



Nashville: comfort food, southern style, set to a country tune

by Lanora Schoeny Mueller

Part of the process of education is discovering the extent of one's ignorance. My recent first-time visit to Nashville demonstrated just how much I didn't know about this Middle Tennessee city. Sure, everyone knows something about Nashville, maybe something about the Grand Ole Opry and the town's importance to the music industry, or about the great colleges and universities that built Nashville's reputation as the Athens of the South.

I admit it. Until I actually made it to Nashville with the express purpose of learning about what people like to eat there, music was the first word that came to mind when I thought about the place. Actually, what I really thought was "Nashville! Great! Music and food, two of my favorite things!" What I didn't expect to find was such a complex food culture, worthy of study in its own right.

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A southern classic, the meat-and-three

What’s a meat-and-three? I knew you’d ask. A meat-and-three restaurant serves southern down-home cooking, almost always from a steam table. When you arrive at a typical meat-and-three, you’ll line up cafeteria style to inspect and select from the day’s offerings, helped by servers who are so friendly, in the southern way, that every patron is honey, baby, or sugar.

The “meat” can be fried chicken, baked chicken, barbecued ribs, pork chops, beef tips, pot roast, fried fish, or even pig’s feet. The standard “three” is two generous servings of any number of side dishes plus one serving of bread, usually corn bread but sometimes with the option of sliced bread or a dinner roll. Sweet or plain iced tea is the drink of popular choice.

Despite the emphasis on meat, the vegetable plate is a popular menu item, consisting of three or four servings of a wide variety of side dishes, including sweet potatoes, mashed potatoes, squash, cornbread dressing, pinto beans, collard greens, green beans, corn, and okra. Hot sauce, vinegar, and raw onions complement almost every dish.

Vegetarians definitely won’t go hungry—macaroni and cheese is another standard menu item—although purists may want to inquire about the possible presence of pork products in some of the vegetable dishes.

Dessert is extra, chess pie, pecan pie, and blackberry or peach cobbler the most common choices. Beware that dessert may be the first thing you see after you arm yourself with your tray and flatware. No worries. The pie slices are individually packaged, so if your eyes are bigger than your stomach, you can always save that tempting dessert for later.

Everyone I talked to in Nashville has a favorite meat-and-three place. One Nashvillian is so enamored of a meat-and-three place 45 minutes away in Murfreesboro, I’m compelled to mention it here. And people from all walks

of life eat at Middle Tennessee’s meat-and-threes, from construction workers and retirees to Grammy-winning musicians and high-ranking politicians.

My first meat-and-three meal was at Swett’s, a family-owned, family-run restaurant headed by David Swett, whose African-American grandparents opened the original location in 1954. I was lucky enough to meet David at Swett’s main location just across the street from where his grandparents started out. Swett’s kitchen still cooks the same way David’s grandmother did, a little of this, a little of that, with no written recipes. You might detect a touch of soul in the seasoning of some dishes; you’ll definitely find soul in the hoecake-style cornbread and the home-bottled pickled peppers in vinegar sitting on each table.

Everything at Swett’s was delicious, and I truly regretted not cleaning my plate. However, I knew I had more great food to sample the next day at the Kleer Vu Lunchroom in Murfreesboro, a meat-and-three 45 minutes south of Nashville down I-24, a scenic drive through rolling hills so brightly green, my host said, they hurt the eyes. One of the main attractions of the Kleer Vu, he told me on the way, is its hot-water cornbread, a version rarely seen nowadays. Boiling water partially cooks and thickens the cornbread batter. It’s then shaped into individual cakes and deep-fried. After just one mouthful, I agreed that it is truly a delicacy, deserving of legendary status among lovers of good cornbread.

Uniquely Nashville-style affordable dining

It was good fortune that we’d arrived at the Kleer Vu just at opening time, and not only because the wait was shorter and the food at its peak. I had a reservation that afternoon for a late lunch at The Yellow Porch, a casual bistro in south Nashville with a misleading name and an affordable lunch menu. The restaurant has no yellow porch although, I was told, it did once have a yellow-painted deck. These days, it has outdoor seating on a deck covered by a grape arbor and separated from traffic by a small urban organic garden.

Inside, the dining room was dark and cozy, with splashes of light focused on paintings by a local artist. Still full of meat-and-three, I ordered a BLT with leaf lettuce, perfectly crisp bacon, and herb mayonnaise on whole wheat toast, and a cup of extraordinary bleu cheese celery soup that was like a grilled cheese sandwich in soup form, tangy but not overly “bleu.” All the desserts are house-made, so I had to sample the bananas foster bread pudding.

My last meal in Nashville, at The Mad Platter in Germantown near downtown, wasn’t until seven on Sunday night. I made sure to arrive early to allow plenty of time to digest and reflect upon my culinary adventures of the weekend while exploring the cute Germantown neighborhood.

Strolling with camera in hand, I was thrilled to discover well-preserved nineteenth century architecture, ranging from grand mansions to the tiny workers' cottages of Ratterman Row.

However, as in many other cities, these historic buildings were once targets of urban renewal. When Craig and Marcia Jervis opened The Mad Platter in 1979, the same year the district was listed on The National Register of Historical Places, Germantown was a pretty rough place. As pioneering business people and neighborhood activists, the Jervises played an important role in the area's renaissance.

Approaching its twentieth anniversary as an owner-operated business, The Mad Platter maintains its fresh edge with a seasonal menu that changes daily. The setting is charming: a high-ceilinged 1889 storefront with large windows and lots of natural light to show off a revolving display of local art. The restaurant's back garden, fed by composted scraps from the kitchen, supplies herbs and vegetables for the chefs' creative menus and flowers for the dining room's antique tables. Part of a larger designated community arboretum, the garden is a lovely space for weddings and parties.

