



OFF THE EATEN PATH

It's not always so easy breaking from the well-trod foodie path. Habits are tough to break. Fast-food and interstate-abutting chains, with their neon and promises of easy appetite fixes, are tough to pass by. But as anyone with a heart truly devoted to superlative eats can attest—especially those familiar with these five eateries—it's gonna be worth it. Every time.

By Seth Eli Barlow, Bonnie Bauman,
Jordan P. Hickey and Wyndham Wyeth

Photography by Arshia Khan

Taylor's Steakhouse

14201 Arkansas 54, Dumas
(870) 382-5349

HOURS:

Thurs., 5:30 p.m. - 9 p.m.;
Fri. - Sat., 5:30 p.m. - 10 p.m.

RECOMMENDED DISHES:

Prime dry-aged T-bone, bone-in filet, blackened duck breast with raspberry-chipotle sauce, cheese dip.

THE FARTHER you get from Little Rock, the less developed the landscape becomes. The city skyline shrinks in the rear-view mirror, Interstate 530 fades into U.S. Highway 65, and plowed fields begin to stretch out from either side of the road. But veer off that well-trafficked stretch of asphalt just a little ways as you near Dumas, and you'll find the best steakhouse in Arkansas.

And the folks who run it? Oh, they know. "I told my wife before we went into this, *If we put in just a steakhouse, serve a regular steak like everybody else serves, are people going to drive out here? Or drive from Monticello or Pine Bluff or Little Rock? No, they're not,*" owner Chuck Taylor says. "I *have* to have people specifically drive here from other places to eat at my establishment. And to do that, I've got to have something special."

In that, Chuck and his wife, Pam, have more than succeeded. Taylor's Steakhouse has only been in business since 2012, but the Taylor family has been serving food in Dumas since 1954. Chuck's parents originally opened Taylor's as a grocery store, and that's the way it remained for almost 30 years, until it became apparent that country grocery stores were going to become a thing of the past. So the Taylors added a lunch counter and started cooking barbecue, slowly adding burgers and po'boys to round out the menu. Eventually,



the establishment's lunch service became so popular, they started moving the shelves and grocery stock out to make room for more tables and chairs.

As time went on and Chuck neared his 40s, having spent most of his life working at Taylor's Grocery, he and Pam began to dream about serving dinner in their own high-quality steakhouse. To set themselves apart—to get people off the beaten path and in the door—he opted to specialize in a time-consuming dry-aging process that can take up to 80 days. Although the process has fallen out of favor in recent years (owing to the financial and time investment required), what makes dry-aged beef so special is that, as the meat ages in carefully controlled refrigerators, it essentially breaks down and actually begins to shrink as the flavor becomes more and more concentrated. The beef becomes unbelievably tender and juicy, and even the fat changes in texture, taking on a buttery, melt-in-your-mouth consistency. Chuck proudly keeps the meat on display behind glass refrigerator doors as it ages in the coolers near the kitchen.

But food this transcendent doesn't just happen overnight. In a sense, Taylor's Steakhouse required a degree of aging itself before it could really come to fruition. But take the trip down to Dumas for one of the Taylors' thick, juicy cuts, and all it will take is one bite to see that, gosh darn it, it's all been well worth the wait. —*ww*

RAISING THE STEAKS

Carnivores, rejoice! There's some darn fine meat-eating in out-of-the-way Arkansas

COW PEN A devastating fire and a handful of ownership changes couldn't keep this institution down. Now a half-century old, Cow Pen's still serving up the steaks, Italian dishes and Tex-Mex mainstays that made it famous—a menu as varied as the Delta itself. (5198 U.S. 82 E., Lake Village; (870) 265-9992)

DANNIE'S CAFE It's a surprising find: a high-end-yet-still-down-home bistro plunked down in the rural outskirts of Hope in a renovated brick-red barn. An even bigger surprise? The dishes coming out of the kitchen, particularly the cast-iron-seared rib-eye served with a side of earthy mushroom risotto. (475 County Road 54, Hope; (870) 777-8870)

