

Food & Travel

SUMMER 2025

MAGAZINE

THIS SUMMER

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Georgia

YOUR PERFECT VACAY
THE PALM BEACHES
FLORIDA

DEFENDING
CALIFORNIA

ARTICLE BY THOMMY KANE

CALIFORNIA GOVERNOR
GAVIN NEWSOM



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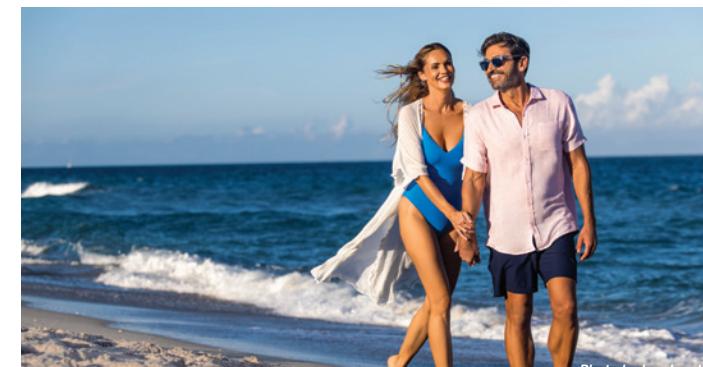
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Food & Travel[®] MAGAZINE

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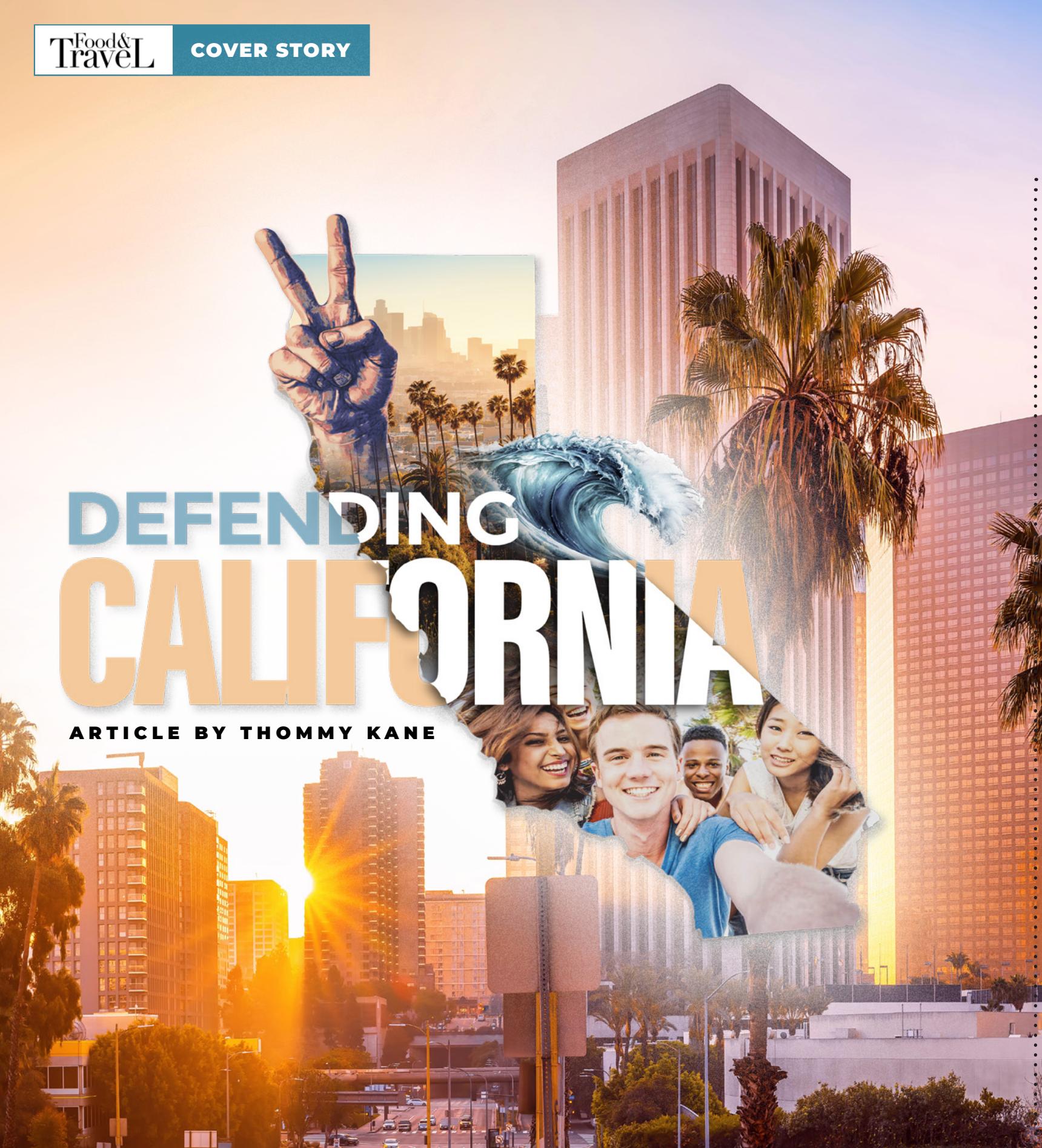
DEFENDING CALIFORNIA

Article by Thommy Kane

Pictured: California Governor
Gavin Newsom

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DEFENDING CALIFORNIA

ARTICLE BY THOMMY KANE



There's a booth at Joey's Café in West Hollywood I sit at three times a week. Four, if I'm honest. It's not the kind of place you'll find in a glossy guidebook or tagged by influencers holding mimosas. It's simpler than that. Honest. A chalkboard menu, a sun-faded awning, and a front door that creaks like an old friend. The same cook has been behind the grill for years. The same manager with the tucked-in shirt and calm smile greets every customer like they've been coming their whole life. The servers remember your name, your order, your drink—your story, even if you don't think you have one.

Outside the window, the city walks by. Joggers. Nurses on break. A Russian guy in tech. A Guatemalan mother pushing a stroller. A tattooed Armenian artist in paint-splattered jeans. Gay dads with iced coffees, nodding as they pass. Korean grandmothers with sun visors and discipline in their gait. A white guy with headphones and a Dodgers cap. This, I suppose, is what they mean when they say California is diverse. But what they don't say—what they forget or never learned—is that diversity isn't the opposite of community. It is community. It's the secret ingredient, not the obstacle.

When people from other states say we don't have community here, I know for a fact they've never been to Joey's. They've never watched the regulars wave at each other, the barista who's worked that corner since the Obama years slipping a free muffin into a kid's to-go bag because "he's having a rough day." They've never sat under a pale beam of morning sunlight while a Salvadoran dishwasher and a Filipino delivery guy argue playfully over baseball stats in Spanglish. They've never seen what I see four, five times a week: a real neighborhood in the heart of what outsiders claim is a lawless, soulless wasteland.



Spend five minutes online and you'd think California fell into the Pacific somewhere between brunch and Botox. We're painted as a cautionary tale. A failed experiment. The state that went too far, got too weird, taxed too much, hugged too many trees, and forgot how to lock its doors. There's an entire cottage industry of pundits and "freedom fighters" building their brands on the myth that California is unlivable, ungovernable, and unraveling at the seams. It's a fascinating narrative. It just happens to be completely disconnected from the truth.

Do we have problems? Of course we do. We're not Disneyland. But we're not the apocalypse, either. We're a state of nearly 40 million people, stretched across 900 miles of coastline, 3,000 miles of highways, deserts, forests, farms, and cities that don't sleep because the dreams are too big to fit in a single REM cycle. We contain multitudes. And some of those multitudes include complicated issues: homelessness, cost of living, the daily pressure of being a place where the rest of the country likes to point and wag its finger. But the people doing the finger wagging tend to forget that their states have those same problems—just hidden under colder skies and quieter headlines.



