



Pastries baked in the wood-fired oven at Sub Rosa Bakery; shrimp and cheddar grits at Chox Foushee.

THE PERIPATETIC GOURMET



RICHMOND THE NEXT GREAT AMERICAN FOOD CITY

In Virginia's capital, contemporary but roots-based Southern restaurants are changing the game by mixing down-home flavors with cuisine inspired by the state's varying coastal and farm regions. **BY COLMAN ANDREWS**

Ameaty jumbo crab cake topped with crisp country bacon and sandwiched between two slices of tart fried green tomato; creamy cheddar grits heightened with smoked king portobello mushrooms; homemade cavatelli pasta tossed with fresh fava beans and juicy rabbit confit; moist chocolate-and-peanut-butter doughnuts still warm from the oven.... These are some of the most mouthwatering dishes I've eaten this year, and I found them all in a city that might not even make most people's top 25 list of best food towns in America: Richmond.

On the James River in east-central Virginia, the capital is a leafy, hilly city. Thomas Jefferson, James Madison and Edgar Allan Poe, among many others, walked its streets (as did, much later, such local-born celebrities as brother-and-sister movie legends Warren Beatty and Shirley MacLaine, author Tom Wolfe and tennis star Arthur Ashe). It was here, in St. John's Church, that Patrick Henry delivered his "Give me liberty or give me death!" speech in 1775.

During the Civil War, Richmond was the capital of the Confederacy, and the city's Old South associations are still vivid:

Tourist signs point to the Historic Slave Trail, statues of Confederate war leaders stand proudly along a major avenue and grizzled old-timers sometimes hold full-size Confederate flags outside the Confederate Memorial Chapel, looking as if they're still angry that their side lost.

There's far more to Richmond than its historic past, however. Today, with a population of about 214,000 (plus another million or so in the surrounding area), it is home to three universities, six Fortune 500 companies (Altria and CarMax, among them) and a lively arts and theater community. Plus, in the last

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not anything to brag about.") Yes, the service can be fast, but the mostly delicious Italian-American food, served in generous portions, is hard to fault. Such familiar fare as red peppers with anchovies, penne or spaghetti with a choice of a dozen sauces, veal Marsala and osso buco is done well, as are surprises like fried smelt, lamb meatballs and crab Norfolk (lump crab meat cooked in butter with Old Bay seasoning). And it was at Mamma 'Zu one recent evening that I enjoyed one of the finest dishes I've had in Richmond: perfectly poached shad roe on a thick slice of egg-battered bread, the roe glazed lightly with mozzarella and the whole arrangement cloaked in an assertive white-wine sauce full of anchovies and capers.

Diners wait for a table at Mamma 'Zu.

If there's a local restaurant that has lately achieved as much celebrity as Mamma 'Zu, it's the very different **Peter Chang China Café** (1424 W. Broad St., 804-364-1588; peterchangva.com), just outside the city proper in the suburb of Short Pump. The eponymous Chang came to the States in 2001 to cook at the Chinese embassy in D.C., and later began a dizzying war through a host of Chinese restaurant kitchens in Virginia, Tennessee and Georgia, usually staying just long enough to attract a following of fervent local foodies before moving on. In 2011 Chang opened **Peter Chang China Grill** (2162 Barracks Rd., 434-344-9808; peterchang-chinaatlantaville.com) in Charlottesville. This time he stayed put—or rather, stayed only far enough to open four more restaurants around Virginia, one of them in Richmond. (He rotates between them.)

Chang is, simply, a great Sichuan chef, using first-rate materials to prepare food that is complex—and pretty fiery. His trademark scallion bubble pancakes are immense inflated spheres, almost the size of soccer balls, made

half-dozen years or so, it has become a hotbed of entrepreneurial activity.

Both fed by Richmond's creative ferment and helping to nourish it is a vigorous and varied food scene, from artisanal burger joints to neighborhood restaurants serving Afghani, Asian-fusion and Pan-African cuisines to all-American farm-to-table establishments that are as original—and as good—as anything in New York or downtown L.A. "It's not an overstatement to say that Richmond is on the verge," says local radio host Chris Dovi, who has covered the city for nearly two decades. "Last summer I spent three months in Brooklyn, which has some pretty decent restaurants, and I can't say I had a meal there that was any better than anything I've had in Richmond."

Patrick Evans-Hylton, a Norfolk-based food historian and journalist who has been dining in Richmond since 1975, seconds Dovi: "The chefs see what is being done in larger cities and don't replicate it—rather, they are inspired by it, making it uniquely Virginian."