JERRY'S STEAKHOUSE If you like your charcoal-grilled filet served with a side of neon signs, pitchers of beer and dive-bar nostalgia, this is your kind of place. Don't come expecting fancy fixins'—you're here for the steak, after all. And maybe a couple of spins on the jukebox. (424 U.S. 463 S., Trumann; (870) 483-1649)

THE TAMALE FACTORY It's called The Tamale Factory because it's where George Elridge of Doe's Place fame makes the goods (in a barn on his farm, naturally). Think of it as a rural version of his Little Rock restaurant—same family-style steaks, same drool-worthy tamales, just with way more country charm. (P.S. It's only open on Friday and Saturday nights.) (19751 Arkansas 33 S., Gregory; (870) 347-1350)



Low Gap Cafe

THE NEW-MODEL opal-colored Cadillac pulled over to the side of the road, and three older faces looked out from the inside. “Are you open?” they asked the couple sitting on the bench in front of the gas station. The man and woman gave them a funny look and explained that, well, they didn’t own the place—and it’d been five years since the gas station had been open. Hearing this, the people in the Cadillac left and went on their way.

Well, wasn’t that just the strangest thing? the couple asked themselves. They didn’t have much time to mull it over, however, before a young family in a minivan pulled up. Then another. And another. Before long, there were trucks pulling off to the side, and there were cars parked in the lot of a restaurant that didn’t exist. That night, the couple, Nick and Marie Bottini, went home and decided, well, *maybe there should be a restaurant there*. Five months later, there was.

On a Thursday evening some 5 1/2 years later, Nick tells this story as the majority of that evening’s customers are making their way out of the restaurant. He’s removed his floor-length apron, though he keeps the cordless phone attached to his belt. (Cell service is virtually nonexistent around these parts.) The night rush behind him, he now seems somewhat more at ease—however, he says that now, at 54, he’s working harder than he did when he was 30. What’s more, even though the universe had nudged him and his wife to open the restaurant, it certainly hadn’t come easy.

That first winter? Things were tough. By the time they finished renovating the old gas station, it was already November, well past the summer peak of the tourist season on the nearby Buffalo River. However, as he says, the locals were the ones who got them through.

They’re the ones who came in, filled the tables, ordered their meals off the large green chalkboard where he used to write everything the restaurant had to offer. And really, they’re the ones who first spread the word—who got people in the door. They’re the reason Nick has yet to spend a dime on advertising.

In fairness, however, it hasn’t taken a lot of convincing. People’ve come for the prime rib and live music on Fridays and Saturdays. They’ve come for the view from the patio, which overlooks a sprawling mountain vista that would be worth the trip alone. They’ve come in droves. They’ve come by car, by truck, by horse. (The second year, Nick remembers, there was a day when they had 24 horses tied up to the trees adjacent to the restaurant.) Oh, and make no mistake: The customers absolutely come for the food.

The spinach-artichoke dip? It’s the sort of stuff you’re supposed to eat with the provided pieces of toast (but secretly eat via spoon). The seafood? Bafflingly fresh for the middle of nowhere (it’s FedEx’d daily from Florida) the salmon and snapper in particular are standouts. And the desserts? Made fresh by Marie every morning (with the exception of the creme brulee, which Nick takes care of).

It’s interesting, though. Unlike many of the other places that have earned such a passionate and far-traveling clientele, the Low Gap Cafe hasn’t been around for decades. For that matter, it hasn’t even been around a decade. However, there’s an important point to be made here. Before, back when he and his wife were sitting on the bench drawing questions about the nonexistent hours of their nonexistent restaurant, the location’s appeal hinged much more on convenience. Now, however, this is the destination. —jph



Arkansas 74, Low Gap (near Jasper) lowgapcafe.com; (870) 861-5848

PEAK-SEASON HOURS
(now through Nov. 5):
Wed. - Thurs., 11 a.m. - 8 p.m.;
Fri. - Sat., 11 a.m. - 9 p.m.

