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On the Menu

Mobile's burgeoning food scene is drawing national attention — and for good reason

BY SUSAN SHAIN

When 32-year-old Chris Andrews was growing up in Mobile, Ala., his family never went downtown. "Everything was kind of boarded up," he says. But over the past decade, those shuttered buildings have begun to open their doors again. "We've had a few good mayors who made downtown a priority," says Andrews, who created the Bienville Bites Food Tour in Mobile. That strategy helped to revitalize the city, bringing it in line with its rich culinary and cultural history. Since 2008, the number of annual visitors to Mobile has grown by 45 percent — and the number of restaurants has nearly doubled, going from 28 to 50, according to Tara Ziemann, marketing and communications manager for Visit Mobile.

That abundant history dates back to 1703, when the country's first Mardi Gras celebration took place in what is now present-day Mobile — 15 years before New Orleans was founded.

"Folks have been talking about the historic side of Mobile for 300 years, but lately they're talking about the food," Ziemann says. "Shrimp, blue crab, oysters and more are as bountiful as they are succulent — and they come straight from our backyard: the Gulf of Mexico."

That said, seafood isn't the only delicacy on Mobile's menus these days. Whether you have a hankering for down-home barbecue or are looking for a contemporary take on authentic cuisine, even the most >



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Wintzell's Oyster House

discerning palates will enjoy eating their way through this historic Alabama town.

BOUNTY OF THE BAY

"When you talk about the food scene in Mobile, it revolves around oysters. It always has and always will," Andrews says, adding that oysters were the primary food source for the area's Native American tribes, and that nearby islands still have hills composed entirely of shells.

The bay's oyster-filled past extends through the Civil War, when hungry soldiers were delighted to arrive in Mobile. "They came down here, and it was like a seafood buffet," he says. "They could scoop their hands out of the water and have a meal."

To taste them for yourself, venture to one of the longest-running restaurants in town: **Wintzell's Oyster House**. What began as a six-stool oyster bar in 1938 is now a Mobile institution. Andrews takes visitors to

Wintzell's on his main tour, LoDa Stroll, which has seven stops and explores Lower Dauphin Street Historic District (LoDa).

The original downtown location oozes nostalgia, with walls plastered in hundreds of the founder's homespun sayings. Under signs like, "The best way to look young is to hang around older people," you can enjoy the city's signature dish: oysters, either fried, stewed or "nude" (raw).

While you're there, try the West Indies Salad, a tangy combination of crab meat, onions and vinegar that originated in Mobile. *O Magazine* called Wintzell's version one of the best things to eat in Alabama — and if you can't trust Oprah, who can you trust?

To sample more of the region's bounty, head out onto the Causeway, a narrow highway that straddles Mobile Bay. Here you'll find several "fish camps" — establishments modeled after



Felix's Fish Camp

the tin shacks of fishermen — offering rustic charm paired with tasty seafood.

One of the most famous is **Felix's Fish Camp**, which affords expansive views of the water — and resident gators Shelia and Big Brutus — from its panoramic windows. "The crab soup is to die for," says Stacy Hamilton, former vice president of marketing and communications for Visit Mobile. "As is pretty much everything else on the menu." >

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THE NEW PITMASTERS

While Mobile has always been known for its seafood, a relative newcomer is making waves in the BBQ world, too. **Meat Boss**, a homey spot with license plates on the walls — and a constant line on its front porch — was recently named the best-loved barbeque in the state by Yelp.

“We baby our meat all night long,” says Dara Chinnis, who co-owns the restaurant with her husband, Benny. She’s not exaggerating: Meat Boss has an overnight staff that tends the meat during its 12- to 14-hour smoking process, producing more than 2,000 pounds each week.

With a choose-your-own-adventure menu, patrons can create their perfect combination of meat, starch, sauce, toppings and sides. (Some can’t-miss options include the pulled beef brisket and creamy white Alabama sauce.) “It’s like you’re coming into our house to eat,” says Chinnis. “We make it however you want it.”

