




# APPALACHIAN TASTE

A TOUR OF ASHEVILLE'S EXQUISITE EATERIES PROVES THE MOUNTAIN CITY IS A WEALTH OF FINE FOOD FARE

BY M. LINDA LEE / PHOTOGRAPHY BY PAUL MEHAFFEY



**BUTTON UP /**  
Chef Katie Button, co-owner of Asheville's popular Nightbell and Curate restaurants, is one of several rising culinary stars elevating Asheville's diverse food scene.



all it artsy. Call it independent Appalachian spirit. Whatever label you choose, an unmistakable bohemian ethos infuses the mountain town of Asheville, North Carolina. And the same counter-cultural vibe that drives local drumming circles and lures myriad artisans to pursue their craft here spills over into the city's food scene.

While restaurants such as Table, Marketplace, and Cucina 24 have long been the fine-dining standard-bearers downtown, within the last five years a new crop of chefs including Katie Button (Cúrate and Nightbell), Justin Burdett (Local

Provisions), and John Fleer (Rhubarb and sister bakery The Rhu) have elevated the level of dining in town.

But what is it that draws these premier-eating establishments? "Asheville has an amazing abundance of culinary resources, as well as a great community of chefs," observes John Fleer, owner and chef at Rhubarb. "For as long as I've lived here, the city has been a fermenting brew of people intent on doing interesting things."

"The connections between farmers, chefs, and artisan food folk run deep in our Blue Ridge Mountain city," observes Dodie Stephens, Director of Communications for the Asheville Convention & Visitors Bureau. "While regional food traditions are a major point of pride and inspiration, Asheville's culinary creatives often take broader, global inspiration. In Asheville, you can find Indian street food, Spanish tapas, Asian fusion, Old World breads, and cave-aged cheeses—all pulling inspiration from a farm-fresh, local palette."

**FRESH TAKE /** Those resources inspired Justin Burdett to open Local Provisions in downtown Asheville a year ago. "There's a ton of farmers here," says the former executive chef of Ruka's Table in Highlands, North Carolina. "And they take an outside-the-box attitude to how they grow things, so there are a lot of really cool ingredients available."

One of his prized purveyors is Evan Chender of The Culinary Gardener. "He grows things like puntarella and cardoons and a weird variety of bitter greens—oka leaf and sculpit and tetragonia," Burdett notes. "He has so much weird stuff that we can't put the actual names on the menu—we just say 'Evan's crazy greens.'"

Burdett gets his beef from Apple Brandy Beef outside Charlotte and trout and roe from nearby Sunburst Trout Farms. All his milk, cream, and eggs come from Farm to Home, and he gathers bushels of vegetables and fruit from select area farms. "It's hard to run a restaurant with this business model, as opposed to having one purveyor come drop off all your food," he admits. "My model involves non-stop conversations with producers."



**LIVIN' LA VIDA LOCAL /** (above) Chef Burdett's precise, artfully composed plates, like these sweetbreads, turnips, and bacon, are thoughtful combinations of flavor and texture that change based on the produce that is locally available and in season.

Though time-consuming, those conversations pay off in terms of the variety and quality of seasonal ingredients that imbue Burdett's ever-changing menu with a solid sense of place. "It's very much about ingredients and technique," states the chef. "A lot of it is putting flavors together that people aren't expecting."

Take, for instance, a starter titled Turnip and Persimmon. "This dish may sound weird, but it makes sense in my head," Burdett explains. "I'm playing with sweet flavors, earthy flavors, and briny caviar." He even juices the turnip greens to add to the Champagne-vinegar and lemon vinaigrette.

Though Burdett doesn't offer a set tasting menu, his bill of fare is built so diners have that option, with smaller dishes available at a lower price point, and an impeccable wine list curated by his wife Brooke. Menu categories—Taste, Small, Large, and Preserved—encourage guests to choose multiple courses. As large plates go, North Carolina pork tenderloin, cooked to a perfect medium, plays well with fall squash,



**ROOT DOCTOR /** (clockwise from top left) Chef Justin Burdett crafts elegant, intelligent dishes of locally-sourced produce; Chef Burdett composes a dish with turnips, persimmons and caviar with a bright Champagne vinaigrette; beef salad with goat cheese and mixed local greens; a bundle of beautiful turnips; Local Provisions' clean, monochrome interior befits Chef Burdett's artistic plating.



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—CHEF JUSTIN BURDETT

braised collards, and an apple agrodolce; while steamed tilefish swims in a delicate broth scented with young ginger.

Like Burdett, Chef Katie Button makes stellar use of local ingredients. Button owns Cúrate and Nightbell—both within shouting distance of Local Provisions—with her parents and husband Felix Meana. While Cúrate holds to its concept of authentic Spanish tapas, Nightbell has been revamped with a full dinner menu.

