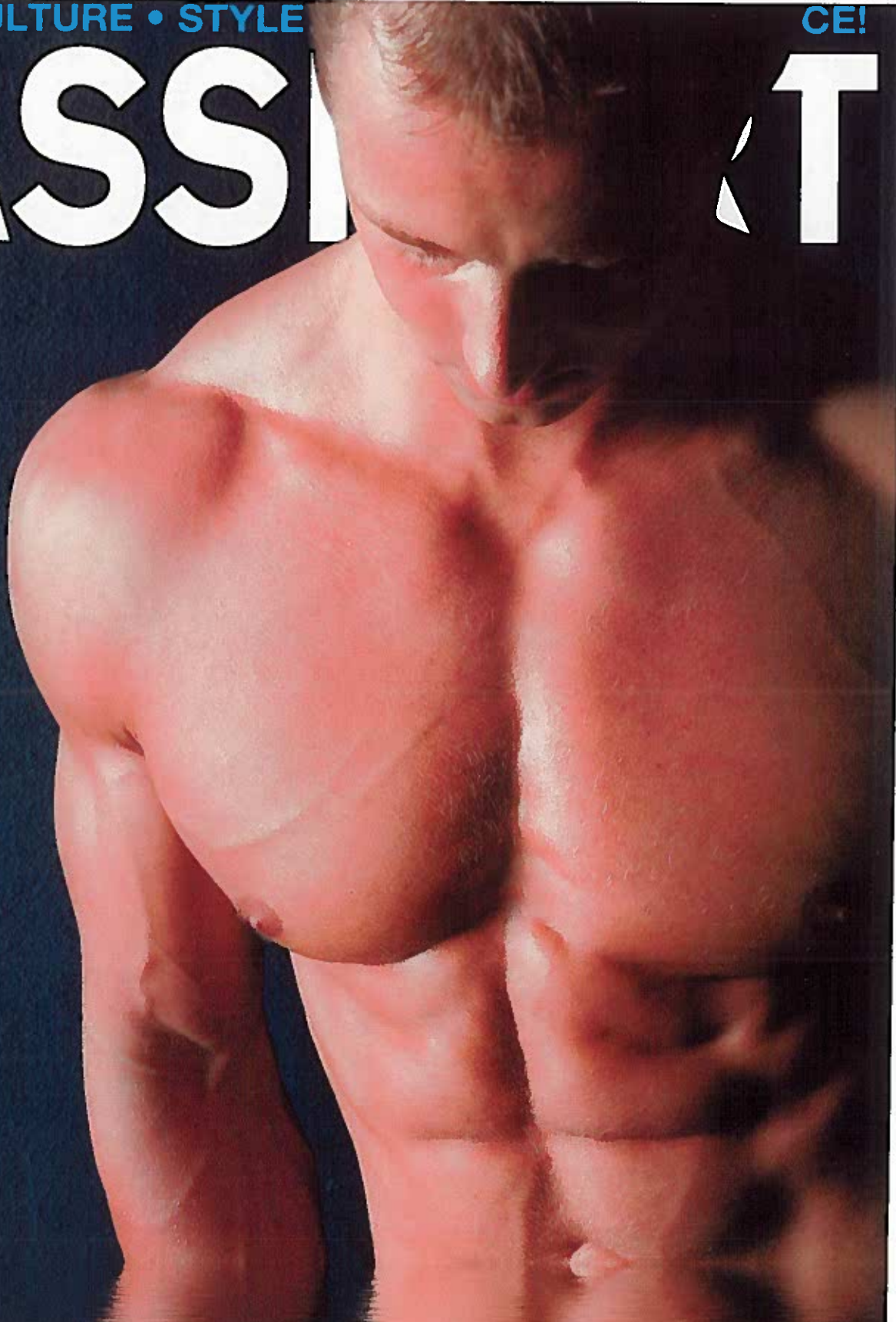


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NORTH CAROLINA'S CRAFT CUISINE, BREWERIES, AND DISTILLERIES

by Lawrence Ferber

From Asheville in the west to Wilmington on the coast, North Carolina's major cities percolate with delicious and boozy creativity, and since many of these treats and bottles are strictly local, the only way to savor and/or take them home is to actually go there for some *gastrotourism*.

