

Flavor of FLORENCE

WHETHER YOU'RE A SEASONED FOODIE OR JUST A HUNGRY VISITOR, YOU WILL FIND CULINARY DELIGHTS TO TEMPT YOUR PALATE AND SATISFY YOUR EVERY CRAVING AMONG THE VAST ARRAY OF DINING OPTIONS IN THIS FOOD-FRIENDLY CITY.

TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY CHEROKEE LAIR

Florence has a keen reputation for music, fashion, fishing, and golf, and now, the Renaissance City is the perfect foray for foodies. You could spend months indulging in the wonder of food combinations on offer and never repeat a meal. In a few short years, with Rivertown as the anchor, a fleet of stellar restaurants has opened and begun to thrive. The heady mix of locally and seasonally sourced food ingredients combined with the best craft brews, wines, and coffee has made Florence the perfect weekend or weeklong getaway for foodies and food lovers.

Your foolproof foodie itinerary begins at The Shoals Marriott. Yes, a hotel chain gem has become a foodie's delight. With the installation of Executive Chef Garien Shelby, Swampers Bar and Grill, the in-house restaurant/bar/music venue has become a local favorite for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Both Swampers and the 360 Grille make everything in house from scratch, from the freshest ingredients available.

Selena Miller, marketing director for Swampers and 360 Grille, explained their vision, saying, "Our chefs pride themselves on staying on the cutting edge of trends by taking classics and putting a new twist on them. We dream food and take great pride in creating a lasting experience. We try to push the envelope while never forgetting the lessons Grandma taught."

Swampers is named after the famous Muscle Shoals Rhythm Section, and there is live music in the afternoon and evenings almost every day of the year—the perfect



local flavor



accompaniment to your meal or your brandy and cigar on the outside terrace. Breakfast choices at Swampers include chocolate gravy and biscuits, crisp locally sourced bacon, and a Southern take on eggs Benedict that includes a swish of bloody Mary for the perfect eye-opener.

For lunch, the shaved NY Strip Pimento Cheese Sandwich is a crowd favorite, and the Bananas Foster Brioche Bread Pudding with Salted Caramel is stamped with a Swampers guitar of spice for the ideal finish. For dinner, feast on Bacon Wrapped Meatloaf or Chipotle Rubbed Mahi Mahi with Papaya Mango Salsa and Cilantro Rice.

If you head downtown for a day of shopping, you'll be glad to know that Rivertown Coffee Co. serves the best cup of joe and the most delicious breakfast sandwiches. Regulars happily wait in line for the Pimento, Bacon, and Egg with spinach. Lunch specials change daily with an array of wraps, burritos, soups, and sandwiches to suit any taste. Cooler months inspire their resplendent Indian-spiced Sweet Potato Soup with buttermilk and basil oil.

Rivertown owner John Cartwright and his musician baristas are now legendary. They have become a part of the fabric of Florence and provide an endless supply of laughter and great conversation. The decor is a mix of vintage finds and diner classics that echo Edward Hopper's Nighthawks as well as your favorite aunt's kitchen. It is at once inviting and welcoming—and rather hard to leave, once you happily settle in. Local art, music, and Rivertown logo gear is available for gifting the folks back home.

For an afternoon nosh, The Carriage Wine and Market is pure bliss. The charcuterie changes seasonally



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and may include a basil-infused cheese and wild mushroom pâté. Caleb Banks and Jason Allen have curated the best in wine and craft beer for fun sipping or fabulous gifting; Robert Sinskey Carneros Pinot Noir and POV Red Blend and Billicart-Salmon Brut Rosé Champagne are all on offer. They also carry a wonderful collection of Alabama vineyards' best vintages.

Fresh flowers are another staple of The Carriage, and the bouquets, personally arranged by Allen, are stunning. The atmosphere has an old world Brooklyn-esque charm. "We hoped that it would feel like an extension of our living room," says owner Caleb Banks, "a place where you're always welcome and where wine is never in short supply." The Carriage has also started the annual Florence Wine Fest, which draws hundreds of wine lovers from all over the globe. Tickets for the 2017 event, a celebration of wine, friends, food, and community, are on sale now.