RECOMMENDED DISHES:
Spinach-artichoke dip, pan-seared scallops, red snapper, salmon and chicken francese. Desserts alternate, but our four-berry Chambord cake was bonkers. Prime rib is served Friday and Saturday nights.

OFF-TRAIL OASES

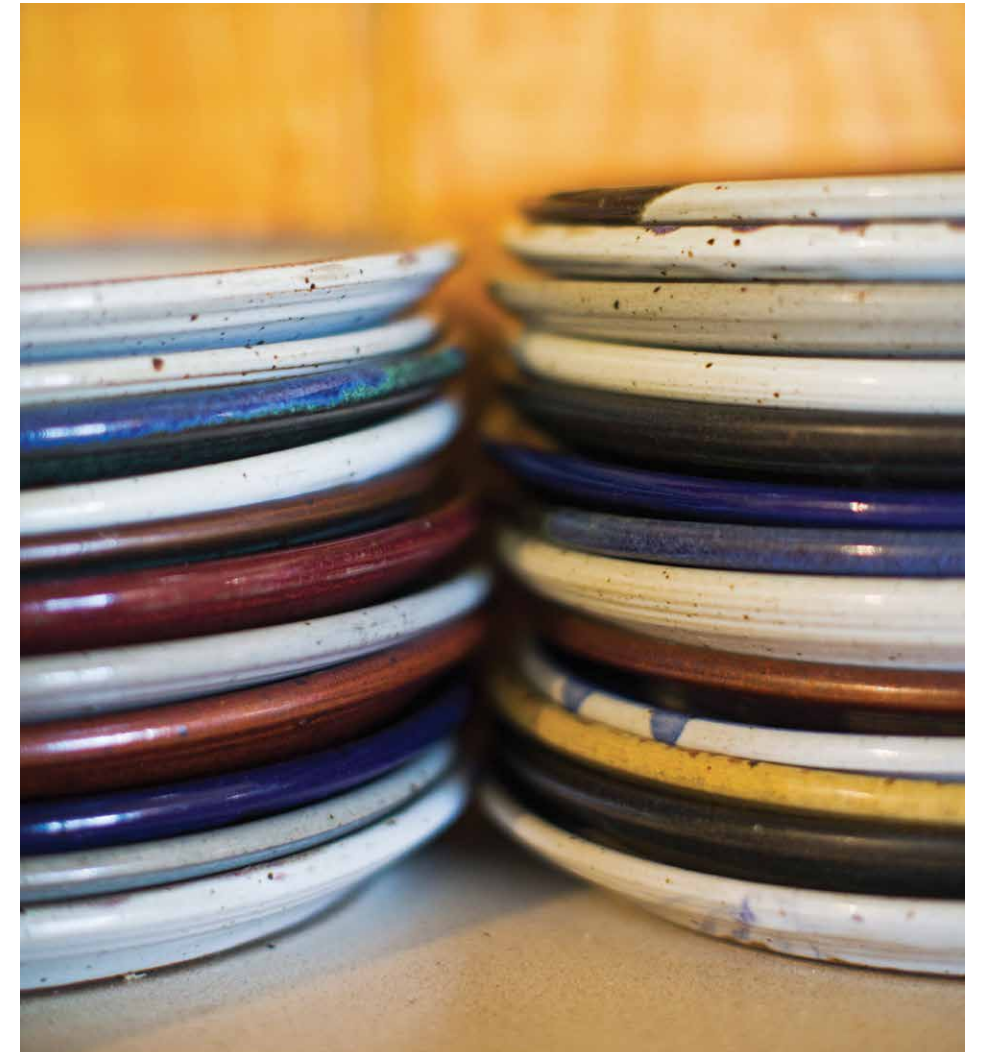
Finding these places may have you thinking your GPS is on the fritz. (It’s not.) But trust us: It’ll all be worth it.