I took a NC road trip to check out the diverse offerings, from crispy buffalo-style pig ears, and possibly the world's best nouveau grits dish, to a dense chocolate stout beer that obsessed locals camp out overnight for, plus fabulous LGBT-owned spots and chefs...with help from a designated driver and prudent pacing, of course.

ASHEVILLE

Nestled in the mountains, Asheville (www.exploreasheville.com) holds a reputation as one of the South's most prominent LGBT meccas. Hippies, hipsters, and artists have long flocked here: its progressive Black Mountain College was founded in 1933, with a teacher and alumni roster that includes Josef Albers and Merce Cunningham. Today, culinary culture also reigns, with a Portland-like output of incredible craft everything. "Portland is the Asheville of Oregon," one local countered, strongly.

I checked in at **Reynolds Mansion** (100 Reynolds Heights. Tel: 828-258-1111. www.thereynoldsmansion.com), a gay-owned, luxury B&B about five miles from the city center. Charming owners Billy and Michael have decked out the place with period art and tchotchkes (and some old-Hollywood mementos), yet the rooms boast modern tech, and there are plenty of tasty pastries for snacking and, of course, every morning, a communal full-service breakfast.

Asheville's downtown is refreshingly free of big-box brands. Instead, you have cool, thoughtfully curated indie shops like in LGBT-owned bookstore, **Malaprop** (a favored stop on author readings/signings tours), and **Asheville Bee Charmer** (38 Battery Park Ave. Tel: 828-424-7274. www.asheville-beecharmer.com). The latter's owners, a for-

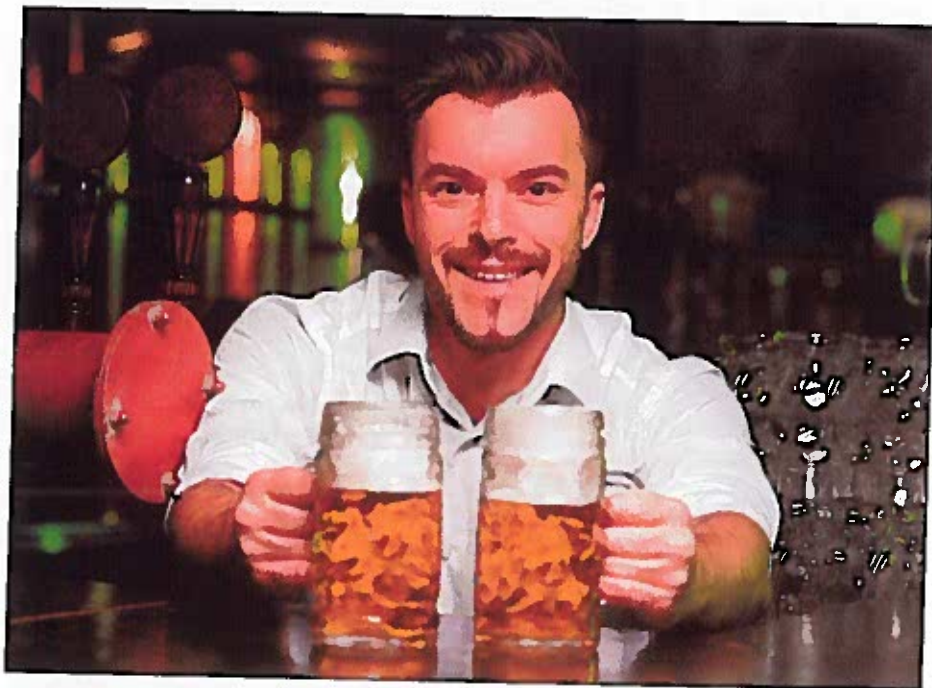


Photo: g-stockstudio

mer day trader, Jillian Kelly, and her life partner Kim Allen, moved from Chicago to Asheville in 2013. A year later they opened this unique all-things-honey boutique.

