

ADVENTURE & TRAVEL

Eat Your Way Through Appalachia

Skip the fried-squirrel jokes—this could be the next big dining destination. And a multistate road trip is the way to experience it

BY MELANIE D.G. KAPLAN

GROWING UP in the heart of Appalachia—specifically, the Kentucky coal-mining town of Hazard—my friend Travis Fugate had little variety in his cuisine. Pinto beans, unsweetened cornbread and fried cabbage were staples. At a young age, he knew he wanted more flavor, diversity and excitement in his meals.

He eventually found that elsewhere, but it turns out he didn't need to leave Appalachia to do so. The region, which covers parts of 12 states between New York and Mississippi (plus all of West Virginia) isn't just a major source of coal; it's one of the most agriculturally abundant areas in the U.S. Everything from rhubarb to ramps grows there, and farming, canning and pickling are important aspects of the local food heritage.

The mountainous terrain that gave rise to so much bounty—and created a distinct culture and dialect (the “holler” where Travis grew up sounds to me like “holler”)—has also kept the region geographically isolated and in many ways, lagging behind nationally. Appalachia continues to rank low in terms of income, employment, education and health. Traditional dishes reflect some of those challenges: Soup beans, made from dried legumes and a bit of pork for flavoring, is cheap to make; stack cake is said to have originated with friends and family contributing layers to build a wedding cake, which would otherwise have been prohibitively expensive.

Only in recent years have chefs begun to recognize and riff on this rich heritage. And a new initiative by the Appalachian Regional Commission, an economic development agency, aims to promote it. The Bon Appétit! Bon Appalachia! map and website, launched this summer, spotlight hundreds of the region's most distinctive food destinations, from farmers' markets to craft breweries to cafes that serve locally sourced berries and beets. On the list are spots like the SustainFloyd Farmers Market in the funky town of Floyd, Va., off the Blue Ridge Parkway; and a small, legal moonshine operation in Gilbert, a hard-scrabble blip of a town in the coalfields of West Virginia.

I had many of the same preconceptions a lot of people do about Appalachian fare (lots of fried food, the occasional squirrel) and had never considered visiting this part of the country to eat. But the more I studied the map, the more intrigued I was by all of the farm-to-table restaurants in off-the-tourist-track places. Travis—who shares my love of bluegrass music and culinary adventures—was in Kentucky for the summer, and agreed that a road trip was in order.

We sketched out a four-day itinerary through the heart of Appalachia—West Virginia, Kentucky, Virginia and North Carolina—and chose a dozen spots to visit, a few in each town. I dreaded the hours of mountain driving, but at least it would give our stomachs a respite between meals.

One Friday morning in August, we loaded our dogs into the car and headed west from Washington, D.C., into the mountains. Four and a half hours later, we'd reached our first stop, Lewisburg, W.V. Just 10 miles from the famous Greenbrier resort, the town didn't seem to suffer from the economic blight that affects much of the region. We walked past bakeries, boutiques and art galleries, and grabbed the last open lunch table at a decade-old bistro called Stardust Café.

Giant paper lanterns hung from the ceiling, and a note on the menu suggested that “slow food” might mean leisurely delivery as well as sustainable sourcing of ingredients. We shared a locally grown green salad topped with plump tomatoes that tasted fresh off the vine, and a fat, juicy burger, made from locally raised, grass-fed beef and embellished with avocado. I was glad to



From top: Alamy; NC Persinger for The Wall Street Journal (2)



DISH DASH Clockwise from top: The Highland Scenic Highway in West Virginia; Bluegrass Kitchen in Charleston, W.V.; the restaurant's tofu 'wings.'

have made an exception for the burger in my largely vegetarian diet.

I'd asked Jennifer “Tootie” Jones, who raised the cow that became our burger, to join us—her Swift Level Farm is just 4 miles away from the restaurant. After lunch, we followed her to the farm, where she raises some 75 head of cattle and hosts cookouts and weddings. Sugar maples and oaks lined the winding driveway, and black and brown Angus cattle dotted the hilly pastures. Showing us around, Ms. Jones said she hoped that the new tourism initiative would help educate folks—not just about Appalachia, but about where their food comes from.

As we drove west on Interstate 64 toward Charleston, we crossed the New River, popular with white-water kayakers and rafters. Travis mused that he should find a bride so they could marry at Ms. Jones's storybook farm, but our conversation never strayed far from food. He recalled sitting on the porch with his grandmother, breaking green beans for canning, and rushing to see what remained in his father's blackened lunch box after a day at the mine. Many people in his hometown would be hard-pressed to even afford a meal at Stardust, he observed.

We continued westward, and just before dinner arrived in Charleston, a riverfront city of 50,000 that combines the splendor of a gold capitol dome with the grittiness of its industrial past. After walking the dogs around the capitol building, we drove up the street to Bluegrass Kitchen, which specializes in high-end comfort food. The city's East End was starkly different from Lewisburg;

abandoned storefronts and empty lots stretched along the main street. We sat in the corner of a large dining room with exposed-brick walls and a pressed tin ceiling. And then, we over-ordered. Our table was soon covered with dishes: tomatoes stuffed with quinoa, squash, peppers and feta; a version of Hoppin' John, the traditional Southern stew, with black-eyed peas and Swiss chard; and a trout and grits dish with kale and bourbon-mustard-dill sauce.

Tomato soup, grilled cheese, green salad, potato salad, sautéed squash and beans, and apple cobbler cost just \$10.