Take crime, for example. One of the favorite talking points. “You can’t walk through L.A. without getting mugged.” “San Francisco is a war zone.” “California is Gotham now.” These statements float around social media like gospel, shared by people who’ve never stepped foot past Burbank Airport. But here’s what the data says: violent crime in Los Angeles is down. Not slightly—substantially. Nearly 15% lower than its pandemic peak, according to LAPD data. Robberies, homicides, and assaults are falling. Cities like Miami, Houston, and Memphis are currently seeing higher crime rates per capita, but nobody’s making viral TikToks about that. You don’t see Florida’s crime stats trending on Fox News.

-15%

**Decrease in Los Angeles Violent Crime
since its Pandemic peak,
According to LAPD**

Homelessness? Yes, it's real. Yes, it's visible. And no one should pretend otherwise. But let's stop acting like it's exclusive to California. Walk around Denver. Take a trip through Phoenix. Drive through any American city where rent has outpaced wages, where mental health care was gutted, where addiction became more profitable than recovery. California didn't invent homelessness. We just refuse to shove it out of view. And while some states build walls, we build solutions—however imperfect and unfinished they may be. Governor Gavin Newsom's Project Homekey, for example, has already converted over 13,000 hotel and motel rooms into permanent supportive housing. That's not a press release. That's a roof over someone's head.

That's dignity restored.

And still, the same voices scream: “Everyone’s leaving California!” Except... they’re not. Yes, people moved out during the pandemic. So did people in Chicago. So did people in New York. Migration shifted nationwide. But here’s the part the clickbait never mentions: net migration to California is stabilizing—and in some places, it’s rising again. Especially among Gen Z. Turns out, they want what California has always offered: possibility. Weather. Opportunity. Culture. Access to the kinds of lives they can’t build in the middle of the country. The tech sector hasn’t collapsed—it evolved. Hollywood didn’t vanish—it adapted. Tourism didn’t dry up—it came roaring back.



Nearly 50 million people visited Los Angeles County in 2024. That's not a state people are fleeing. That's a place people save up to see with their own eyes.

Of course it's expensive. Paradise usually is. But let's not confuse cost with failure. People aren't willing to pay more for something they don't want. The price of California living reflects demand—and it's still high. Because this place gives you access not just to palm trees and rooftop patios, but to the kinds of dreams that still feel possible. You can surf and ski in the same day. You can hike through redwood forests, then catch a vinyl-only DJ set in Echo Park before midnight. You can live two, three, five lives here—reinvent yourself as many times as you can afford to try.

And the food. My God, the food.

If California were just a dining destination, it would still be worth defending. It's not just that the food is good—it's that the food here means something. It's the story of migration, resilience, creativity, and risk. It's a Guatemalan grandmother's mole in a Boyle Heights kitchen. It's a French-Vietnamese fusion pop-up in Silver Lake run by two queer chefs who met at culinary school. It's taco trucks that beat brick-and-mortar fine dining, strip mall sushi that humbles Michelin inspectors, farmer's markets where the avocados have names and the strawberries taste like confessions.



Nancy Silverton's burrata could end wars. Jon Yao's tasting menu at Kato is what happens when elegance and umami fall in love. Guelaguetza in Koreatown has been serving Oaxacan food so good it made the James Beard Foundation blush. Mariscos Jalisco isn't just a food truck—it's holy communion wrapped in a fried tortilla. And all of it, every bite, every dish, is powered by the simple truth that California grows the food that feeds the nation. Two-thirds of all fruits and nuts. One-third of all vegetables. If you're biting into a perfect peach in Minnesota, thank a farm worker in Fresno.

You can taste our soul in the spice.

And yet, there are people online—loud, defiant, misinformed—who genuinely believe this place is hollow. That we've lost our way. That California is nothing but fake smiles and Teslas running over tents. That it's just movie studios, overpriced rent, and politically correct zombies wandering around farmer's markets trying not to offend each other. These people love to talk about how the "real America" is somewhere else. That this place isn't grounded. That we've abandoned common sense in favor of crystals and self-help podcasts.

What they're missing—what they've always missed—is that California isn't some polished utopia. It's not trying to be. It's a bruised, brilliant mosaic. A place where struggle and celebration live on the same block. Where people come not because it's easy, but because it's possible. It's the promise of a second chance dressed in denim and sunshine. It's the waitress working two jobs and still smiling as she tops off your coffee. It's the aspiring musician who bartends in the Valley and plays to ten people on a Tuesday, chasing the same dream that gave birth to Springsteen lyrics. It's the undocumented gardener who sends half his paycheck to Oaxaca every month and still finds time to coach his daughter's soccer team.

And let's talk about that—about them. About the working class that makes this state function. Because if we're going to defend California, we'd better start with the people who get up at five in the morning and keep it moving. The line cooks. The Uber drivers. The nurses. The teachers. The electricians. The people who don't go viral but still make everything run.

This isn't a billionaire's playground. It's not just Westside real estate and Malibu cliffs. It's Fontana. It's South Gate. It's Fresno. It's East L.A., Pacoima, Inglewood. It's single moms clocking in, cousins watching kids so their sister can finish nursing school, uncles fixing brakes in alleys. It's people helping each other move on weekends, lending each other rides, splitting the bill at restaurants and Venmoing five bucks when you forget your card. It's not glamorous. It's not polished. But it's real. And it's everywhere, if you're paying attention.

So no, California isn't dying.

***It's living. Sometimes messily. Sometimes too loudly.
But always with intention.***

50M

**Amount of People who
Visited Los Angeles in 2024**



CALIFORNIA ISN'T DYING... IT'S LIVING

I've walked along Venice Beach at dawn when the mist hasn't yet burned off and the air smells like salt and something old. I've stood on Mulholland at midnight, the city stretched below like circuitry, every twinkle a heartbeat. I've driven through the redwoods in silence and come out believing in God again. I've hiked in Malibu and watched dolphins jump like punctuation marks in the surf. I've sat in traffic on the 405 and felt both murderous and in love. I've eaten tacos better than

most marriages. I've watched strangers help an old woman cross Sunset Boulevard. I've seen trans kids get hugs from drag queens outside The Abbey. I've seen the quiet grace of California in the eyes of a bus driver waiting for a late rider.

I've also seen the dark parts. Of course I have. I've seen tents. I've seen overdoses. I've seen despair on the steps of City Hall. I've seen gentrification steal families out of homes they built over decades. I've seen promises broken and futures

priced out of neighborhoods where they once belonged. And that's all real, too. But the thing about California is: we don't look away. We argue. We vote. We show up to town halls. We yell at council members. We start nonprofits. We push, drag, and demand better—not because we think we're perfect, but because we believe we still can be better.

***That belief is what makes this place different.
We still give a damn.***



13K

**Hotel & Motel Rooms
Converted into
Permanent Supportive
Housing With Governor
Newsom's Project
Homekey**



And yes, some of that credit goes to leadership. There. I said it. Gavin Newsom gets his share of flak—some of it earned, some of it predictable, much of it completely detached from facts—but here's what I know: the man has governed with a spine. While other states play dress-up with authoritarian cosplay, Newsom leaned into science when it mattered. He didn't get it all right. No leader does. But his investments into clean energy, climate resilience, public education, paid family leave, and housing aren't theoretical. They're showing up in real people's lives. Quietly. Steadily. Without a Twitter thread to follow it.

He protected women's reproductive rights when half the country was unraveling them. He raised the minimum wage. He pushed for electric vehicle expansion while the rest of the country was still debating if the planet was warming. And while others passed laws telling teachers what they're allowed to say in a classroom, he told them to keep teaching the truth.