Their 50-plus honey varietals, which you can sample at their tastings bar (strongly encouraged and alone worth the visit), range from local sourwood to imported Sicilian wild carrot.

Honey also figures into Troy & Sons' quaffable Honey Nectarine Whiskey, which can be tasted during free Friday and Saturday tours at **Asheville Distilling Company** (12 Old Charlotte Hwy. Tel: 828-575-2000. www.ashevilledistilling.com), best known for a high-end, legal moonshine fashioned from non-GMO heirloom corn.

A locavore take on a deli-bodega, the year-old **Ben's Penny Mart** (195 Hilliard Ave. Tel: 828-424-7580. www.facebook.com/tuneupmart) serves excellent, meat-centric lunch sandwiches and American craft sake made just next door. Come dinner, it's time for fine dining. Chef John Fleer's **Rhubarb** (7 SW Pack Square. Tel: 828-785-1503. www.rhubarb-asheville.com), opened in October 2013, is spacious with a contemporary chic-rustic aesthetic and farm-to-table (which, at this point, is becoming redundant to mention) menu of

tapas-style small plates like heritage pork meatballs with grits and tempura-pickled green beans with ranch dressing dip, and mains including goat cheese gnudi. Brunch here is also a local favorite.

A favorite after-hours haunt of kitchen staff from other excellent Asheville eateries (always a good sign), the year-old speakeasy-restaurant **Nightbell** (32 South Lexington Ave. Tel: 828-575-0375. www.thenightbell.com) is from hot Asheville Chef Katie Button, whose resume includes elBulli. The cocktails are high-maintenance, delectable concoctions: Penicillin #3 includes apple pie moonshine, honey ginger syrup, smoked applewood, lemon, and all-spice, while the vegetarian-friendly small-plate-driven dinner menu veers wildly in international influence (e.g. shakshuka grits).

Beer lovers, meanwhile, can sample inventive ales and stouts at **Wicked Weed Brewing** (91 Biltmore Ave. Tel: 828-575-9599. www.wickedweedbrewing.com) and barrel-aged sours and wild brews at sister venue **Funkatorium** (147 Coxe Ave. Tel: 828-552-3203).

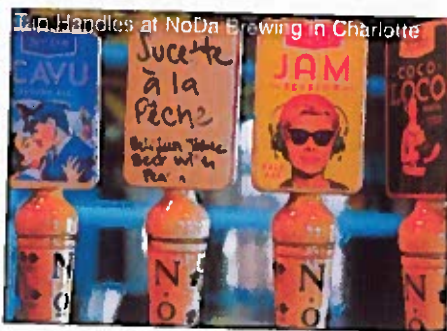
CHARLOTTE

Nicknamed "The Queen City" in honor of

King George III's wife, Queen Charlotte of Mecklenburg-Strelitz, **Charlotte** (www.charlottesgotalot.com) is a major hub for banking, while tourists are lured by its excellent museums, the NFL Carolina Panthers' 74,000-seat Bank of America Stadium, an annual LGBT Pride (www.charlottepride.org), and plenty of historic sites and establishments including the century-old **Dunhill Hotel** (235 N. Tryon St. Tel: 404-332-4141. www.dunhillhotel.com). The latter, occupying a prime city center location, was previously known as Mayfair Mansion, and now exists as an upscale yet retro-minded boutique property.

The Asbury (235 N. Tryon St. Tel: 704-342-1193. www.theasbury.com) restaurant is excellent, with blue walls, creamy banquettes, and street views up front. Maintaining close relationships with 40 area farmers, Executive Chef Chris Coleman adheres to a nose-to-tail philosophy (all animals are bought whole and little goes to waste) in his modern-Southern cooking. In fact, the butter is made from rendered pork fat. The \$65 five-course tasting menu might include seared scallops atop sliced pork belly, and hay-smoked burrata with arugula.

Opened in 2010 as a business incubator, **7th Street Public Market** (224 E. 7th St. Tel: 704-230-4346. www.7thstreetpublicmarket.com) houses divine vendors including artisanal java-slingers **Not Just Coffee** (their housemade Juniper Lime soda is also delicious), **Pure Pizza** for Neapolitan-style pies like The Chorizo, with chorizo, shaved radishes, onions, cilantro, and lime with spicy honey for crust-dipping (it's amazing!), and a lesbian-



owned beer bar, **Tank's Tap**, which keeps many Charlotte-area brews on tap.