"Originally, the concept was a craft cocktail bar with late-night food and desserts," recounts the biomolecular engineering major. "But while the bar/nightlife scene was good, we quickly realized that we are much more into food, so we decided to change Nightbell to a full restaurant." Completing the transition has taken a few years, and involved hitting the drawing board to solidify their concept.

That concept was influenced by a James Beard-sponsored salon

on Appalachian food and history that Button attended in Asheville back in February. "The idea of food preservation resonated with me," Button recalls. So she decided to devote the food program at Nightbell to reducing food waste and preserving seasonal products.

Button began buying aged beef quarters from Apple Brandy Beef and butchering them on-site, and now even a burger gets an Appalachian spin with a mix of beef and smoky Benton's Bacon. It comes served on a house-made bun with local Barkley's Mill Grits, which are ground into cornmeal and added to the dough. As Button describes, "(it) has the buttery fluffiness of brioche and the taste of cornbread."

With a background including a stage in Ferran Adrià's

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—CHEF KATIE BUTTON



kitchen at the now-shuttered Michelin three-star restaurant elBulli in Catalonia, Spain, Button injects her penchant for molecular gastronomy into Nightbell's dishes. Deftly executed by Chef de Cuisine Eric Morris (who worked at Craft in New York City), an ingenious "deviled egg" takes the form of luscious corn sabayon and Sunburst smoked trout gravlax, sprinkled with spicy pimenton and served in a hollowed-out egg cup.

A quick-brined fillet of flounder is steamed to moist, flaky perfection, placed over a lemon purée, and dressed with black walnut gremolata. The crispy waffle, one of Button's favorite dishes, is deep-fried and slathered with duck confit "poutine" and decadent cheddar mousse.

Button's first cookbook *Cúrate: Authentic Spanish Food from an American Kitchen* hit the shelves in October. The book, which adapts the restaurant's recipes for the home cook, also includes new recipes. "It was a lot of fun creating recipes just for the book, and I'm excited to potentially add those to Cúrate's menu," she says.

**JUST DESSERTS /** Not far from downtown in the residential neighborhood of West Asheville, patrons of HOLE wait as long as 40 minutes on weekends for one of Caroline Whatley's amazing doughnuts. Her jeans dusted with flour, Whatley punches out rounds of yeast dough with a

cookie cutter and pulls each one around her hand to form a ring. After dunking them in a bath of rice-bran oil—she can only fry 24 at a time in her tiny storefront—the doughnuts emerge from the fryer as golden-brown, misshapen wreaths, which she rolls in spices or dips in glazes.

Crafted with stone-ground organic flour and served piping hot from the fryer, HOLE's doughnuts are crisp on the outside and ethereally fluffy within. The secret to their tender, open crumb, Whatley confides, is pre-fermenting the dough for 24 hours.

Before opening HOLE in 2014, the Louisiana native worked in bakeries in New Orleans—notably with Chef Susan Spicer—and New England before moving to Asheville, where she pinpointed a market for well-made doughnuts.

She took what she knew from making European-style laminated dough and brioche, and what she gleaned from other artisan doughnut makers and started playing around at home. She had always used natural fermentation in her breads in order to develop texture, flavor, and an open crumb, so she figured that might work with doughnuts.

**DOWN TO A SCIENCE /** Chef Katie Button and her team at Nightbell execute a playful menu that highlights Button's background with Chef Ferran Adrià, who changed the face of modern cuisine at Spain's elBulli; (from left) caramelized turnips, fennel, whey sauce, pink peppercorn, and fried bread; crispy waffle, duck confit poutine, and cheddar mousse; and the "deviled egg," of corn sabayon, sunburst smoked trout gravlax, and pimenton in an egg cup.

And it did, as the line out the door and her recent kudos can attest. Whatley's molasses-bourbon doughnut was recently lauded online by *Bon Appétit* magazine as "Dessert of the Year." HOLE offers three core flavors—vanilla glaze, cocoa rub, and toasted almond sesame—with a new one added every week (think rosemary bourbon, salt and peppercorn maple). The challenge is consistency, especially when Whatley is making 300 to 500 donuts on weekdays and up to 700 on the weekends.

Whatley just sold her business to regulars Hallee Hirsh and her husband Ryan Martin, transplant actors from Los Angeles who run a sourdough tortilla business out of their farm in Marshall, North Carolina. "I'll miss my customers," Whatley concedes, "but at least my hair won't smell like doughnuts, as it has for the last two years."

From HOLE, it's a short drive—or walk—around the corner of Haywood Road to the tiny yellow house whose small sign heralds OWL Bakery. Inside, pastries beguile from behind a glass case: fragrant Scandinavian cardamom buns sprinkled with pearl sugar; gluten-free financiers, a blackberry-studded French tea cake made with almond meal; and the Danish du jour, a croissant pinwheel cuddling sage-infused pastry cream and a fan of fresh pear slices.



**HOLE SHABANG /**  
Hallee Hirsch (below) and her husband Ryan Marlin recently purchased HOLE from original owner Caroline Whatley, whose brioche-like doughnuts in flavors like cocoa rub, vanilla glaze, and toasted almond sesame have gained national attention.