The city's most famous restaurant has long been **Mamma 'Zu** (501 S. Pine St., 804-286-4205), opened in 1993 by chef Ed Vasaio, whose family had run several Italian places in Washington, D.C. The iconic institution, with its huge, wall-mounted blackboard menu, is a love-it-or-hate-it place. (Online comments range from "I can't say enough good things" to "The place is a dump, the service sucks and the food was



The dining room at *Chez Foushee*

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operating farmers' market in America, existing on this spot since 1737.

Hungry locals visit **Sally Bell's Kitchen** (708 W. Grace St., 804-644-2838; sallybellskitchen.com) weekdays for mocha-devil's-food cupcakes or chicken-salad sandwiches on house-baked rolls; buy wood-fired stone-ground-wheat bread at **Sub Rosa** (B 620 N. 25th St., 804-788-7672;

subrosabakery.com) pick up a flaky beef short rib pie at the **Proper Pie Co.** (2505 E. Broad St., 100, 804-343-7437; properpieto.com). Sunday mornings they crowd into the tiny **WPA Bakery** (2707 E. Marshall St., 804-716-9297; wpabakery.com) for just-made doughnuts in such flavors as coffee and that extraordinary chocolate peanut butter. And, of course, they fill restaurant seats.

The Roosevelt (623 N. 25th St., 804-458-1935; rooseveltrva.com), with its hand-stenciled walls and tin ceiling, has a 1930s look to it, but the food might be called updated Southern. That means such dishes as pimento cheese (the cheese-and-pimento spread that is more or less the *pâté* of the South) with homemade potato chips, and, if you're lucky, deep-fried

sugar toads—sweet little puffer fish caught in the nearby Chesapeake Bay, cloaked in a light fish-and-chips-style batter. (They take their nickname from their "less than *Veggie*-worthy appearance," as Virginia food writer and cookbook author Kendra Bailey Morris puts it.) Oh, and for dessert, a dense chocolate cake that gets its moisture from Coca-Cola.

Millie's Diner (2603 E. Main St., 804-643-552; milliesdiner.com) is undeniably a diner, with a seven-seat counter and hick jukeboxes at the wooden booths, but it's a diner with a tasting menu in the evenings and a serious wine list. The real action here, though, is the weekend brunch, when two short-order cooks working in the front window turn out, among other filling breakfast specialties, excellent crab-and-egg enchiladas. Also popular for brunch is **The Black Sheep** (B 901 W. Marshall St., 804-648-7500; blacksheepvirva.com), famous for its "green eggs and lamb" (a pesto-and-spinach frittata with grilled lamb and pork sausage).

The Maggie (1301 W. Leigh St., 804-269-0023; themaggiervva.com) meanwhile, is a gastropub with a great neighborhood vibe. The menu is

of thin, golden-hued dough lightly specked with scallions, meant to be torn into shards and dipped into a sourish curry sauce—remarkable. Dry-fried eggplant, a Chang invention, consists of small eggplant batons cooked in a crunchy, cumin-scented corn-starch batter and tossed with cilantro, scallions and dried red chiles. Garlicky sour-sweet bang bang slrimp; Shan City chicken spiced with chiles and mouth-numbing Sichuan peppercorns; a fried boneless whole tilapia, its flesh scored into bite-size cubes in a non-cloying sweet-and-sour sauce with pine nuts—food like this will make you forget every mediocre Americanized Chinese meal you've ever had.

There's obviously a strong community of food lovers in Richmond. You see them buying pesticide-free produce and sipping kombucha on tap at **Ellwood Thompson's Local Market** (4 N. Thompson St., 804-359-7525; ellwoodthompsons.com), a sort of homegrown Whole Foods; standing in line at Tanya Cauthen's **Belmont Butchery** (15 N. Belmont Ave., 804-422-8579; belmontbutchery.com) for hormone-free beef, pork, veal and poultry or some of the varied sausage and charcuterie the shop produces seasonally; or raiding the stalls at one of the dozen-plus farmers' markets in and around the city—one of which, called 17th Street, is said to be the oldest continuously

WHERE TO STAY

Richmond is a chain-hotel town. All the big brands—Hilton, Omni, Marriott, Westin, Hyatt and the rest—are represented. But there are three independent, more boutique-style hotels that provide local flavor as alternatives to the chains.

The Berkeley Hotel (rooms, from \$125; 1200 E. Cary St., 804-780-1300; berkeleyhotel.com) is a pleasant, if somewhat anonymous, 55-room hotel on a cobblestoned street in the lively—and occasionally noisy—Shoemaker Slip neighborhood. Flat-screen TVs, free WiFi and Gilchrist & Soames toiletries are among the amenities. Ask for one of the rooms with a lovely city view.