The Charlotte area is home to about 16 craft breweries, including the four-year-old **NoDa Brewing** (2229 N. Davidson St. Tel: 704-900-6851. www.nodabrewing.com), located in the trendy and bohemian NoDa district. Their Mojito-inspired wit, NoJajito, and organic coconut-blessed chocolate stout, Coco Loco, are fantastic.

While far-flung from Charlotte's urban center, Chef Clark Barlowe's **Heirloom** (8470 Bellhaven Blvd. Tel: 704-595-7710. www.heirloomrestaurantnc.com) is worth the drive. After stints at iconic restaurants French Laundry and elBulli, Barlowe returned to his home state to open this rustic country home venue with a staunch locavore ethos. Everything, no exceptions, is sourced within NC and housemade (including the honey, extracted from six rooftop hives), while exotic regional produce and plants are put to innovative use on the daily-changing tasting menus (from three courses at \$35 to 12 at \$120), which fuse Southern and international cuisine. We're talking curried tomato soup with mint oil and roasted watermelon seeds, Triple C smoked malt sausage, and vermilion snapper over forbidden rice, noodle beans, and Thai chili pickled shallots. This is Michelin Star worthy.

WINSTON-SALEM

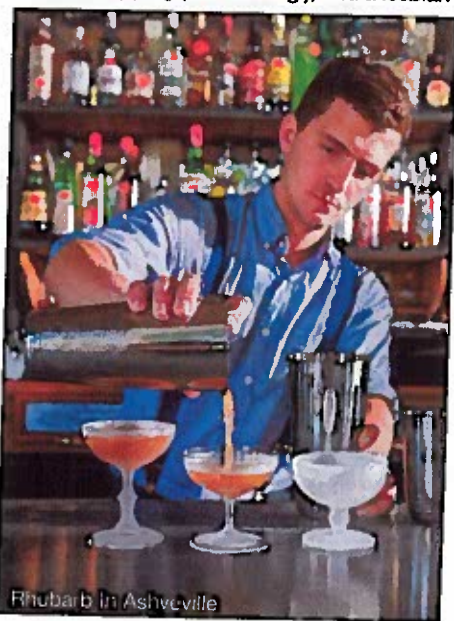
North Carolina's fifth-largest city, **Winston-Salem** (www.visitwinstonsalem.com) was originally two cities that became joined/hyphenated in the 1900s.

The Moravians, a religious people à la the Amish, that originally hailed from the Czech region of Moravia (hence the name) and, later, Germany, settled in Salem during the 1700s, and the town retains its historic charm and Moravian buildings (and period costume characters). Now known as **Old Salem** (www.oldsalem.org), it's a robust tourist attraction, and I settled into the main strip's **Augustus T. Zevely Inn Bed & Breakfast** (803 S. Main St. Tel: 336-748-9299. www.winston-salem-inn.com).

Today, the Moravians are best known for their namesake cookies (thin, crisp discs in ginger and other flavors) and Winston-Salem is ground zero for this addictive confectionary specialty. Run by a seventh-generation Moravian, **Mrs Hanes' Moravian Cookies** (4643 Friedberg Church Rd., Clemmons. Tel: 336-764-1402. www.hanescokies.com) remains the only facility to create these by hand (some 400-500 pounds daily in six varieties, including black walnut and vanilla), and is a favorite of Oprah Winfrey. You can take a tour of the bakery and try your hand at rolling the dough and cutting a sheet's worth (nothing goes to waste. If your efforts are lame, they'll be placed into bargain bags of imperfect cookies after baking!).