You can disagree with him. You can challenge his policies. That's democracy. But you can't say he doesn't care. And you definitely can't say he hasn't fought to keep this place livable, breathable, and equitable—for the working class, the dreamers, and the everyday people who call this coastline home.

And maybe that's what really bothers some people about California. Not the taxes. Not the politics. But the nerve we have to care about each other. The audacity of compassion. The radical idea that diversity doesn't mean chaos—that it can, in fact, be a kind of order. A social rhythm. A shared beat.

It's easy to mock a place you've never felt. To dismiss it from the window of a cable news studio or the passenger seat of an anonymous tweet. But it's harder to mock when you've eaten pupusas next to a stranger who became a friend. When you've had your oil changed by a mechanic who called you "mijo." When you've had your bad day rescued by a stranger who held the door, cracked a joke, made you feel seen.

And that brings me back to Joey's Café. Back to the table by the window. Back to the regulars. The local dog who gets scraps under the counter. The barista who hums old love songs. The cook who makes the omelet exactly how I like it without ever asking. The joggers who wave. The nurse who always picks up her cortado in scrubs. The couple that walks their three-legged golden retriever every morning at 8:15, like clockwork. The same people. The same smiles. A small, perfect, persistent rhythm of kindness in a city that outsiders insist doesn't have a heart.

But it does. It always has.

This place—this state—is not for everyone. It never claimed to be. It's complicated. It's exhausting. It's too much and not enough. But if you live here long enough, if you actually see it, not just visit it—you understand. You feel the pulse. You forgive the flaws. And you realize that you're lucky. Not because it's perfect, but because it's alive.

So if you're out there, reading this, thinking about canceling your trip to Los Angeles because some guy on YouTube told you it's dangerous—don't. Come. See it for yourself. Come walk the boardwalk at sunset. Come sip mezcal on a rooftop in Echo Park. Come visit Griffith Park and watch coyotes trot down the trail like they own the joint. Come sit at Joey's Café. Watch the world go by. Watch community happen in real time. Watch the stereotypes fall apart like overcooked brisket.

California is not a headline. It's not a tweet. It's not a caricature drawn by people who've never once heard a mariachi band echo off the walls of Olvera Street. California is a feeling. A momentum. A million stories clanging together in a great, imperfect, astonishing chord.

You don't have to love it. But if you've never really seen it—don't pretend you know it.

I do. I live here.

And I'll defend it with everything I've got. •



Exploring CULINARY ARTISTRY

WITH CHEF SEAN STAGGS AT SANDIA RESORT
& CASINO'S BIEN SHUR RESTAURANT



Photo by CRS Social



At the grand opening of Sandia Resort & Casino's new Sportsbook—an innovative venue that combines dining, sports betting, game coverage, and entertainment—guests are welcomed with the warmth of New Mexico hospitality. The event featured a culinary showcase curated by Chef de Cuisine Sean Staggs of the resort's fine dining restaurant, **Bien Shur**. Known for blending local flavors with refined techniques honed over years of experience, Chef Sean brought his distinctive touch to the menu. Hosted in a lively, cocktail-style setting, the grand opening allowed attendees, including professional athletes like Brian Urlacher and Notah Begay III, to savor Chef Sean's unique creations. Known for his inventive dishes and fresh perspective, Chef Sean's approach combines high-end technique and local flavors, making Bien Shur a standout in Albuquerque's dining scene.

..... Article by Camille Rodriguez

CHEF SEAN STAGGS' CULINARY BACKGROUND AND PHILOSOPHY

Chef Sean's culinary journey is marked by a commitment to innovation and mastery of diverse techniques. Early in his career, he trained at Chicago's legendary Moto Restaurant, a hotspot for molecular gastronomy that pioneered the fusion of science and fine dining. Moto Restaurant introduced Chef Sean to the science of flavor transformation, using techniques like liquid nitrogen and edible paper to create playful and memorable dishes. As a result of his training, Chef Sean loves bringing elements of molecular gastronomy into Bien Shur as special features, explaining, "it [molecular gastronomy] really needs to not be used at the forefront, but something to accomplish these dishes versus just making that the standard." Chef Sean says he loves to surprise guests with the unexpected amidst familiar flavors by having a creative take on traditional dishes.

An Albuquerque native, after time as a private chef in Arkansas and Colorado and working in exclusive destinations like Alaska, he returned to Albuquerque, motivated to contribute to the local culinary scene. At Bien Shur, Chef Sean celebrates New Mexico's culinary heritage while pushing boundaries.



“Keep your head up. You’re going to make mistakes over and over again. And that’s the best part of it. Making those mistakes.”

-CHEF SEAN STAGGS

Photo by CRS Social

A PREMIER ALBUQUERQUE DINING EXPERIENCE AT BIEN SHUR

Chef Sean's focus at Bien Shur is on reimagining classic dishes through seasonal ingredients and creative presentation. "I love to always be creative. So I'm always changing the menu," he shared. Each dish is crafted to reflect a balance of flavors and a hint of surprise, from the visually stunning short rib pot pie with puff pastry to the expertly prepared Japanese Wagyu, served as a memorable dining experience.

Bien Shur's breathtaking rooftop setting and fine dining atmosphere are ideal for special occasions or a night out. The farm-to-table philosophy is a foundational aspect of the menu. Chef Sean curates a menu emphasizing locally sourced ingredients often from Sandia Pueblo's farm, reinforcing his commitment to quality and sustainability. He creatively adjusts the menu to match ingredient availability, relying on seasonal ingredients without compromising quality. With its rooftop views and focus on locally inspired cuisine, Bien Shur is deeply rooted in local culture but elevated in presentation and technique, making it a unique dining destination in Albuquerque.



Photo by CRS Social



Photo by CRS Social

MENTORSHIP AND GIVING BACK TO THE COMMUNITY

Through mentorship and involvement in local nonprofits, including the Rio Grande Agricultural Land and Trust, the 505 Food Fights, and Kitchen Kids, Inc., Chef Sean seeks to inspire and guide emerging chefs to follow their dreams and overcome the challenges of the culinary industry. His mentorship emphasizes resilience and creativity, qualities he believes are essential for success in the culinary world.

"Keep your head up. You're going to make mistakes over and over again. And that's the best part of it. Making those mistakes. You learn how to not make those, how to do things the right way. Just keep your head up. It's a hard, hard industry. You've got to have a thick skin," he advises.

For Chef Sean, mentorship is a way to give back to the industry that shaped him. He finds inspiration in culinary icons such as Rick Bayless and Jacques Pepin, whom he admires for their straightforward, timeless approach to cooking.



Photo by CRS Social

SOCIAL MEDIA AND THE ART OF STAYING AUTHENTIC

In today's digital age, social media has become a powerful tool for chefs. While Chef Sean maintains a presence online, he admits that he's more focused on substance than style. Rather than chasing trends or aiming to be "Instagrammable," he uses social media as a digital portfolio, documenting his dishes and drawing inspiration from his past creations. For him, social media is a practical tool to keep track of his evolving menu and revisit previous dishes for new inspiration.

Chef Sean explained that he uses social media as a digital archive for his dishes, saying, "I'm horrible at social media. I'll post three or four times and then just forget for a week. So, I'm hit and miss on social media, but I use it more for a food platform. For me, my social media is strictly professional. So it's just all of my dishes. So I can go back and be like, Hey, what did I make here? How can I do this again?" While his beautiful presentations are certainly "Instagram-worthy," he aims to create food that speaks for itself, ensuring each plate is memorable for more than its visual appeal, combining elegance with the charm of New Mexico's flavors.