The portions were better suited to people who'd spent the day doing manual labor, but we couldn't resist finishing the meal off with blueberry buttermilk pie. Patrons at the next table offered advice on local spots. One suggestion was Taylor Books, a high-ceilinged indie bookstore on the other side of town with a lively coffee shop. We stopped there the next morning and flipped through hard-to-find books like “Mountain Measures: A Collection of West Virginia Recipes” and “Folk Medicine in Southern Appalachia.” At Capitol Market, the city's indoor-outdoor farmers market, we browsed giant bins of dried beans, fresh produce, Mason jars of jalapeno-pickled eggs and a regional relish called

chow-chow, made with cabbage and onions.

As we crisscrossed the spine of the Appalachian Mountains, we found ourselves in the car for hours at a time, but often had the road to ourselves. We listened to bluegrass and country on WVOW radio, the “Voice of the Coalfields,” and followed handwritten signs for boiled peanuts. I marveled at the kudzu that blanketed trees and mountainsides.

Next up was Pikeville, Ky., a small mountain town that Travis said had spruced itself up since he'd last visited. The whole population seemed to be downtown for Muscle on Main, a monthly classic-car show. The roar of drag racing accompanied our al fresco meal at the Blue Raven, which serves “pub-style Appalachian cuisine,” like a bone-in pork chop with corn-muffin stuffing and bourbon-honey carrots. The owners grow produce on a family farm. Travis's generously stuffed \$3 short-rib biscuit appetizer turned out to be the best value of the trip.

We spent the night in a lodge at Jenny Wiley State Resort Park, leaving early the next morning. Clouds hung low among the mountains. The road heading southeast toward Virginia curved like a Crazy Straw, and we listened to Sunday bluegrass gospel on the radio. “This is the kind of music we'd hear at church,” Travis said. “But at night, the lyrics are all about heartbreak and moonshinin'.”

In Abingdon, in southwestern Virginia, we stopped for brunch at Heartwood, a center that showcases the area's music, crafts and food and looks like a massive, modern inter-

pretation of a barn and silo. Although Heartwood sometimes caters to busloads of tourists, the food at its restaurant—buttermilk biscuits, heirloom-tomato-and-beet salad with goat cheese—tasted like it could have come from a farmhouse kitchen.

Travis had gotten in the habit of asking our servers where menu ingredients were from. Some said, frankly, that they arrived on 18-wheelers. Others named local farms. But we weren't prepared for Harvest Table, a homey, hardwood-floored restaurant in the little town of Meadowview, Va., owned by author Barbara Kingsolver and her husband, Steven Hopp. The server—calling me “Honey”—said we should try the blueberry crisp and the carrot cake; she'd made the crisp, and the carrots came from the owners' nearby farm.

In Boone, N.C., a hippy-outdoorsy town, we imbibed at Appalachian Brewing Company and dined at Hob Nob Farm Café, a five-year-old restaurant with a surprising number of vegan options—like a tamale with local kale, portobellos, sweet potatoes and vegan crème fraîche. I opted for the real-cheese, local-vegetable lasagna; Travis succumbed to the bacon-wrapped meatloaf.

Over the course of the trip, we'd seen coal towns struggling to reinvent themselves and restaurants straining to be sustainable and profitable. We'd talked about the challenge of providing healthy, tasty food to less-than-affluent locals. It seemed fitting that our last stop was Boone's F.A.R.M. (Feed All Regardless of Means) Café, a pay-what-you-can kitchen where you can buy a meal, trade volunteer hours for food or pay extra so someone else can eat later.

We sat at the counter next to a maintenance worker from Appalachian State University, who lunches there daily. The locally sourced meal—tomato soup, grilled cheese, green salad, potato salad, sautéed squash and beans, and apple cobbler—was served on a green cafeteria tray and cost just \$10.

“Tomorrow would be a good day to eat here,” a bearded regular offered. “Tomato Pie Tuesday, with heirloom tomatoes and goat cheese.” We later saw him sitting out front, playing the mandolin for change.

We wanted to return, and to volunteer serving meals and washing dishes. But too soon, we were on the road again, disentangling ourselves from the embrace of the mountains, speeding along the straight lines of the interstate, savoring memories of fresh kale and warm berry crisp.

THE LOWDOWN // A FOOD-FOCUSED ROAD TRIP IN APPALACHIA

Getting There: The Appalachian region includes West Virginia and parts of 12 other states, and stretches from southern New York to northern Mississippi. Bon Appétit stops are scattered throughout the area. Keep in mind that routes through the mountains can be very indirect.

Eating There: The Bon Appétit! Bon Appalachia! interactive map and guide are available at visitappalachia.com. Some highlights around the region: Blue-

grass Kitchen in Charleston, W.V., serves upscale comfort food, and cocktails with homemade garnishes, including pickled onions and ramps ([1600 Washington St. E., bluegrasswv.com](http://1600WashingtonSt.E.,bluegrasswv.com)). In Meadowview, Va., Harvest Table sources everything from within a 150-mile radius, including seafood from the Carolina and Virginia coasts ([13180 Meadowview Square, harvesttablerestaurant.com](http://13180MeadowviewSquare,harvesttablerestaurant.com)). F.A.R.M. Café in Boone, N.C., is a pay-what-you-can community kitchen that uses local ingredients ([617 W. King St., farmcafe.org](http://617W.KingSt.,farmcafe.org)).

Staying There: Country Girl at Heart Farm Bed & Breakfast in Munford, Ky., is an eco-friendly inn with a working farm ([from \\$109 a night, bedandbreakfastkentucky.net](http://from$109anight,bedandbreakfastkentucky.net)). The property's refurbished Amish farmhouse features skylights and organic cotton linens. At the Inn at Evins Mill, east of Nashville in Smithville, Tenn., you can enjoy luxury and mountain views, with creek-side accommodations and covered decks furnished with rocking chairs ([from \\$290 a night, evinmill.com](http://from$290anight,evinmill.com)).