For lunch, it's on to Winston, its main strip lined with plenty of small galleries and cool indie shops, plus a brand-new public art park with vapor-spewing pylons. Opened in 2003 by life partners Chef Stephanie Tyson and Hostess Vivian Joiner (they first met at Washington D.C.'s Lambda Rising), **Sweet Potatoes** (529 N. Trade St. Tel: 336-727-4844. www.sweetpotatoes.ws) is an unpretentious venue, with local art on the walls, specializing in all things sweet potatoes (which are sourced from the state's eastern region). Their sweet potato pie is an absolute must, creamy and rich, and has been featured in the *New York Times* and *USA Today*. Tyson also authored a cookbook, *Well, Shut My Mouth!* in 2011. They're a lovely pair to team up between bites!

Chocolate stout also warrants serious chocolate-fetish action in Winston-Salem. The annual release of cocoa-infused, bourbon barrel-aged Sexual Chocolate Imperial Stout from **Foothills Brewery** (638 W. 4th St. Tel: 336-777-3348. www.foothillsbrewing.com) sees dedicated fans camp out overnight to get first dibs at the limited run. It's admittedly a dense delight with coffee, toffee, and fruity tones, while Foothills' downtown pub serves Chef Shane Moore's superb Southern pub grub, like Parmesan-crusted shrimp and grit cakes, ale-battered fish and chips, and flash-fried calamari.



Rhubarb in Asheville

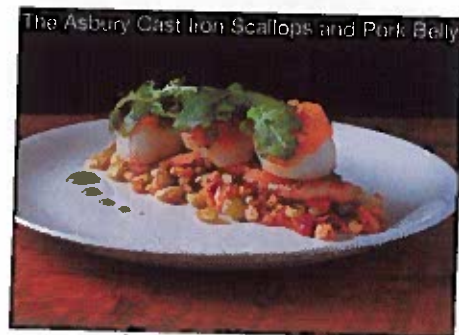


Photo: The Asbury

Photo: Lawrence Ferber

GREENSBORO

A passionate lesbian chef making blips on the national radar, Kristina Fuller (whose hands are tattooed with a diamond and dagger, respectively), heads two venues in neighboring Greensboro (www.visitgreensboronc.com). Featured last year on Food Network's *Cutthroat Kitchen*, Fuller's **Crafted – The Art of the Taco** (219-A S. Elm St. Tel: 336-273-0030. www.eatatcrafted.com) traffics in taco-fusion creations like the Wayfarer, with pulled pork, Korean red sauce, and sesame-marinated cucumber.

In May 2015 she opened a sister venue, **Crafted – The Art of Street Food** (600-C Battleground Ave. Tel: 336-265-8859), putting a spin on international hawker and street fare like Nashville hot wings, Quebec poutine, Cuban sandwiches, and Vietnamese bánh mì (here stuffed with decadent crispy pork belly). Conveniently, CTAOSF shares a building with **Preyer Brewery** (600 Battleground Ave. Tel: 336-256-9450. www.preyerbrewing.com), also opened in May, which keeps seven craft brews on tap.

THE TRIANGLE

The neighboring cities of Raleigh (www.visitraleigh.com), Durham (www.durhamnc.com), and Chapel Hill (www.visitchapel-hill.org) make up the Triangle, which for decades has been recognized as one of the state's most progressive regions (Durham is second only to Asheville as a Southern lesbian mecca, while the **NC Gay & Lesbian Film Festival** takes place in Durham).

After decades of efforts, Durham revitalized its downtown and 2015 saw major game-changing additions, like luxury boutique property **21c Museum** (111 Corcoran St. Tel: 919-956-6700. www.21cmuseumhotels.com/durham), which doubles as a world-class contemporary arts gallery. Its in-house restaurant, Counting House, is equally arts-centric (check out the stylized



takes on mounted animal heads, fabricated from rubber and other materials) with Chef Josh Munchel's fresh, elegant global-Southern fusion.

Breakfast spot **Parker & Otis** (112 S. Duke St. Tel: 919-683-3200. www.parkerandotis.com) is both a café and cavernous, foodie-centric gift shop. The two-egg BLT on toasted sourdough is particularly scrumptious. For lunch, brewery **Bull City Burger** (107 E Parish St. Tel: 919-680-2333. www.bullcity-burgerandbrewery.com) takes farm to table a step further, offering only seasonal ingredients (no tomatoes during winter!), duck-fat shoestring fries, excellent tap brews, and the state's first Puck's soda fountain.