BEAN PALACE CAFE AT WAR EAGLE MILL It’s a windy drive out to the historic War Eagle Mill, but you’ll be more than rewarded for your efforts at the mill’s third-floor cafe. The signature dish is War Eagle Mill-ground cornbread with smoky pinto beans (hence the cafe’s name), but there’s also a stellar breakfast lineup (pecan-cinnamon pancakes, anyone?) and a noteworthy cobbler. (11045 War Eagle Road, Rogers; (479) 789-5343)

JENNY LIND COUNTRY CAFE If we’re gonna drive out of our way, it might as well be for pie. Especially *this* pie at this quirky-as-can-be country diner somewhere between Fort Smith and Greenwood. If the Chocolate Joy’s on offer, it’s a must—but we’d also gladly “settle” for a slice of buttermilk. Or whatever else the “Pie Girl” is serving up. (2655 Gate Nine Road, Greenwood; (479) 996-1099)

OARK GENERAL STORE & CAFE There’s nary a weekend that goes by that doesn’t find our Instagram feeds filled with snaps from inside this one-stop shop near the Mulberry River, and we can see why—it’s the state’s oldest continually operated store, after all (and quite photogenic, to boot). But it’s the charming cafe that’s the real draw, especially those half-pound, well-worth-the-trip burgers. (117 County Road 5241, Oark; (479) 292-3351)

PICKENS RESTAURANT & COMMISSARY Turnip greens, squash casserole, fried catfish, deviled eggs, rib-sticking meatloaf: This is grandma-approved, down-home cookin’, served the plate-lunch way on the grounds of the old Pickens plantation. It’ll be hard, but make sure to save room for the coconut meringue pie. (122 Pickens Road, Pickens; (870) 382-5266)





Pig Trail Bypass Country Cafe

4223 Arkansas 16, Elkins
[facebook.com/crossesgrocery](https://www.facebook.com/crossesgrocery);
 (479) 643-3307

HOURS:
 6 a.m. - 9 p.m., daily

RECOMMENDED DISHES:
 Fried mushrooms, fried pickles,
 Hooshburger with home fries,
 chicken-fried steak, chicken
 enchiladas.

HOOSHANG NAZARALI, proprietor of the Pig Trail Bypass Country Cafe, won't divulge the combination of Persian spices he mixes into the local ground beef he uses to make his infamous "Hooshburger." But he is willing to provide some insight into the inspiration behind it.

"In Iran, I love kebab, and here in the United States, I love cheeseburgers, so I thought, why not combine the two?" he explains. "And the people, they like it."

The people *do* like it, so much so that online travel and food website Thrillist.com named it the best burger in Arkansas on its "Best Burger in Every State in America" list.

How it earned the designation is no mystery to me after I take a bite of my own Hooshburger on a bright Wednesday afternoon. Those secret Persian spices give the nicely caramelized made-to-order patty a subtle smoky flavor—is that turmeric I taste? onions?—while melty American cheese and an uber-fresh bun, lettuce and tomato give the burger a decadent, yet wholesome quality.