Linden Row Inn (rooms, from \$100; 100 E. Franklin St., 804-783-7000; lindenrowinn.com) is an assemblage of 19th-century Greek Revival row houses where Edgar Allan Poe spent his childhood playing in the garden that is now the hotel's courtyard, a lovely space for eating breakfast or sipping wine. The 70 rooms are modestly furnished with an appropriately old-fashioned feel to them, though the facilities are up-to-date.

The Jefferson Hotel (rooms, from \$305; 101 W. Franklin St., 804-788-8000; jeffersonhotel.com) is the grande dame of the city's hotels: a 140-room 1895



institution that once boasted live alligators in the Palm Court lobby and, until 1937, priced its rooms at \$1.50 a night (a private bath raised the mighty price by a dollar). The ornate lobby areas, with their monumental staircases, faux marble columns and stained-glass skylights, host afternoon tea, a sumptuous Sunday brunch and all the important local social affairs. Rooms are handsomely accoutred, and Lemaire, its restaurant, is one of the best in town.—C. A.

constantly being updated; on my visit there were roasted Brussels sprouts with aged vincotto, Georgia olive oil and Gruyère, and soba noodles in a pig's-head broth with pork shoulder and a six-minute egg.

Rappahannock (320 E. Grace St., 804-545-0565), one of two Virginia restaurants owned by the Rappahannock Oyster Company—which farms oysters in the Rappahannock River, east of Richmond—serves impeccably fresh oysters (Rappahannocks, Stingrays, Olde Salts); excellent, if unconventional, fluke ceviche with Castelvetrano olives and watermelon radishes; and a range of other just-caught local seafood. **Postbellum** (1225 W. Main St., 804-353-7628, postbellumrichmond.com) is a big, raucous tavern with a seductive roof terrace, a plethora of craft beers (several from Virginia, among them Richmond's Hardywood Dry Irish Stout, dense and chocolatey) and an unusual menu that includes chicken confit leg with grapes and smoked darts, and those king portobello mushrooms with cheddar grits. **Chez Foushee** (2 E. Grace St., 804-648-3276, chefoushee.com) brings a New Orleans flavor to its Cajun boudin balls with white rémoulade and shrimp and green-chile cheddar grits.

My favorite dishes in the breezy dining room at **Pasture** (436 E. Grace St., 804-780-0416, pastureva.com) were boiled-peanut hummus (yes) with hot-sauce oil and very crispy haricured pork ribs glazed with mayonnaise-based Alabama white sauce. **Heritage** (1627 W. Main St., 804-353-4060, heritageva.com) has a bar-and-grill atmosphere and a menu that includes pimento-cheese croquettes with smoked-tomato aioli (not to be missed) and that superb cavatelli pasta with rabbit confit and fava beans.

For some reason, **Amuse Restaurant** (200 N. Blvd., 804-340-1980, vmaf.museum) upstairs at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, doesn't get a lot of press. I can't imagine why. Chef Greg Haley's cooking is inventive, with a distinct but unforced Southern accent. Curry-scented fried oysters, small and sweet, were first-rate, and the aforementioned crab cake, containing almost nothing but delicious crab, was truly memorable. So was the homemade herb focaccia bread.

The stylish contemporary interior of chef Dale Reitzer's **Acacia Mid-Town** (2601 W. Cary

St., 804-562-0158, acaciarestaurant.com) feels more Miami than Richmond, but the daily menu uses locally sourced ingredients, including scallops, tilefish, black sea bass and grouper caught off the Virginia coast. Given Reitzer's reputation—he is widely recognized as a fine-dining pioneer in the area—the night I was there I was surprised by an appetizer of duck breast with red-chile sauce; a few sad slices of meat with a goopy puddle and no sign of the promised cucumber salad. The kitchen redeemed itself, though, with sautéed rockfish in a shrimp *sage* with wild-rice gnocchi and roasted sunchoke.

The best upscale restaurant in town is **Lemaire** (101 W. Franklin St., 804-649-4489, lemaire-restaurant.com) in the historic Jefferson Hotel,

where Walter Bundy, an alumnus of The French Laundry, has been executive chef since 2001, using, as he says, "as many local ingredients as I can get my hands on." When I was there Bundy combined "chicken fried" Chesapeake Bay Barcat oysters with Carolina Gold Rice "middlins" (broken grains), crispy salsify and Dave and Dec's oyster mushrooms; and cosseted grouper filets in brown butter served with wild-rice pilaf, bok choy, amFOG shiitakes and toasted almond cream.

"Virginia is a terrific place for food," says Bundy. "We embrace what's around us, and we have so much at our fingertips." Richmond, he adds, has great possibilities as a food capital. "We have a lot to offer. We just haven't been discovered yet." ✦



Confit chicken leg with red grapes and watercress from Postbellum