Photo by CRS Social

WHAT DINERS CAN EXPECT FROM BIEN SHUR

Located on the rooftop of Sandia Resort & Casino, Bien Shur offers a fine dining atmosphere with sweeping views of the Sandia Mountains that make every visit memorable. Chef Sean describes the Bien Shur experience in two words: "enjoyment, and different." He aims to create an atmosphere where guests can relax, savor the flavors, and connect with Albuquerque's unique culture, saying "We're about feeding you really, really good food and giving you experience that you're not going to get anywhere else." For him, success is not just about feeding people but crafting an experience that stays with them long after leaving the restaurant.



“The excitement of having something that is so unique and different and that you can't get anywhere else.”

-CHEF SEAN STAGGS

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE OF ALBUQUERQUE'S CULINARY SCENE

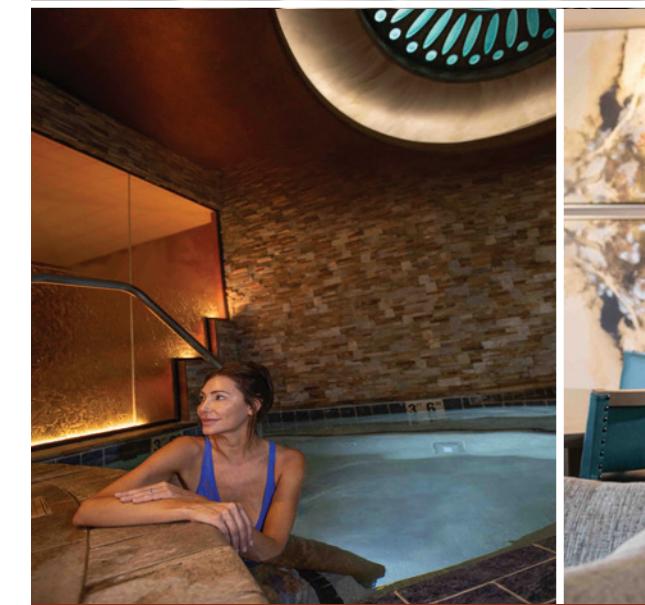
Chef Sean is dedicated to continuously evolving Bien Shur's offerings, ensuring that every visit brings something new and exciting for guests. Chef Sean sees Bien Shur as bringing a fresh approach to fine dining that combines the traditions of New Mexico with the innovation of global techniques, saying he aims to give every guest “the excitement of having something that is so unique and different and that you can't get anywhere else.” Whether experimenting with new techniques or curating fresh seasonal

menus, his passion for culinary innovation guarantees that the dining experience remains dynamic and unforgettable. “You're coming to get good ingredients, you know, really take the time to enjoy,” says Chef Sean.

As Albuquerque's foodie culture continues to grow, Chef Sean is optimistic about the future and excited to be part of a city that is gaining recognition for its culinary talents. With his dedication to local ingredients, commitment to creativity, and unwavering focus on quality, Chef Sean Staggs and Bien Shur are set to make an enduring impact on New Mexico's dining scene.



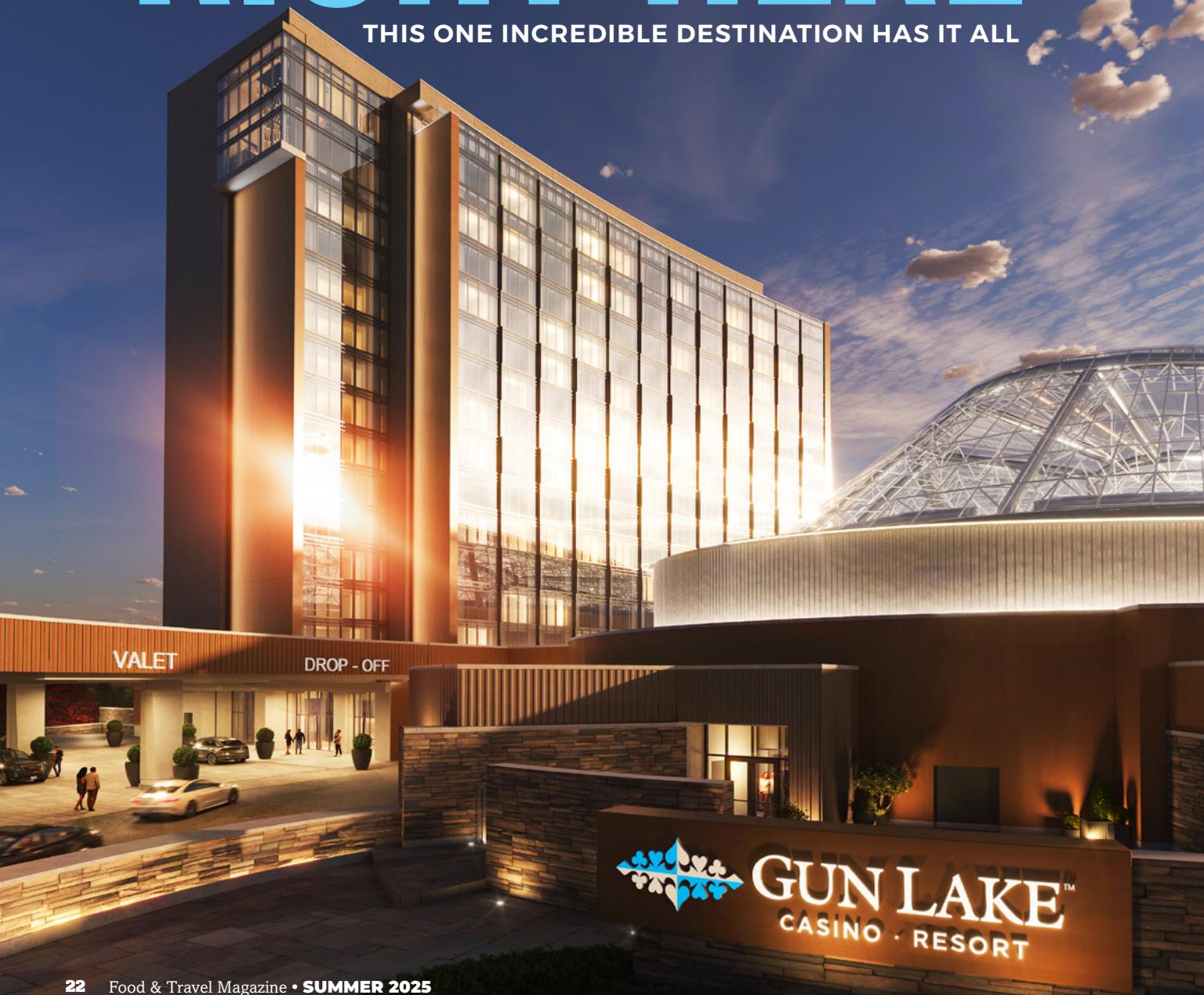
In the words of Chef Sean, Bien Shur is a place where guests can expect not just to be fed but to experience the joy of truly great food. For those looking to experience Albuquerque's culinary evolution firsthand, a visit to Bien Shur promises a taste of what makes this region—and Chef Sean's cooking—so special. •



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Photo by Ideology



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Coal-Fired and Culinary: A BRIDGEPORT FEAST



Nestled comfortably in the northern part of West Virginia, Bridgeport manages, with surprising charm and no small measure of sauce, to punch well above its weight.

Dining in Bridgeport, West Virginia, is a bit like stumbling into a local secret that everyone in town already knows. It is a reminder that great food doesn't need flashing lights or big-city zip codes. Sometimes, it just needs a family recipe, a hot oven, and a town full of people who know the difference between a good meal and a great one—and who'll gladly point you in the right direction, fork in hand.