Meanwhile, **Piedmont** (401 Foster St. Tel: 919-683-1213. www.piedmontrestaurant.com) seems the domain of special occasions and dedicated foodies, including lots of LGBT people. This loft-like space brought in a new chef, Gregory Gettles, in June 2015, whose excitement about native ingredients shines through brightly flavored technique-forward creations like crispy pork belly with tomato water, buttermilk, cornbread, watermelon pickles, and pasture-raised chicken with smoked oyster mushrooms and corn.

Gettles' cooking can truly be held up as a quintessential, must-try example of modern-Southern fare, and the same can be said of Chef Colin Bedford at **Fearrington House** (2000 Fearrington Village Center, Pittsboro. Tel: 919-542-2121. www.fearrington.com/the-fearrington-house-inn) in nearby Pittsboro. Part of the posh Fearrington Village, which includes a fabulous Inn and host of stunning wedding venues and services, the restaurant has been cited as one of *Condé Nast Traveler's* top hotel food destinations for Bedford's degustation menus, which might include yuzu scallop ceviche with compressed melon and whipped yogurt, eggplant caviar, and smoked Anson Mills grits with silver-queen corn and watermelon radish. The latter is mind-blowing, and possibly the most sophisticated, textural, and beautiful grits dish in the entire south.

Over in the state capital of Raleigh, also boasting a lively downtown today, Chef Ashley Christensen is a James Beard Award-winning

celebrity with seven venues and counting. One of the latest, **Joule Coffee & Table** (223 S. Wilmington St. Tel: 919-424-7422. www.ac-restaurants.com/joule), is especially popular during breakfast and brunch (the heirloom cornmeal Belgian waffle of the day is dreamy), while four-year-old **Beasley's** (237 S. Wilmington St. Tel: 919-322-0127. www.ac-restaurants.com/beasleys) specializes in the Southern staple of friend chicken and waffles.

Specialty pizzas and nano-brew beer rule **Trophy Brewing Co.** (827 W. Morgan St. Tel: 919-803-4849. www.trophybrewing.com). I was wowed by their bourbon barrel aged Wee Heavy, which was akin to liquid-burnt caramel. Some local brews and liquors are made with cocoa nibs from a pair of Raleigh bean-to-bar chocolate makers that add a Seattle-like touch to the Triangle: **Videri** (327 W. Davie St. Tel: 919-756-5053. www.viderichocolatefactory.com) and **Escazu** (936 N. Blount St. Tel: 919-832-3433. www.escazu.chocolates.com).

WILMINGTON

Asked to name the absolutely best thing I ate during this gut-busting road trip, it would be the crispy-buffalo pig ears I had for lunch at **Wilmington's** (www.wilmingtonandbeaches.com) **Rx** (421 Castle St. Tel: 910-399-3080. www.rxwilmington.com). Chef James Doss occupies the kitchen of this former pharmacy, transforming whatever's at market into new Southern miracles. Thinly sliced, dredged in wing sauce, over a shallow puddle of blue cheese dressing, this barely lasted ten minutes between myself and a couple of local foodies. Compressed watermelon, heirloom tomatoes, and shrimp with grits barely lasted longer.

New American-cuisine haunt, **Manna** (123 Princess St. Tel: 910-763-5252. www.mannaavenue.com), has a slick bistro feel. The menu's quirky-named selections, like Ducks On The Pond (seared duck breast, house-made gnocchi, rutabaga purée) are solid, as are the cocktails. Stuffed to the gills. It was off to nearby Wrightsville Beach for some well-earned sand and sun time.

Later, I check into the gay-friendly boutique property **Blockade Runner** (275 Waynick Blvd., Wrightsville Beach. Tel: 910-256-2251. www.blockade-runner.com), where same-sex weddings are welcomed with open arms and a lovely oceanfront lawn and deck set the stage for a relaxing respite by the sea. I also quickly realize their own restaurant has quite an impressive menu...there's always room for a chilled Thai carrot and ginger soup and Carolina crab cakes. Right? ■