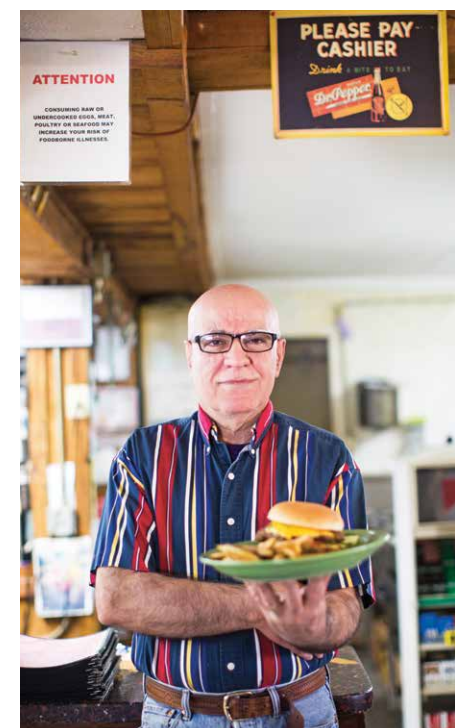
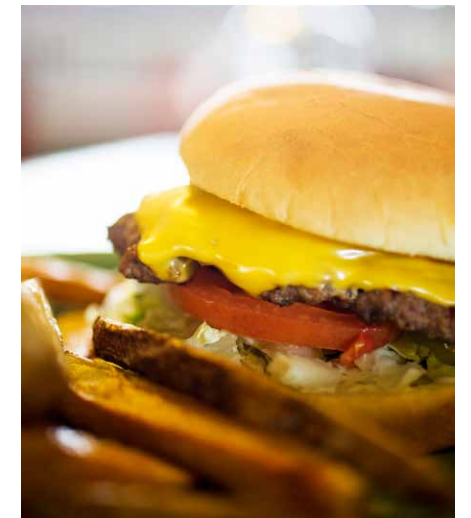
But while the Hooshburger is certainly a draw, it's not the only reason to drop in to the roadside cafe-slash-convenience store on Arkansas Highway 16 in rural Crosses, an unincorporated community in Madison

County. (If you see a thriving cactus garden out front, you're in the right place.) Aside from the snacks and such you'd find at any ol' convenience store, here you'll be able to grab last-minute fishing gear before heading out to the nearby White River for the day. Not to mention that the cafe's menu serves up a wide variety of hearty American fare, like biscuits and gravy for breakfast and a Sunday special of chicken-fried steak that the locals swear by (and a group of Bella Vista regulars make the trek out every week for). Plus, the Americana bric-a-brac that fills the cafe—think Elvis busts, dated license plates and faded adverts for old-timey products—are a hoot.

But as I take my time putting away my burger and house-cut fries, I suspect that Hooshang (or "Hoosh" as the locals call him) is the biggest draw. Darting about here and there making lunch, waiting tables and tending to convenience-store clientele, he addresses each and every customer by name and earnestly asks after expected grandkids and ailing relatives—and he's been doing so for more than three decades.

Hooshang's path to this small Ozark hamlet was every bit as winding and dramatic as the Pig Trail Bypass that threads its way through it. Born in Southwest Iran, in a town called Shiraz, he traveled to the United States in 1977 on a student visa to study in Texas. But after the Iranian Revolution began about a year later, at his mother's insistence, he chose to remain in the U.S. Three years later, he found himself in Madison County, close to his new bride's family. Since then, not only has he built a thriving business; he's raised four children and become a revered member of the community. In 2004, for instance, he was elected justice of the peace.

"I love it here," he says of his adopted homeland. "The pace is slower here, and the people, they care for each other." —bb



BEST IN BURGERS

Because sometimes you just need a good hunk a beef

THE BACK FORTY This family-owned spot has been churning out the same legendary burger for upwards of 37 years: the half-pound Barnbuster, a juicy griddled number that tastes like the ones Dad used to flip on the

backyard grill. (1400 Arkansas 62 E., Mountain Home; (870) 425-7170)

COTHAM'S MERCANTILE Sure, there's a Cotham's in the City in downtown Little Rock. But for some reason, those Hubcap Burgers and (those onion rings) just taste better when devoured at the original location in rural Scott. (5301 Arkansas 161, Scott; (501) 961-9284)

DAIRYETTE This Ouachita mountain hamlet on the western shores of Lake Ouachita is home to one of the state's most beloved dairy bars—which is

home, in turn, to one of the state's finest burger-and-shake combos. It's the stuff of summer dreams, folks. (717 U.S. Highway 270, Mount Ida; (870) 867-2312)