Cody's isn't trying to be cool. It just is. Cody's is what every gastropub wishes it could be—unpretentious, packed with locals, and run by someone who doesn't just flip burgers, he engineers them. Chef Cody Thrasher's Pub Burger, slathered in whipped pimento and brown sugar espresso bacon jam, tastes like it was designed to wreck your diet and ruin every other burger you've ever had. And then there's the Cowboy Killer—a triple-stacked beast with fried pickles and a Korean barbecue sauce that, once you taste it, you'll chase for the rest of your life.

But Cody doesn't stop at pub food. No, he kicks it up a notch. One night it's Korean tacos, the next, Japanese udon. And then there's Sunday brunch. From creative breakfast bowls to out-of-this-world eggs Benedict to chicken & waffles, you'll leave full, happy, and already planning your next visit.



For the old-school, red-sauce, Sunday-dinner-with-your-grandmother kind of Italian, head over to **Oliverio's Ristorante**. Do you want meatballs the size of your fist? Done. Lasagna that weighs more than a brick and tastes like a third-generation secret? They've got it.

Created by Sonny and Shirley Oliverio in 1966 as a humble little joint, three generations later it has become a West Virginia institution. Filet Oliverio, topped with bleu cheese, crab meat, and a portobello cream sauce is a local favorite. Their Chicken Diablo— chicken and Italian sausage, red bell peppers, and onions over a bed of linguine and topped with a spicy cream sauce—will have you screaming “uncle.” And even though it’s easy to fill up on their flaky, garlicky breadsticks, try to save room for the tiramisu—it’s ethereal.

Oliverio's isn't just a restaurant. It's a living, breathing family story that has become a part of every local's story—and soon it'll become a part of yours. Honestly, isn't that the kind of place worth sitting down for?



Then there's **Mia Margherita Coal Fired Pizzeria**. This is more than a pizza joint—it's a tribute to the immigrants who came to West Virginia, chasing work in the mines and bringing their Old World recipes with them. They came for coal but stayed for community, carving out a life underground by day and gathering around tables by night with good wine, loud voices, and food that made the hard days a little softer.

At Mia Margherita Coal Fired Pizzeria, that spirit is alive and well. The ingredients are fresh, the flavors honest, and the coal-fired oven—a roaring beast of tradition—is the soul of the place. It's the first of its kind in West Virginia, a nod to the very first pizza oven in America, also coal-fired. Using clean-burning anthracite, they dish out pizza that is as authentic as it gets, with wonderfully charred edges and a smoky crispness that never sacrifices the chew of a good crust. And while you could load it up with fancy toppings, you won't need to. The Margherita is simple, pure, fire-kissed perfection.

The thing about Bridgeport is, it's not trying to be anywhere else. It's not imitating New York or Chicago. It's just being itself, which, in a world full of culinary clones and overpriced concepts, is something worth celebrating. You come here to eat well and feel like you belong, even if just for one meal. No pretense. Just honest food, cooked by people who care. •



West Virginia Dines Here!

Centrally located in the heart of West Virginia, Greater Bridgeport is home to some of the finest indoor and outdoor recreation facilities in the region. After a day of play, discover a rich variety of authentic and culturally diverse restaurants known throughout the state for great food and friendly service.



Bridgeport 
WEST VIRGINIA

304-848-7200 • Greater-Bridgeport.com

Save the Date SOUTHEASTERN BBQ SHOWDOWN

RETURNS TO COLUMBIA, SOUTH CAROLINA

APRIL 24-25, 2026!

BARBECUE ENTHUSIASTS, FOOD LOVERS, AND LIVE MUSIC FANS MARK YOUR CALENDARS!



The Southeastern BBQ Showdown is gearing up for its highly anticipated return to Columbia, South Carolina, on April 24-25, 2026. Following the resounding success of its inaugural event in September 2024, which garnered national attention and aired on Bally Sports, the excitement continues to build as the event is set to debut on the Cooking Channel in April 2025. This will provide audiences with a tantalizing preview of the mouthwatering BBQ and thrilling experiences planned for 2026. This fiery celebration of BBQ culture is gearing up to be even bigger and more unforgettable!



Capital City
Lake Murray
Country

DISCOVER
South Carolina

A FLAVOR-FILLED WEEKEND TO REMEMBER

The Southeastern BBQ Showdown isn't just another food festival—it's a food sport competition that brings together the best pitmasters from across the country to battle it out for the coveted Grand Champion title. At the 2024 event, teams from states like Texas, Georgia, and across South Carolina, and even Japan, lit up the competition with bold flavors and mouthwatering dishes. With the bar set high, 2026 promises an even fiercer contest, featuring elite BBQ teams and a new crop of celebrity judges ready to crown the champions.

This weekend-long celebration of food, music, and fun offers something for everyone. Guests can sample world-class BBQ, explore interactive exhibits, and enjoy live music. Whether you're a die-hard foodie or just looking for an unforgettable weekend, this is the place to be.

LOOKING BACK AT THE 2024 CHAMPIONS

The 2024 Southeastern BBQ Showdown set the stage for greatness with First Class BBQ from Texas taking home the Grand Champion title and \$10,000 in prize money. Led by Head Chef Robert Smith, the team impressed judges with their unbeatable flavors and flawless techniques. Will First Class BBQ return to defend their crown in 2026? Or will another team rise to claim the title? The competition is wide open, and the anticipation is already building.

STAR-STUDDED JUDGES PANEL

The 2024 Showdown made history with its impressive lineup of celebrity judges, including WWE Hall of Famer Mark Henry, known as "The World's Strongest Man," and Chef Brian Duffy, a renowned culinary expert from Food Network's Bar Rescue. Alongside Mayor Daniel Rickenmann of Columbia, SC, they brought expertise, excitement, and flair to the judging panel, further elevating the competition's prestige. Their involvement underscored the Showdown's commitment to celebrating BBQ culture on a grand stage.

As the 2026 competition approaches, one can't help but wonder: Who will take a seat at the coveted judges' table this time? Will another culinary icon join the ranks, bringing their expertise to the showdown? Could there be a surprise guest—a celebrity with a secret passion for BBQ? Stay tuned for exciting announcements leading up to the event.

PLAN YOUR 2026 BBQ ADVENTURE

Tickets for the Southeastern BBQ Showdown will go on sale early next year, and if the 2024 event was any indication, they'll sell out fast. General admission and VIP packages will be available, with exclusive perks and reserved seating.

For out-of-town visitors, Columbia offers plenty of hotel options to suit every budget. Make it a weekend getaway and explore everything the **Capital City/Lake Murray Country** region has to offer, from scenic lake views to vibrant downtown attractions.

DON'T MISS THE 2026 SHOWDOWN

The Southeastern BBQ Showdown is more than an event—it's a celebration of community, culture, and the irresistible allure of BBQ. With award-winning teams, live music, and unforgettable experiences, it's a must-attend weekend for anyone who loves great food and great times. Mark your calendars for April 24-25, 2026, and stay tuned for more details. Follow [@SoutheasternBBQShowdown](#) on social media and visit [SoutheasternBBQShowdown.com](#) for the latest updates. •

GET READY TO EAT, DANCE, AND CHEER—BECAUSE THE 2026 SOUTHEASTERN BBQ SHOWDOWN IS COMING, AND IT'S BRINGING THE HEAT!



SOUTHEASTERN
BBQ
Showdown

SEE OUR AD ON
INSIDE COVER!

CHEROKEE COUNTY'S

Flavorful Side

FARM DINNERS, ROOFTOP VIEWS, AND LAKESIDE LEISURE



Photo by Angela McDaniel

Looking for a North Georgia getaway that blends extraordinary dining with outdoor adventure? Destination Cherokee GA offers the perfect mix of farm-to-table cuisine, scenic landscapes, and laid-back lakeside vibes—ideal for your next weekend escape or last-minute summer trip. From locally sourced menus to sunset cruises on Lake Allatoona, this is where hidden gems shine brightest.