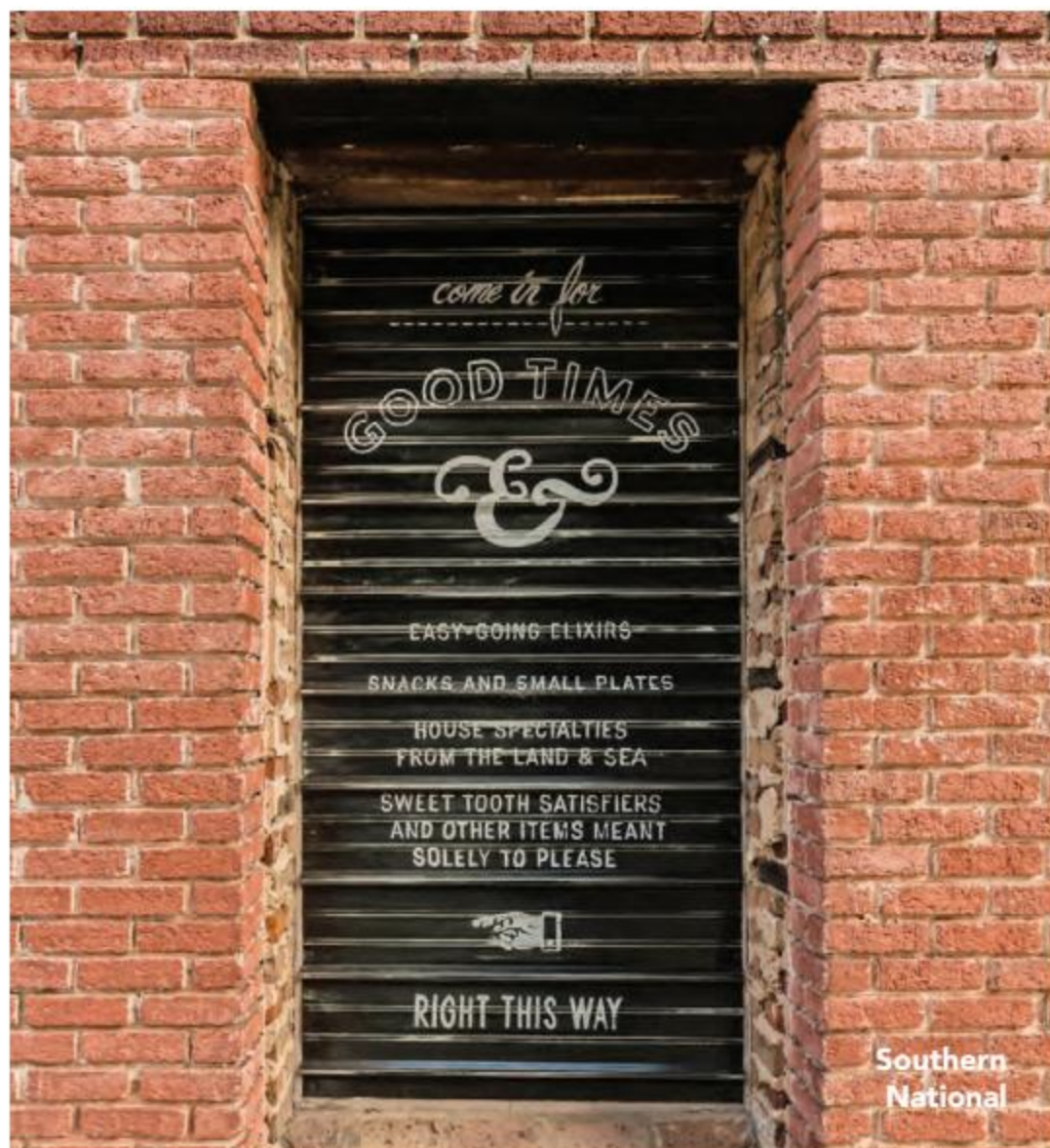


Meat Boss

MODERN SOUTHERN CHARM

Like the downtown it inhabits, Mobile’s restaurant scene has elevated itself in recent years — while still staying true to its Southern roots.

Take, for example, **Southern National**. Months after opening, this upscale spot was named a



semifinalist for a James Beard Award — the first restaurant in Mobile to receive such a nod.

“When I started cooking, I never imagined I would be part of something like a city’s transformation,” says chef Duane Nutter. “But as far as I’m concerned, there’s only one way to cook — and that’s with a sense of place.”

For Nutter, that sense of place has led to contemporary takes on Southern classics, like grilled shrimp jalapeño Johnny Cakes, mussels and collard greens and “Kentuckyaki” braised short ribs. It’s also contributed to the restaurant’s casual, vintage vibe, complete with floral upholstery, retro light fixtures and a dramatic Alabama pine ceiling.

For down-home Southern cooking, look no further than **Mama’s on Dauphin**. Each weekday, it offers an enticing lunch special: an entree and two sides for \$8.95. You could

be treated to chicken and dumplings, jambalaya or shrimp creole, accompanied by sides like black-eyed peas or fried okra.

The Noble South is an airy restaurant with two-story ceilings, exposed brick and a trendy vibe that wouldn’t seem out of place in any major city. Although the seasonal farm-to-table menu changes frequently, favorites include the deviled eggs and fried oyster benedict.

When you’re ready to hit the town, head to **Callaghan’s Irish Social Club**, a neighborhood watering hole that’s been serving up live music and beer since 1946. While most bars this fun aren’t typically known for their food, locals say Callaghan’s has the best cheeseburger, well, ever.

“Mobile used to be a city that people passed through,” says Andrews. “But I think people are starting to recognize there are things to do here. And things to eat.” ■