MORRILTON DRIVE INN With names like the "Triple Super Double Cheese," these monstrosities aren't for the faint of heart. They are, however, exactly what you need after a long Petit Jean hike (or a long I-40 haul). (Note: For the less hungry, there are almost-regular-sized burgers on offer, too.) (1601 N. Oak St., Morrilton; (501) 354-8343)



Craig's Bar-B-Q

15 W. Walnut St., De Valls Bluff
(870) 998-2616

HOURS:
10:30 a.m. - 8 p.m., daily

RECOMMENDED DISHES:
Pork with medium sauce, grilled cheese (seriously) and the slaw.

ON THE SOUTH SIDE OF U.S. Highway 70, just before the quarter-mile strip of downtown De Valls Bluff, is Craig's Bar-B-Q. On the outside, it's little more than a white-cinder-block shoebox with half a gravel parking lot, but inside, past the dozen tables and faded wallpaper, is a kitchen full of Delta magic. As the kitchen door swings open, the radio and cooking aromas come out, blending

sweet smoke, bell pepper and Beyoncé.

"Just up the road in downtown. If you go over the bridge, you've gone too far." The waitress (there's only one) is telling a guest where the nearest ATM is. It's a line she's had to tell a thousand times to the folks who drive in and don't know to bring cash.

The sauce is the game here—"what we're known for," the server says—and it's for good reason. You can get it over pork or beef, your choice, but pork is most popular. The sauce trades sweet for savory, an herbal concoction. The recipe is a closely held secret, but a close inspection leads to hints of vinegar, bell pepper, cinnamon and sorghum. It's a blend that's changed little since the restaurant was opened by Wes and Lawrence Craig, two brothers, in 1947. "Or at least that's when they started counting," the server says. Three generations of the Craig family have kept the place running.

Eating at Craig's, regardless of what you order, be it pork or beef, on a sandwich or on its own, or even, if you must, a simple cheeseburger, is a lesson in defying expectations. Where your mouth expects sweet, it gets savory. Where your tongue thinks sour, it's met with salt. This isn't your typical Memphis-style dry rub. The flavors, as they linger on your palate, change directions of their own accord, launching off on tangents, flying away like the pheasants that dot the dining room's decades-old wallpaper. (Make note: If by some cruel twist of fate, BBQ just isn't your thing, just know Craig's has the best grilled-cheese sandwiches for a hundred miles around.)

The holy trinity of Delta barbecue is completed by beans and slaw. The slaw is another secret recipe (is the secret green apples?), another holdover from an era before, just like the beans, but that's what Craig's is: a time capsule to the last century, when Lawrence Craig was cooking on riverboats up and down the Mississippi.

Arkansas has always occupied a marginal place in the national barbecue story, being a unique mishmash of influences from Texas and Memphis. But in De Valls Bluff, where sauce is king, Arkansas can finally lay claim to something uniquely its own. Looking to end things on a sweet note? Just a quarter mile from Craig's is one of the Delta's sweetest treasures: Ms. Lena's pies. Ms. Lena sells a range of mile-high meringue pies from her roadside bakery, regularly stocking freshly made coconut, chocolate, pecan and whatever else might be in season. Weekends are for fried pies, and she changes pies regularly, which means you'll have to keep coming back. —*seb*



HOLY SMOKES

Because down here, good barbecue is religion

THE BACKYARD BAR-B-Q CO. It's all about the ribs at this southern-Arkansas institution. Well, the ribs and Ms. Glenda's pies. Be sure to bring a cooler—you're going to want to take some of both back with you for, you know, later. (Or maybe sooner rather

than later. We won't judge.) (1407 E. Main St., Magnolia; (870) 234-7890)

DIXIE PIG There are people who make the haul up Dixie-Pig way just for a bottle of the joint's pepper-heavy, vinegar-laden sauce. We know, because we are those people. (701 N. Sixth St., Blytheville; (870) 763-4636)