SAVOR CHEROKEE COUNTY'S FARM-TO-TABLE DINING SCENE

Start your culinary adventure at **J Michael's Prime** in Canton—a premier Cherokee County steakhouse that's redefining the local dining scene. Helmed by Chef Adam, this upscale restaurant is known for artful plating, curated wines, and high-quality ingredients. Savor hand-cut steaks, fresh seafood, and farm touches like Meats by Linz organic grain-fed beef, Circle A hydroponics lettuce, and farm-to-cup Alma Coffee. If you're a foodie seeking an elevated Southern dining experience, this is a must-visit destination.

Just around the corner, **Riverstone Corner Bistro (RCB)** serves comfort food with a creative twist. With seasonal menus crafted in a scratch kitchen and a warm neighborhood vibe, RCB's rooftop patio is the perfect spot to watch a Georgia sunset. It's the kind of place where local flavor meets casual elegance.

Looking for something even more intimate? **Frik and Frak's Farm Dinners** are a true Cherokee County treasure. These limited-seat, multi-course events celebrate the region's bounty in

a cozy café transformed into fine dining with white tablecloths, floral arrangements, china, glass, and silverware; the table is yours for the evening. A recent dinner featured shrimp and grits with colorful peppers, Real Cajun sausage, Suga's pimento cheese, and their signature sweetheart sauce—a true flavor explosion. These events are more than a meal—it's a one-of-a-kind experience you won't want to miss.

BALL GROUND • CANTON • HOLLY SPRINGS • WALESKA • WOODSTOCK
DESTINATION
Cherokee



UNWIND ON THE WATER: LAKE ALLATOONA & BEYOND

After indulging in Cherokee County's rich culinary offerings, stay for the weekend to enjoy some well-deserved relaxation on the water. **Little River Marina on Lake Allatoona** offers everything you need for a perfect lake day—boat rentals, fishing spots, and scenic sunset cruises. Whether you're a seasoned boater or just want to float and unwind, this is your launchpad for outdoor fun.

Prefer a paddle in hand? Stop by **Murph's Surf dockside at Little River Marina** for kayak and paddleboard rentals. Explore the serene waters of the Etowah River or Lake Allatoona's quiet coves. It's a low-key, pet-friendly adventure perfect for families, couples, or solo travelers looking to reconnect with nature.

For thrill-seekers looking to amp up their lake day, **Knot Mine Jet Skis** offers high-speed fun on Lake Allatoona. With easy rentals and friendly service, it's the perfect way to add a splash of adrenaline to your Cherokee County adventure. Whether you're riding solo or doubling up for a scenic cruise, these jet skis turn the lake into your personal playground.

Wrap up your day at **JD's on the Lake**, a laid-back waterfront restaurant that doubles as a film location. Fans of Netflix's Ozark will recognize it as the iconic **Blue Cat Lounge**. Featured on the free Filmed in Cherokee app, JD's serves up mouthwatering entrees, cold drinks, and unbeatable lakefront views. Grab a table on the patio and watch the sky light up over Lake Allatoona—it's a sunset you won't forget.



PLAN YOUR NORTH GEORGIA GETAWAY TODAY

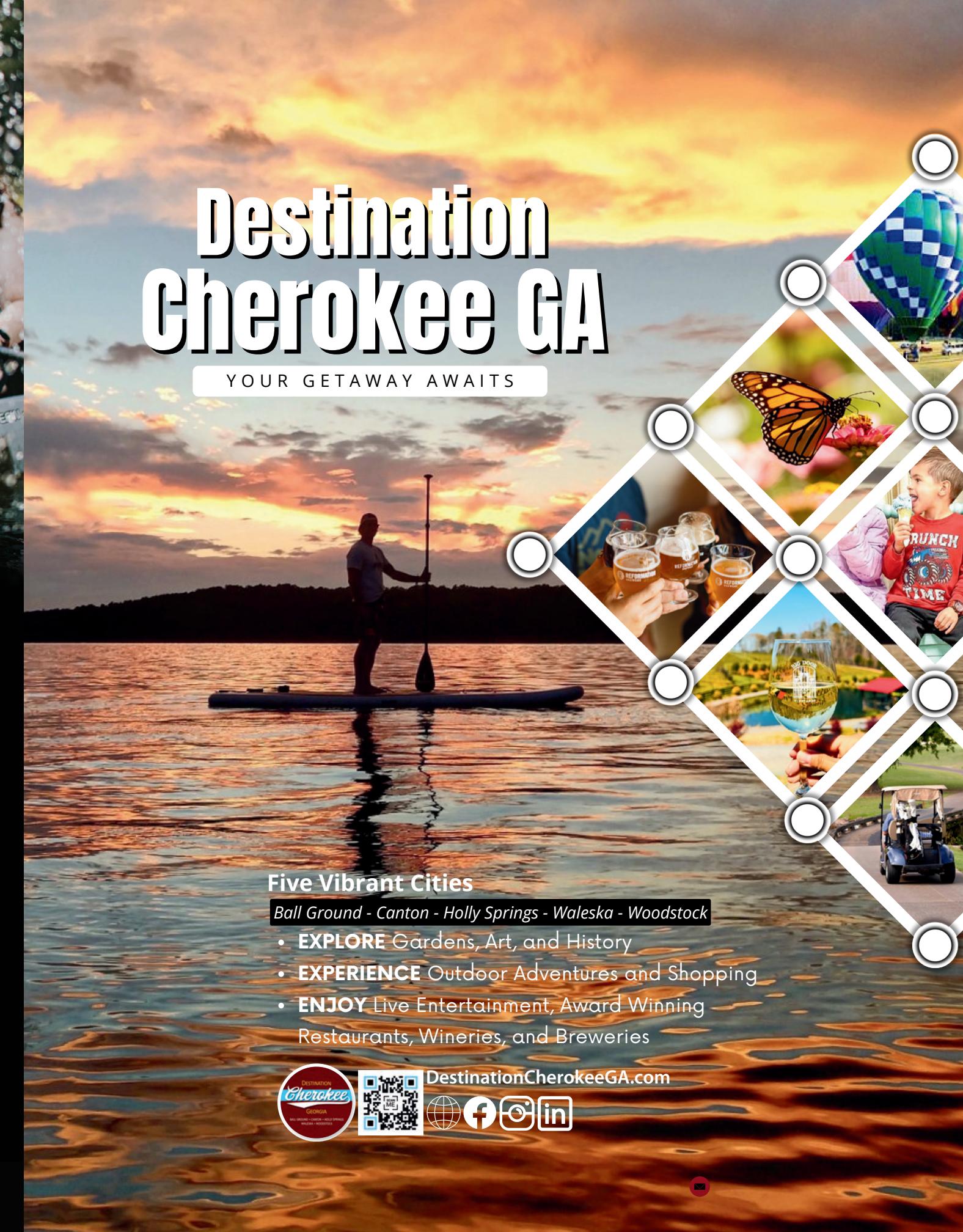
Whether you're planning a romantic escape, a weekend with friends, or a peaceful solo retreat, Destination Cherokee GA invites you to eat well, relax, and explore. With farm-fresh cuisine, scenic water adventures, and welcoming small-town charm, Cherokee County is North Georgia's best-kept travel secret.

Visit DestinationCherokeeGA.com to plan your trip, browse curated itineraries, and discover the region's top dining and outdoor experiences. •

**CHEROKEE COUNTY IS CALLING —
COME HUNGRY, LEAVE REFRESHED.**

Destination Cherokee GA

YOUR GETAWAY AWAITS



Five Vibrant Cities

Ball Ground - Canton - Holly Springs - Waleska - Woodstock

- **EXPLORE** Gardens, Art, and History
- **EXPERIENCE** Outdoor Adventures and Shopping
- **ENJOY** Live Entertainment, Award Winning Restaurants, Wineries, and Breweries



DestinationCherokeeGA.com

THINK TIFTON

Georgia

THE CROSSROADS OF AGRICULTURE & ADVENTURE



Nestled in the heart of South Georgia, Tifton invites you to experience the perfect blend of agricultural adventure and Southern charm. Tifton offers visitors a delightful array of activities that celebrate its rich heritage and vibrant community. Whether you're seeking a fun family outing or a romantic escape, Tifton is the ideal destination for every traveler.



