north carolina

BY JENN RICE

BEST CHEF
Cheetie Kumar

AJJA
Raleigh

Cheetie Kumar is as committed to making every dish an explosion of flavor as she is to advocating for the industry and policy change. One example: During the pandemic, she joined the Independent Restaurant Coalition nationally to help save thousands of small American restaurants from shuttering. To Kumar, it isn't just about making good food and winning awards; it's about preserving culture and memories. At her restaurant, Ajja, she dances with flavors and ingredients from the Mediterranean and Middle East. "I'm finding connections to food I have known and cooked for over a decade while discovering new ways to honor a whole new region," she says. Kumar is also a magician with vegetables. "People who continue to farm are getting more adventurous, and small farms are trying new things. Between seed savers and thoughtful new hybrids, solar tunnels that extend growing cycles, I find new inspiration from our local food supply all the time." We have to consistently confess our love for her carrot dishes: One bite of the carrot houriya—with caramelized carrots, urfa pepper, soft goat cheese, almonds, and fennel—and you'll understand just how much her wizardry in the kitchen sets her apart. *ajjaeats.com*

Ajja

Cheetie Kumar RECOMMENDS

SEABIRD
Wilmington

Not only is the food always creative and delicious, but the care taken in sourcing thoughtfully is palpable throughout the menu. Hospitality and kindness are woven into the vibe. *seabirdnc.com*

CHAI PANI
Asheville

There's a reason it's become a legendary spot. Chai Pani sets itself apart—the flavors are just that much more potent yet balanced, the decor is just that much more jubilant, the service that much more joyful. *chaipani.com*

NANAS
Durham

This legacy Durham landmark landed in the best hands it could dream of with Matt Kelly and Nate Garyantes. Beautiful food [and] maybe the most gorgeous bar in the state. *nanasrockwood.com*

CHEENI
Durham

It's been a joy to see Preeti Waas' evolving path enriched with creativity and buoyancy from the community. Her menu, featuring regional Indian dishes, makes me a little homesick for [my previous restaurant]. *cheenidurham.com*

FROM TOP: JOE PAYNE; BAXTER MILLER. OPPOSITE: FORREST MASON

Best New Restaurant
FIGULINA
Raleigh

Post up at Figulina for chef David Ellis' pasta-centric and small plates menu (we're never not ordering the whipped ricotta with seasonal North Carolina vegetables and the mafaldine country ham carbonara when available). Tuesdays through Thursdays from 5 to 6:30 p.m., aperitivo hour happens with Italian sips and snacks—plus, you can now take freshly made pasta, conservas, and wine home via their shop. Like the whimsical illustrations? Ellis' wife, Sam Taylor, is responsible for the brand's vision. *figulinaraleigh.com*

Most Likely to Receive Michelin Stars
HERONS AT THE UMSTEAD
Cary

Herons, inside The Umstead hotel, offers American regional cuisine with a seasonal, locally sourced menu. Executive chef Steven Devereaux Greene's precise technique and focus on high-quality ingredients shine in every dish. A Forbes Five-Star gem, it's one of the Southeast's most celebrated spots, and if Michelin rated North Carolina, it would surely earn at least two stars. Green's tasting menu is otherworldly, with dishes inspired by art and nature from the hotel's grounds. Harkers Island oysters are known to arrive looking as if they're floating on a cloud by way of dry ice—topped with caviar, of course. Here, you'll consistently ponder whether you're Alice in Wonderland. *theumstead.com*

ANNA ROUTH BARZIN-OPPOSITE; JULIA LYNN


Cheeni

Best Global Influence
CHEENI
Durham

Cheeni is one of Durham's most exciting restaurants. Chef Preeti Waas and her daughter, Amy, bring a heartfelt dining experience to guests. A unique touch: Every table receives a thoughtfully explained menu, delivered in a small travel trunk-inspired box, where Waas connects diners with the origins of the dishes they will eat. The menu features regional Indian fare like Kerala beef, hariyala whole fish, and chicken ishtu—the coconut milk gravy will knock your socks off, it's so good. *cheenidurham.com*

Coolest Pop-Up
AMALIEÄ
Triangle-based
(with pop-ups around the state)

"Our goal with Amalieä is and has been the promotion of Caribbean food as a popular cuisine and fine-dining option," says founding chef Lemar Farrington, who hosts ongoing dinners at various event spaces around the Triangle and beyond. Eat and listen as he weaves stories full of ingredients, recipes, and Southern food traditions like barbecue and hummingbird cake. Keep an eye out for his "island hopping series," when you'll journey through a 6-to-7-course menu and each dish is influenced by a different Caribbean island. *amaliea.com*

Best Bakery
MOTHER
Asheville

After their success inside a 190-square-foot bread and wine spot, Mother (named after their signature sourdough) in the River Arts District, Brett Watson and Heidi Bass opened a Euro-style bakery and café of the same name in South Slope with a full-blown menu centered on bread. Everything is stellar, including the lamb burger, croque madame, and chocolate espresso crémeux—and the wine never disappoints. *motheravl.com*