Just down the street, in the heart of Mobile Plaza, is the most eclectic gastro/hot dog/craft beer pub. Wildwood Tavern is the life dream come to fruition of partners Tyler Ross and Matt Henderson. Ross is a working musician who carefully created the pub atmosphere with vintage lighting, native cedar pillars, a jukebox that pays homage to Florence music, and board games and shuffleboard. Regulars' favorites include the Sweet Heat Dog, Philly Cheese Steak, Pesto Lover Pasta, and Jamaican Sensation Pizza.

Hot dogs and pizza are rarely considered gourmet fare, but Wildwood Tavern is the exception to the rule. The bratwurst is made in house with locally, humanely butchered pork and a secret mix of spices. The

argument over gourmet hot dogs may rage on in other dominions, but it will be silenced forever with your first bite of a Wildwood dog. Everything is created fresh in house—including their own pickled banana peppers, which locals tend to pile onto whatever they order.

A plaque commemorating Ross's completion of the Appalachian Trail is a testament to his sense of adventure and his life philosophy: "The main thing I have learned is that you can take your dreams, add a very healthy dose of drive, and possibly make them come true. If it doesn't, you will be happy knowing that you tried and happiness is what you were striving for in the first place." All of the artwork is in a hot dog motif, and the booths echo the best British gastropubs with a decidedly American spirit.

As your day winds down, Odette is an elegant choice to restore your energy and your spirit. From the entryway to the kitchen, owner Celeste Pillow has created a chic dining experience that is as welcoming as it is memorable. From the gold-washed tin ceilings and oversized drum lampshades to the Mid-century Modern chairs, the decor sets the mood for the contemporary spin on '50s classic fare with a portrait of Great-Grandmother Odette radiantly watching over all.

Brian Lovejoy, a Certified Specialist of Spirits, is at the ready with a discerning culinary-based aptitude for pairing the perfect concoction to fit your mood or palate. Lead bartender, Andrew Davis, has created holiday house specialties including Boots with the Fur, a cranberry, cinnamon bourbon, and Calvados brandy drink that features Buffalo Rock ginger ale. Davis' farm-fresh House Egg Nog with amontillado sherry is another happy



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local flavor



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holiday perfection.

Chef Josh Quick is revered for his buttermilk-brine fried chicken, but he constantly seeks out the freshest ingredients for seasonal menu items like the Seared Chicken Breast with Chioggia/Candy Cane Beets or Fall Roasted Squash Tortilla. And don't forget dessert. The Old-Fashioned Cherry Pie with almond crème Anglaise is a holiday confection worthy of Santa himself. Gifts of fresh jams and pickles are available with an assortment of Odette T-shirts and accessories.

Odette is a special meeting place year-round, for the business community and friends and family, but the holidays bring a special sort of gathering. "The day after Thanksgiving is traditionally one of our busiest nights of the year as out-of-towners with roots in the Shoals reconnect with local family and friends," says manager Kristy Bevis. "It is heartwarming to be able to provide our guests with a place to congregate and celebrate the holidays and each other's company. Additionally, we offer Thanksgiving and Christmas catering to those who want to celebrate with a quality meal at home."

Finally, the best view of Florence is via the 360 Grille. The Shoals Marriott's revolving restaurant offers a panoramic view of the spectacular sunsets and the twinkling lights of Florence at night. Chef "G" pairs Certified Angus Beef steaks with grilled asparagus, crispy Brussels sprouts, and heirloom carrots. Choose the Molasses Pork Belly or Roasted Bone Marrow with a seasonal Heirloom Tomato Salad as a starter and finish with the taste bud-tantalizing Red Velvet Cheesecake.

Whether your visit to Florence is for business or pleasure, at least one thing is for sure: With all the delectable dining options to choose from, you're sure to be happily tempted by the city's culinary offerings.



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