EMBRACE TIFTON'S AGRICULTURAL HEARTBEAT

At the core of Tifton's allure is its deep agricultural roots. There, you can enjoy authentic farm experiences that connect you to the land. Step back in time at the Georgia Museum of Agriculture, where you'll discover farm life in the Wiregrass area during the early 1900s. This immersive experience showcases the history and significance of agriculture in the region. For hands-on fun, visit a variety of U-Pick farms for seasonal fruit and nut picking, or take the family to Rutland Farms for a delightful day at the petting zoo and fishing excursions.

Nature lovers will find Tifton's scenic landscapes perfect for outdoor activities. Stroll through their vibrant public art scene, featuring stunning murals, or discover over 20 charming painted "Georgia Dawgs" that cleverly represent local businesses. Golf enthusiasts can enjoy traditional courses or try their hand at disc golf beneath the majestic pines of Fulwood Park. The park also provides tranquil picnic spots, making it an ideal place to unwind and enjoy the outdoors.

SAVOR TIFTON'S CULINARY DELIGHTS

No visit to Tifton is complete without indulging in their vibrant food scene. From cozy farm stands to beloved local eateries, Tifton is a haven for food lovers. Enjoy a delightful brunch with friends at one of their charming cafés or a memorable dinner at one of their homegrown establishments. Don't forget to swing by Mi-Lady Bakery for a sweet treat that captures the essence of Southern hospitality.

Throughout the year, Tifton hosts various festivals that celebrate its culinary heritage, such as the mouthwatering Rhythm and Ribs BBQ Festival in March and the festive Hometown Holidays in December. These events are not just about food; they're a great way to savor local flavors while enjoying live music and the spirited camaraderie of the community. With each festival, you'll learn more about Tifton's rich traditions and the people who bring them to life.



EXPERIENCE CULTURE AND ENTERTAINMENT

Tifton's cultural offerings ensure that there's never a dull moment. Catch a captivating performance at the Historic Tift Theatre for Performing Arts, where you can laugh the night away at a comedy show or immerse yourself in live theater. The theater is a centerpiece of Tifton's community, hosting everything from musicals to special events that showcase local talent. If music is your passion, don't miss concerts at the UGA Tifton Campus Conference Center, where local and regional artists showcase their skills in a welcoming environment.

Art enthusiasts will love the Plough Gallery, featuring pottery experiences and rotating exhibits that tell the stories of Tifton's vibrant community. Tifton's art scene is not just about viewing; it's about experiencing and participating. Engage in workshops, attend art openings, and connect with local artists who are passionate about sharing their craft.



Easily accessible via I-75, Tifton is just 2.5 hours south of Atlanta, making it a convenient getaway for travelers from all directions. Whether you're there with the kids, your significant other, or for a family reunion, Tifton offers a welcoming atmosphere and an array of amenities to ensure your stay is enjoyable. •

So why wait? Think Tifton for rich agricultural heritage, delightful cuisine, and vibrant arts and culture!

ThinkTifton.com



CULTIVATING THE
PERFECT GETAWAY



[THINKTIFTON.COM](http://ThinkTifton.com)

FROM GEORGIA'S ONLY MUSEUM OF AGRICULTURE TO U-PICK FRUIT ORCHARDS TO LOCAL FARMERS MARKETS, YEAR-ROUND AG-VENTURE AWAITS! TO EXPERIENCE LOCAL FLAVOR AT ITS FINEST IN A DESTINATION THAT'S EASY TO REACH — THINK TIFTON!

think
TIFTON

CHOOSE YOUR OWN WALKABLE ADVENTURE IN MOBILE



The best road trip adventures happen when you find the perfect, walkable destination, where you discover enrichment in a culture that's distinctly different at every turn. Where cuisine, art and history arise from the birthplace of Mardi Gras in a city that's flown under six flags.

Mobile is nearly 325 years old, older than the State of Alabama. Its downtown entertainment district follows old Mobile's north-south, east-west streets like lattice work. Whether you take a right or left at the next intersection could determine which delicious dish or hearty plate you enjoy!

In Mobile, the catch of the day may be fish, shrimp, crabs or oysters and you can guarantee it's Gulf-to-table fresh. Our local chefs are celebrated for their eclectic takes on cuisine, whether it's old-school, Southern contemporary or the family-secret BBQ recipe.



visit
Mobile
Alabama



Le Moyne's Chophouse is one of Mobile's newest dining experiences, redefining downtown Mobile's culinary scene. Located in the expertly and newly renovated Admiral Hotel, the richness of our French foundations hangs in the air alongside the sweet smell of magnolias and the lush scents of fine bourbon.

If progressive is more your speed, there are blocks full of delectable dining spots to tickle your fancy. Start with craft cocktails or mocktails from a rooftop bar, enjoy locally sourced fresh, small plates from **The Noble South** or have it all when you join one of many curated experiences with **Bienville Bites Food Tour**.

Mobile's cultural heritage is a tapestry of its diverse historical influences, vibrant traditions and dynamic community life—a respite from the ordinary. The city's early French and Spanish settlers left a lasting impact, while our significant African American population, with deep roots in the city's history, contributed to its music, food and cultural festivals.

So, ditch the car. Seriously. Mobile's walkable downtown is full of museums, galleries, green spaces, signature hotels and plenty of entertainment, regardless of your direction. •



UPGRADE YOUR *expectations*



visit
Mobile
Alabama

ROAD TRIP ADVENTURES HAPPEN ONCE YOU DITCH THE CAR FOR THE PERFECT, WALKABLE DESTINATION. MOBILE'S DOWNTOWN ENTERTAINMENT DISTRICT HAS 50+ RESTAURANTS, MUSEUMS, ART GALLERIES, ENTERTAINMENT, SHOPPING AND MORE. COME SEE US!

TOP 5

RESTAURANTS TO CHECK OUT IN RIDGELAND

MISSISSIPPI

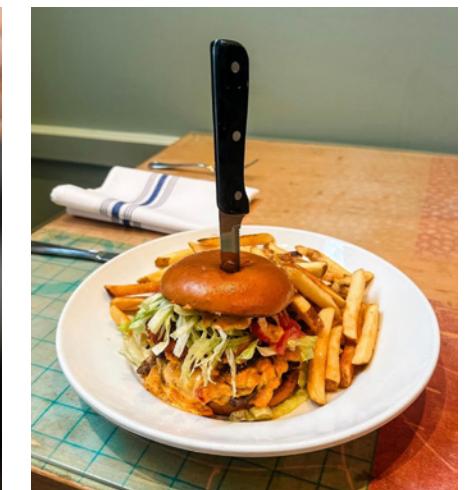


Ridgeland, Mississippi, is known for its breathtaking views of the Natchez Trace Parkway and a sprawling 33,000-acre lake. But what really sets this charming town apart? The food. Whether you're there for a weekend getaway or just passing through, these top Five restaurants offer mouthwatering meals that will make you want to plan your next. Here's a taste of Ridgeland's culinary scene!