**WHATLEY'S MOLASSES-BOURBON DOUGHNUT WAS RECENTLY LAUDED ONLINE BY BON APPÉTIT MAGAZINE AS "DESSERT OF THE YEAR."**



Owner Susannah Gebhart, who opened OWL seven months ago, traces her interest in food back to her work with the student organic garden at Middlebury College in Vermont. After college, Gebhart, from Tallahassee, Florida, landed a job as assistant to a fourth-generation Spanish-Italian baker in Tampa.

She moved to Asheville in 2010 and eventually found work at the Montford Walk-In Bakery, which she took over when the owner gave up the business in 2014. After gaining a following for her breads and pastries, she decided to open her own storefront—specifically in West Asheville, the community where she lives. “I am inspired by the West Asheville community,” she says. “It is a unique residential corridor that’s poised to see a lot of change.”


The bakery’s name refers to the first bread Gebhart developed at the Montford bakery, a leavened sourdough. “I didn’t know what to call it,” the baker recalls, “and since it was an Old World, rustic-style loaf—meaty, fragrant, and slightly tangy—I called it Old World Levain” (*levain* is the French word for sourdough).

For the holidays, OWL’s repertoire will include a mouth-watering assortment of specialty breads and traditional European Christmas cookies (think hazelnut linzer with elderberry jam, spicy *speculaas* from the Netherlands, Southern Italian sesame-seed *guiguilena*). Next year, she plans to add a wood-fired oven and ramp up her bread program with baguettes and *miche*.

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—SUSANNAH GEBHART

As a newcomer to Asheville’s culinary stage, Gebhart has found the local food community warmly supportive. “There are so many amazing chefs here,” she muses, “but the town is small enough that everyone knows everyone else, and there’s really no room for ego. Chefs here realize that as the tide rises and more people visit Asheville, it raises everybody up.”

Justin Burdett, who enjoys pushing the envelope in his own cuisine, predicts that Asheville is well on its way to being a serious food town. Katie Button agrees. “I’m always surprised by the unique, independent concepts that continue to pop up,” she says. As new restaurant gems persist in making their mark, Asheville will continue to paint the wide canvas of its vibrant dining scene in swaths of delicious color. 

**FLOUR GIRL /** Susannah Gebhart (above), owner of OWL Bakery, which stands for Old World Levain, makes a variety of breads and European pastries at her West Asheville location. For the holidays, she plans to roll out several kinds of European-style Christmas cookies.

## FIND YOUR FOOD

### DOWNTOWN

**CÛRATE** 11 Biltmore Ave, Asheville. (828) 239-2946, [heirloomhg.com/curate](http://heirloomhg.com/curate)

**LOCAL PROVISIONS** 77 Biltmore Ave, Asheville. (828) 424-7815, [localprovisionsasheville.com](http://localprovisionsasheville.com)

**NIGHTBELL** 32 S Lexington Ave, Asheville. (828) 575-0375, [heirloomhg.com/nightbell](http://heirloomhg.com/nightbell)

**RHUBARB** 7 SW Pack Sq, Asheville. (828) 785-1503, [rhubarbasheville.com](http://rhubarbasheville.com)

**THE RHU** 10 S Lexington Ave, Asheville. (828) 785-1799, [the-rhu.com](http://the-rhu.com)

### WEST ASHEVILLE

**HOLE** 168 Haywood Rd, Asheville. (828) 774-5667, [facebook.com/holedoughnuts](http://facebook.com/holedoughnuts)

**OWL BAKERY** 295 Haywood Rd, Asheville. (828) 785-1770, [owlbakery.com](http://owlbakery.com)

### RIVER ARTS DISTRICT

**THE BULL AND BEGGAR** 37 Paynes Way, #007, Asheville. (828) 575-9443, [the-bull-and-beggar.com](http://the-bull-and-beggar.com)

## REST YOUR HEAD

### BED OF ROSES B&B

This antique-filled 1897 Queen Anne Victorian holds five lovely rooms, all boasting private baths, jetted tubs, and fireplaces. Emily and Bill McIntosh’s love of entertaining shines in the two-course gourmet breakfast they serve each morning at 9 a.m. in the elegant dining room, as well as in their eagerness to help guests plan their activities in the Asheville area.

**135 Cumberland Ave, Asheville. (828) 258-8700, [abedofroses.com](http://abedofroses.com)**

### CAROLINA BED & BREAKFAST

Six well-appointed rooms and a cottage provide respite at this 1901 Arts and Crafts-style home, set on an acre of flower-filled grounds. Each evening the social hour features homemade canapés and Biltmore Estate wines. Knowledgeable owners and foodies Susan—who recently published a cookbook—and James Murray are happy to recommend good area restaurants.

**177 Cumberland Ave, Asheville. (828) 254-3608, [carolinabb.com](http://carolinabb.com)**