HOOTS BBQ & STEAKS It's a big menu, quite literally—a hand-scrawled chalkboard that takes up the better portion of a wall—and you'd be hard-pressed to make an unwise choice when ordering from it. Brisket, smoked

chicken, big-as-your-noggin onion rings—take your pick. We doubt you'll leave unhappy. (2008 U.S. 65 N., McGehee; (870) 222-1234)

JONES BAR-B-Q DINER Yes, it is *that* good. (You don't earn a James Beard award and become one of the first inductees into Arkansas' newly ordained Food Hall of Fame for nothing, after all.) Go early: Mr. Jones is known to sell out before the lunch hour hits. (219 W. Louisiana St., Marianna; (870) 295-3807)



BIG-CITY COOKING, SMALL-TOWN ARKANSAS

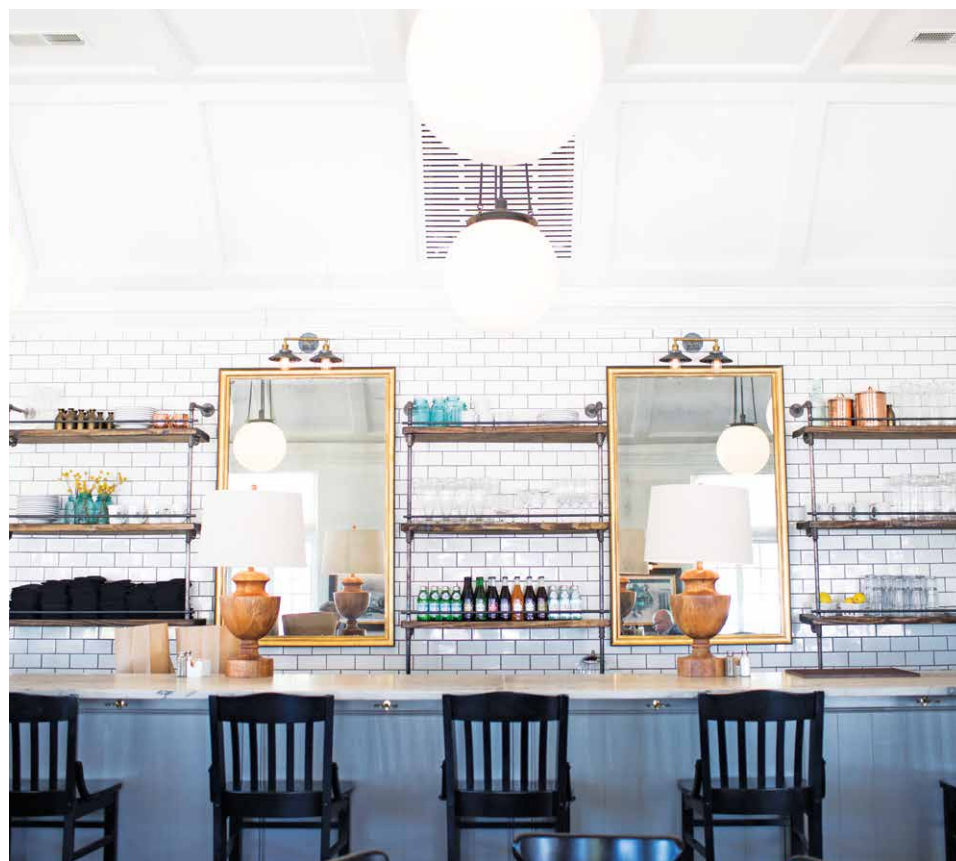
Places that make you wonder how they got where they are (slash thank your lucky stars you found 'em)

DEVITO'S It's an old-school Italian place—spaghetti and meatballs and the like—but it's the charbroiled rainbow trout that packs the parking lot, owing to the family's trout-farm history. Think of it as an Ozark twist on your favorite family-owned restaurant in Little Italy. (350 Devitos Loop N., Harrison; (870) 741-8832)