Aplos Mediterranean

explore
RIDGELAND



1. ELY'S RESTAURANT & BAR

Tucked in the heart of the historic Railroad District, Ely's Restaurant & Bar is a shining example of Ridgeland's local charm. Opened by Richard Shapley in 2008, this upscale steakhouse has become a favorite for those craving mouthwatering steaks and fresh seafood. The sleek, contemporary ambiance sets the stage for an unforgettable dining experience, where every bite is cooked to perfection. Whether you're indulging in a juicy ribeye or savoring expertly prepared seafood, Ely's guarantees a meal that's rich in both flavor and atmosphere. Richard's motto, "Our service and friendships go hand in hand," rings true here, making Ely's feel like a special gathering spot for locals and visitors alike. If you're in the mood for an upscale dinner or a celebratory meal, Ely's is a must.

2. AMERIGO

For a taste of Italy in the heart of Ridgeland, look no further than Amerigo. With over 30 years of culinary tradition, this beloved spot has been serving up rich, flavorful Italian dishes that keep guests coming back. The menu features crispy pizzas, savory pasta, and fresh seafood—all prepared with an Italian twist. The warm, inviting atmosphere is perfect for everything from a quiet dinner to a lively weekend brunch with friends. Don't miss their gluten-sensitive options, which let everyone enjoy the flavors of Italy without compromise. A local favorite, Amerigo has earned its reputation as one of Ridgeland's top spots for delicious, Southern-Italian fare.

3. LOCAL 463 URBAN KITCHEN

For Southern comfort food with a modern flair, Local 463 is a standout. Helmed by James Beard Award finalist Chef Derek Emerson, this restaurant celebrates the best of Mississippi's local ingredients. Every dish is a nod to Southern classics, but with a twist—think Florida Rock Shrimp Pizza, or a decadent Mississippi Fruit Cobbler to finish the meal. The restaurant also doubles as a vibrant art gallery, with local artists' works adorning the walls, adding to the lively, contemporary vibe. Whether you're enjoying a relaxed lunch or celebrating a special occasion, Local 463 offers a dining experience where Southern comfort meets big-city creativity.

TOP 5

RESTAURANTS IN RIDGELAND



4. APLOS MEDITERRANEAN

Next to the serene green space at Renaissance at Colony Park, Aplos offers a fresh take on Mediterranean-inspired cuisine. Drawing influences from Italy, Greece, and the Middle East, Aplos delivers vibrant, flavorful dishes perfect for a casual yet elevated dining experience. Their Neapolitan pizzas, with perfectly crisp crusts and fresh toppings, are a standout, as are their Mediterranean wraps and salads. Aplos nails the balance between fast-casual dining and fine flavors, all while offering an unbeatable view of the Malco Theater show fountains. Whether you're popping in for a quick bite or a leisurely lunch, Aplos offers a taste of the Mediterranean with a Ridgeland twist.

5. CW ORGANICS APOTHECAIRE & TEA ROOM

Sometimes, the best meals are found in the simplest things—like a perfectly brewed cup of tea. CW Organics Apothecaire & Tea Room is Ridgeland's go-to spot for tea lovers. Known for its exceptional loose-leaf tea blends, CW Organics takes tea to a whole new level, blending herbs, fruits, and spices for unique and satisfying flavors. From rich black teas to light, refreshing green teas, each cup is designed to deliver an aromatic experience that calms the mind and soothes the soul. Whether you're a tea aficionado or just looking for a cozy afternoon escape, this charming tea room is the perfect retreat.

explore RIDGELAND

These five spots offer a diverse array of flavors and experiences, each promising to make your visit to Ridgeland an unforgettable one. From upscale steakhouse, authentic Italian comfort food, to relaxing tea breaks, Ridgeland delivers dining experiences that are as memorable as the stunning Mississippi landscapes. •

If you're ready to explore the culinary scene, along with high-end hotels, premier shopping, and Mississippi's only Topgolf, start planning your trip today!

Learn more at
ExploreRidgeland.com

Local 463

explore dining



32.4301,
-90.1285

CW Organics

apothecaire &
tea room

Spring into tea time with an escape to Ridgeland's newest culinary gem. Enjoy exceptional service and a curated selection of holistic teas and appetizers. Experience the art of conversation & Southern hospitality! Start planning your culinary escape today at exploreRidgeland.com.



explore
RIDGELAND

Curate Your PERFECT VACATION



Photo by Ian Jacob



Photo by Ian Jacob

Welcome to The Palm Beaches, Florida's Most Stylish Vacation Destination and home to a collection of 39 vibrant cities and towns from Jupiter to Boca Raton. Visitors can immerse themselves in the colorful culture and nightlife of West Palm Beach, soak up the unspoiled beauty of Jupiter, travel back in time to the Gilded Age in historic Palm Beach, and sample the boundless art and culinary treasures of Boca Raton. In between, dozens more coastal towns await—from funky Delray Beach to the golf haven of Palm Beach Gardens, home of the PGA.

Here, the diversity of travel experiences is matched by the warmth of its coastal communities. Pick your favorite spot on 47 miles of uncrowded beaches, and enjoy the warm, clear water from the Gulf Stream current. Walk in the footsteps of legends on more than 145 sun-soaked golf courses; the destination is known as Florida's Golf Capital for good reason. Enjoy an indulgent collection of world-class spas that will melt away your stress. Find inspiration in artful museums and theatres, and enjoy some retail therapy in iconic shopping districts, including Worth Avenue. You'll find fun activities for kids around every corner in The Palm Beaches, too.



Photo by Clay Cook



CHOOSE YOUR ADVENTURE!

Whether you arrive by boat or by limo, dining in The Palm Beaches is a memorable experience. Award-winning and celebrity chefs head an eclectic culinary scene including everything from casual waterfront cafes to fine dining hot spots, and nine properties were recently recognized by The MICHELIN Guide. You can't go wrong at one of celebrity Chef Clay Conley's hotspots — Grato, Imoto, or Buccan — or Chef Pushkar Marathe's globally-inspired Stage Kitchen & Bar and Ela Curry & Cocktails. Explore the many options at the Jupiter Inlet, including the rooftop tapas bar Topside at the Beacon and the tiki-thatched Guanabanas. In West Palm Beach, options abound on bustling Clematis Street. Regardless of your tastes, The Palm Beaches' dining scene is sure to excite.

As America's First Resort Destination® you'll find an abundance of four- and five-star beachside resorts, as well as historic hotels and boutique inns. Elevate your stay in one of the four standout hotels that have received the coveted honor of a MICHELIN Key. The Breakers Palm Beach has hosted U.S. presidents and foreign nobility on its historic and unapologetically luxurious oceanfront property, while PGA National Resort & Spa in Palm Beach Gardens is a year-round oasis for golfers. The Four Seasons Resort Palm Beach is the island's only five-star, five-diamond resort, and the modern Eau Palm Beach Resort & Spa is the perfect spot for families with their Loggers Kids Club and Hide Away Teens Club. Explore all there is to do at The Boca Raton, including the swanky Beach Club and one of the top-rated spas in the world. For a touch of modern sophistication, The Ben offers stylish accommodations plus a rooftop bar with stunning views of West Palm Beach. With options like these, as well as many more such as The Brazilian Court Hotel, The Hilton West Palm Beach, The Seagate, Amrit Ocean Resort and the newly-opened The Belgrave Resort & Spa, it's impossible to go wrong.



Photo by Ian Jacob

The Palm Beaches have been renowned as the warm-weather getaway by discerning travelers for over 125 years. Here, genuine hospitality is a way of life, and the blend of people, cultures and coastal towns welcomes everyone. •

PLAN YOUR TRIP AT THEPALMBEACHES.COM

Picture Yourself in The Palm Beaches

Florida's Most Stylish Vacation Destination



Experience Top Restaurants Recognized by The MICHELIN Guide

When you visit The Palm Beaches, you'll trade one-size-fits-all experiences for a vacation that's custom-fit to your desires.

Curate the perfect vacation at ThePalmBeaches.com.



FLORIDA



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