

SPECIAL ISSUE

THE LOCAL
palate
FOOD CULTURE OF THE SOUTH

THE BEST CULINARY TOWNS

IN THE SOUTH

**YOU
VOTED!**

READERS' PICK WINNER

LAFAYETTE
LOUISIANA

get to know
Chef Sullivan Zant
at VESTAL

WHERE TO EAT & DRINK IN
**20 SOUTHERN
TOWNS**

Including Runners-Up
Charlottesville, VA & Alpharetta, GA

Wilmington

NORTH CAROLINA

by Jenn Rice

Twenty-some years ago, if you asked anyone what was so delicious about **Wilmington**, the immediate answer would have been **Flaming Amy's**. The Fajitarito, especially with pineapple jalapeño salsa, was a culinary delight for any palate (and it's still legit today). Fast-forward to 2024, and Wilmington has evolved into a town that practically screams for indulging in North Carolina's best eats and drinks. From sustainable seafood towers to the best soft serve, pasta, and everything in between, Wilmington has grown into a destination worth visiting for the food alone.

Keith Rhodes, chef and owner of **Catch**, with a focus on modern Southern fare and seafood sourced from North Carolina's Cape Fear coast, says it's the dedicated local food suppliers combined with the pristine coastal terroir that makes the city's cuisine so delicious.

At **Seabird**, chef-owner Dean Neff also touts the city's geography for its deliciousness. "Wilmington's geography brings together a community of foragers, fishers, farmers, and chefs, all focused on celebrating what's unique to our town," he says. "Close access to the Gulf Stream allows for a diverse catch without long travel, and our thriving oyster industry and local farms contribute to a dynamic dining scene."

BEST PLACES TO

Eat & Drink

BEST FRIED CHICKEN (AND OYSTERS)

Rx Chicken and Oysters

Owners James and Sarah Rushing Doss, whose art decks the walls, marry the best of both worlds: locally sourced seafood and fried chicken. "The briny oysters that come from our estuaries are my favorite in the world, so much so that we started farming our own here, called Lucy Beas," says James. Try 'em roasted with kimchi butter and lacy cornbread—pure heaven. [rxwilmington.com](#)

BEST PLACE FOR ALL THINGS OYSTER

Catch

In 2006, chef Keith Rhodes set out on a mission to celebrate North Carolina

seafood and opened his own restaurant in the hope that diners would catch his passion. In 2024, there's still a full house at Catch, and for good reason: Rhodes' dishes are undeniably delicious. "Towards the end of October we will be featuring all things oyster," says Rhodes. [catchwilmington.com](#)

BEST (AND PRETTIEST) SEAFOOD TOWER

Seabird

Whatever Neff has on the menu is what you want, including wild oysters, clams, whelks, sea beans, tulip snails, and everything that sea forager Ana Shellem finds in the marsh. Seasonal crudos are always on offer, which Neff notes are a great way to highlight the ocean each season in a simple, fresh way. [seabirdnc.com](#)

BEST LOCAL SPIRITS

End of Days Distillery

Known for its small-batch, artisanal spirits crafted with locally sourced ingredients, End of Days is located in

the hip Cargo District and is a must for cocktail enthusiasts. Owners Shane and Beth Faulkner set out to create a fun space with delicious spirits a la vodka, rum, gin, bourbon, and even an agave spirit for tequila seekers. [eoddistillery.com](#)

BEST LASAGNA YOU'LL EVER EAT

Olivero

At Olivero, chefs Sunny Gerhart and Lauren Krall Ivey blend the flavors of Spain, Italy, and New Orleans. Don't miss the lasagna or the beignets with mortadella, fontina fonduta, and Calabrian hot honey. Their cocktail program is strong, and the star of the show is the French vermouth martini. It's salty like the sea. [oliveroil.com](#)

BEST PIZZA (AND SOFT SERVE)

Salita Pizza

Wood-fired pizza with bubbly crust, soft serve, weekend bagels, and natural wine—what more could you ask for? Chef Jim Diecchio highlights local produce throughout the menu. A selection of chicories, lola rossa, Treviso, Tardivo, and escarole makes the menu's killer chicory caesar salad. [salitapizza.com](#)

BEST ESPRESSO MARTINI

The Ibis Coffee and Cocktails

Wilmington's first and only hi-fi cocktail bar features a unique blend of coffeehouse-meets-cocktail lounge, catering to both early risers and night owls. Guests can sip on lattes with coconut pandan syrup while listening to light tunes—and when 4 p.m. rolls around, switch over to the most perfect espresso martini. [theibisbar.com](#)



Rx Chicken and Oysters

Olivero



OPPOSITE CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: SARAH DOSS; MALLORY CASH; ANNA ROUTH

WILMINGTON, NORTH CAROLINA



Claim to Fame

Chef Dean Neff

Wilmington is home to the North Carolina Azalea Festival and the Battleship, but its biggest claim to fame is **Dean Neff** of Seabird, who became the first local chef to be named a James Beard Award semifinalist in the Outstanding Chef category in 2024. The seafood tower is also the talk of town. "We're known for our seafood towers and sell about 40 a week," says Neff. "The tower allows us to work in a smaller format and get really creative with local fish—including lesser known varieties like ribbonfish, local squid, stone crabs, mullet roe, local Marshallberg Farm caviar, and North Carolina shrimp." One tower goes out and the domino effect happens: Suddenly, everyone in the restaurant is noshing on one. [seabirdnc.com](#)



Where to Stay

ARRIVE

This hotel is the perfect spot for a food-filled weekend, with its cozy beds and the Southern coastal cuisine of Dram Yard. The buzzing Gazebo Bar is ideal for a nightcap after your culinary adventures. Did we mention it's in the heart of downtown, making it the most ideal spot to park the car and explore? arrivehotels.com/wilmington



FROM LEFT: C/O ARRIVE; C/O BIGGERS MARKET. OPPOSITE: C/O ARRIVE

ARRIVE

WILMINGTON, NORTH CAROLINA



Where to Shop

Biggers Market

Biggers Market is a local gem that chef Keith Rhodes frequents. “Our tomatoes for our burrata salad this past summer were sourced from [the market],” he says. biggers-market.myshopify.com

The Wilmington Farmers Market at Tidal Creek

For chef James Doss, **The Wilmington Farmers Market at Tidal Creek** is the best place to shop for local food and beverage products, and you’ll find chefs like Doss and Rhodes passing through on Saturdays. “It’s a producers-only market with the best farmers in our area,” says Doss. thewilmingtonfarmersmarket.com

Wilmington Bread Company

Wilmington Bread Company stands out with its high-quality pastries made with only local organic flour. “You can find them at different coffee shops and markets throughout Wilmington,” says chef Jim Diecchio. “My personal go-tos are a pistachio twist, morning bun with orange sugar, and the mushroom Gruyère bear claw croissant.” wilmingtonbread.com