LOCAL FLAVOR Owned by a sixth-generation Eureka, this downtown favorite is as eclectic and artsy as the town surrounding it. Grilled salmon, walnut-pesto pasta, pan-seared tilapia—it's all here, and all utterly delicious. (Don't miss the sister restaurant, Aquarius Taqueria, if you're craving authentic Mexican or a mezcal marg.) (71 S. Main St., Eureka Springs; (479) 253-9522)

FOX & FORK Here's something you shouldn't do: Browse this quirky Clarksville bistro's Facebook feed when you're hungry. Here's something you most definitely should do: Stop in for a spell on your next Interstate-40 haul. Then order the bacon-pâté-and-tomato-jam-topped BLT and start planning your next visit. (117 S. College Ave., Clarksville; (479) 647-5010)

SKYLARK CAFE This sweet-as-sugar cafe off U.S. 65 is helmed by a sweet-as-sugar young couple who are churning out dishes that we crave on the regular (namely, those green-chile pork tacos and that pulled-pork Cuban)—*annnd* that we often make the drive for. And don't even get us started on that strawberry pie. (401 High St., Leslie; (870) 447-2354)



Wilson Cafe

TO SPEND any amount of time in Wilson is to feel you've encountered a place that's fallen directly out of the sky. Heading north from Memphis, there are the wide, wide fields of the Delta that spread off like a blanket, uniform to the eye unfamiliar with the subtler cues and totems by which such a landscape can be marked away and defined. But then, arriving in Wilson, there is Tudor architecture, a company town all in one style, a place that, again, feels so disconnected from the elements that would normally tether a town to one place—that if it weren't anchored in place by the solidly built red-brick structures, it might drift up and away into the horizon.

Of course, this is wrong on several counts.

Do a little looking around and you'll find the town has been there for a *good* long while, going all the way back to 1886, when Lee Wilson founded his sawmill, and a company town rose up with it. But there's more rooted there than just history—something that is amply clear when you look to the 100-acre Wilson Gardens just a little ways up the road and across the train tracks. This gets all the clearer, however, when you stumble across the restaurant where so much of that produce is finding a home, (especially during the spring and summer months): Wilson Cafe.

When chef Joseph Cartwright—who runs the place with his wife, Shari Haley—talks about the produce that winds up on the table of the Wilson Cafe, it's almost as if all the vegetables were vying for placement in the sentence. “Zuchinisquashtomatookra” he says before noting that really, there's so much more than that. There are the fruit trees, for example—the many kinds of apples and pears, the nectarines, plums, the limes that'll wind up behind the bar. Or the green tomatoes. Or the carrots that, as of this writing, ought to be showing up any day now.

But of course, in order to get the full effect, you've really got to see the dishes that comprise those ingredients coming out of the kitchen, (even in the winter months, greens from the hoop still make regular appearances). You've got to see Shari in the kitchen surrounded by pecan and chocolate chess pies, and the traveling salesmen who linger over pie and coffee and lick their plates clean. Really, in order to see all the ways Joseph and Shari have decidedly made the place their own since opening in December 2013, you've got to eat there for yourself.

Although any discussion of Wilson is certainly incomplete without a pointed mention of the windfall the town received when Gaylon Lawrence Sr. bought the whole thing in 2010, thereby energizing a place that might have otherwise languished in the manner of so many small towns, there's an equally important point to be made: When you spend time in this place, it's clear a community is taking root in a new and exciting way. And you can taste it. —jph **AL**

2 N. Jefferson St., Wilson
eatatwilson.com; (870) 655-0222

HOURS:

Sun. - Tues., 11 a.m. - 2 p.m.;
Wed. - Sat., 11 a.m. - 2 p.m., 5 p.m. - 8:30 p.m.

RECOMMENDED DISHES:

Strawberry Fields salad, good ol' burger, “steak and eggs,” scampi and grits, and pie. All Of. The. Pie.