Once seated and welcomed warmly by Daniel, I had some difficult choices to make, starting with the long list of wines by the glass. After a few sips *continued on page 93*

To read more from Lanora Mueller visit WritingTravel.com



Mad Platter
in historic
Germantown

FRUGAL FOODIE TRAVEL TIPS

* Eat as many meals as possible in locally owned, independent establishments with uniquely local menus, atmosphere, and decor. Your travels can be infinitely more interesting and culturally rewarding if you eat dishes that are available nowhere else but in a particular destination.

* Get off the beaten track, and don't judge a place's culinary standards by its outer facade or its next-door neighbors. Accept that you'll have to step off the main tourist path to find the most authentic frugal foodie treasures. That's certainly the case in Nashville, where your adventuresome palate can be rewarded at any number of unlikely addresses.

* Quality comes first in dining decisions, cost second, although the best frugal foodie finds will often be the most economical. One fellow frugalist I met in Nashville confided that she and her roommate would eat ramen noodles five days out of seven to support their foodie habit. While sacrifice can be a good thing, remember that the best food is not always the most expensive (and vice versa).

* The best food is slow food, and it's even better when it's served fast as it is in Nashville's meat-and-three cafeterias. Be prepared to wait patiently however if your food is cooked to order, as the fried catfish will be in many meat-and-threes.

IF YOU GO

Kleer Vu Lunchroom
226 S Highland Ave
Murfreesboro, TN 37130
(615) 896-0520

Swett's
Two locations in Nashville and one in the airport
www.swettsrestaurant.com

The Mad Platter
www.themadplatterrestaurant.com

The Yellow Porch
www.theyellowporch.com



Mad Platter's house pate de
campagne with pickled watermelon



Juxtapositions | frugal foodie vs gregarious gourmet

Two chefs, one

Over the course of two days I had two top

“Nashville is a hip dining destination that is still under the radar of many. We offer some of the best barbeque and Southern soul food to be had at the casual level. Nashville’s diversity surprises many, but the availability of excellent Mexican, Vietnamese, Ethiopian and Indian cuisines keeps many chefs engaged. Most of all, our fine dining scene is really taking off with a huge emphasis on farm to table - providing guests with as much local TN product that can be sourced from within 100 miles.”

-Chef Forrest Parker



His kitchen: Parker is the Executive Chef at Cascades Restaurant at the Gaylord Opryland Resort. He takes extreme pride in sourcing ingredients that are easy on the environment and good for the local economy. Whenever possible he uses local purveyors and is part of the Monterey Bay Aquariums Seafood Watch, which ensures only sustainable seafood is served. Highlights from his menu are: the Creamy Grits Trio, which take this mundane Southern breakfast staple to a new level when topped with lowcountry shrimp, crispy oysters in a porcini stew and pulled beef; Lowcountry Crab Cakes; Harris Ranch Bistro Steak with Elvis Fries, which get their name due to the gray poured over them (F.Y.I. the King loved gravy on everything). www.gaylordhotels.com/gaylord-opryland



His wine bar of choice: Tayst is Nashville’s first and only certified green restaurants, hence Parker’s interest in the establishments. Innovative dishes like barramundi with braised leeks and bacon caramel are expertly paired with a unique and varied global wine list. www.taystrestaurant.com



A restaurant he admires: Chef Parker’s love of travel leads him to Zola, helmed by award winning Chef Debra Paquette. Chef Paquette’s menu takes you on an adventure through the Mediterranean while throwing in hints of the South to remind you where you are. A classic example of this technique is in the Beet and Heat salad, comprised of pecan fried beets, sage goat cheese, figs, bacon, greens, tossed in a maple Tabasco vinaigrette. www.restaurantzola.com

city, two takes

Chefs take me around to see their Nashville

by Michelle Strashoon

“Nashvillians are hungry; hungry for growth. With promising growth comes the need to expand Nashville’s cultural and social horizons and that is just what Music City USA’s food scene is doing. Even during these economic times, independent boutique restaurants continue to challenge corporate establishments and are setting new trends and staples. Be it local farm to table, meat-and-three or tapas; speak easy or cigar lounge, progressive chef’s and restaurateurs find Nashville to be the perfect place to identify and explore their philosophies and visions.”

- Chef Arnold Myint

His kitchens: Growing up as a national level figure skater, Arnold Myint’s exposure to the world spans far beyond his Nashville upbringing of running around his family’s International Market and Restaurant. While cooking remains his passion, Arnold’s successes are far from limited to the kitchen as his approach to all things culinary are more than fresh and trend setting. Be it designing nationally recognized cocktails or creating progressive restaurant concepts, Arnold’s steady, cohesive and consistent growth is sure to make him an industry leader. The Executive Chef and Owner of two restaurants, PM and Cha Chah, Arnold continues to develop ideas and strategies that compliment the booming pop-food culture. Items not to be missed on Cha Chah’s menu include the Yuca-Potato and Chorizo Croquetas and the Hibiscus Cosmopolitan. www.chachah.com

His wine bar of choice: Rumours East wine bar is a cozy hangout located in a gorgeous 1900’s Victorian house. An extensive wine by the glass menu is paired with a continental menu. www.rumourseast.com

A restaurant he admires: A highlight of my trip to Nashville was experiencing a restaurant that Myint raved about, City House. Chef Tandy Wilson brings standard Italian dishes to life with his penchant for making as many ingredients from scratch as physically possible. The menu is sprinkled with in-house creations that include: mozzarella, belly ham, bresaola, and a variety of house made sausages. www.cityhousenashville.com

