

MINNEAPOLIS - ST. PAUL, MINNESOTA

Food leads attractions of Atlanta

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Great barbecue? Check. Fabulous soul food? Check. World's largest drive-in? Check. Of the many reasons to visit Atlanta, food may be tops.

The first time I took a friend to Son's Place, the Minnesota native was about to put butter on his collard greens until I yelped and held up the pepper vinegar, the proper accompaniment. Since then, he never fails to go to Son's on his Atlanta visits, to fill his cafeteria tray with perfectly cooked fried chicken, crowder peas, hoe cakes and cobbler (100 Hurt St. NE., 1-404-581-0530).

Looking for barbecue? Harold's, just down the road from the federal penitentiary in which Al Capone once resided, has superb pulled pork and Brunswick stew (171 McDonough Av. SE., 1-404-627-9268).

If your palate runs to the south and west of Atlanta, head to Nuevo Laredo, where the only thing more taxing than the long waits is winnowing your way through a copious menu (1495 Chattahoochee Ave. NW., 1-404-352-9009).

If your palate runs to the south and east, the rustic Havana Sandwich Shop not only has swell boliches and other Cuban sandwiches, but also the best yellow rice and black beans I've ever tasted (2905 Buford Hwy. NE., 1-404-636-4094).

Speaking of all-time bests, I've tried Buffalo wings in at least 100 other places since first sampling them 23 years ago at Taco Mac, and none have equaled, much less exceeded them (1006 N. Highland Av. NE., 1-404-873-6529).

Not to be missed by any visitor to Atlanta is the world's largest drive-in eatery, the Varsity. On an average day, the Varsity claims to serve 2 miles of hot dogs, more than a ton apiece of potatoes and onions (deep fried, of course), 300 gallons of chili (mostly on those dogs) and more Coca-Cola than any place on the planet. You can secure a drive-in slot or sidle up to the 150-foot stainless-steel counter inside and be thoroughly entertained by the rapid-fire lingo of the staff (61 North Ave. NW., 1-404-881-1706).

Rathbun's, the city's hottest new restaurant, offers primarily small bites with huge flavors -- the eggplant fries and shredded marinated zucchini could turn any carnivore into a vegetarian -- but be sure to save room for desserts such as a banana ice-cream sandwich with chocolate toffee sauce (12 Krog St., Suite R, 1-404-524-8280).

Small dishes are also a hallmark at the Woodfire Grill, a cozy enclave that emphasizes lusty, savory, smoky flavors with dishes such as grilled scallops with mango and smoked paprika (1782 Cheshire Bridge Rd. NE., 1-404-347-9055).

Watershed has a slightly more Southern bent, with a shrimp-grits dish, sublime oyster Po' Boys and, every Tuesday night, fried chicken with the perfect amount of spice and moisture. The potatoes, both mashed and French-fried, are otherworldly-good, and you'd be hard pressed to find a better roast-pork sandwich (406 W. Ponce De Leon Av., Decatur, 1-404-378-4900).

Another sandwich, the lowly hamburger, gets an upgrade at Floataway Cafe, an atmospheric wonder that more than fulfills its aim of raising "peasant food" to beautiful heights. Most entrees are either braised or

wood-grilled or roasted, but it's hard to not order a raft of the superb appetizers (1123 Zonolite Rd. NE., 1-404-892-1414).

Floataway is an offshoot of Bacchanalia, which has been Zagat guide's top-rated restaurant in the city for eight years. One visit confirms why. The chefs grow most of their own produce, but they also have a stunning touch with meat from organic farms and seafood (1198 Howell Mill Rd. NW., 1-404-365-0410).

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