAA Five Diamond and Forbes Five-Star restaurant, offering private space and interactive culinary programs. 



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