

# Local's Guide

SOUTH-  
EAST



## The South's Best New Restaurants

More than just terrific places to enjoy a meal, these businesses are transforming their local dining scenes and the food world at large

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### Alabama

#### BIRMINGHAM

##### Pizza Grace

The story of Birmingham's Pizza Grace began when chef and owner Ryan Westover finally admitted that he just really likes creating pizzas. Westover made a name for himself as a pastry chef and from cooking in or consulting for restaurants around the country. But the fact remained that Westover, whose résumé also includes early stints at Domino's and Papa John's, had his heart in pizza. That love comes through in his pies, which start with a three-ingredient sourdough. The pepperoni version gets zing from Aleppo pepper, and the plain cheese isn't so standard thanks to a blend of four varieties and a sprinkle of herb breadcrumbs. For something more adventurous, try the veggie with pesto, garlic confit, kale, roasted mushrooms,

provolone, and smoked sea salt. Dine in the sleek, warehouse-chic restaurant, or order a pie and salad to go.

### Florida

#### CORAL GABLES

##### Zitz Sum

Few menus are as uniquely delicious and surprising as the one at Coral Gables' Zitz Sum, and that's because it reflects chef Pablo Zitzmann's own story. The son of German and Mexican immigrants, he was raised in Bogotá, Colombia. After graduating from culinary school, he cooked in Miami, Honolulu's Chinatown, and Hong Kong before returning to South Florida, where he helmed the kitchen at the lauded but now-defunct No Name Chinese. That varied history, plus Zitzmann's love of Japanese and Italian

flavors, translates into an incomparable dining experience. The oft-changing menu means you might encounter the spicy, quick-to-sell-out Har Gow (shrimp dumplings with Calabrian chili oil, lime, and Thai basil) or the Wonton in Brodo (chicken-and-foie gras-filled dumplings swimming in a mushroom-Parmesan broth).

### Louisiana

#### NEW ORLEANS

##### Lengua Madre

You could define the unexpected Lengua Madre by what it isn't—a Mexican restaurant with the usual platters of enchiladas and fajitas piled high with rice and beans. What chef Ana Castro has built in New Orleans' quiet Lower Garden District is far more interesting than that. During dinner service in this



## ATLANTA, GEORGIA

### Lucian Books and Wine

Find elegant small plates and great vino at this stylish spot

**L**IKE AN ACE up the sleeve, Lucian Books and Wine is the kind of wild-card that can suit itself beautifully to nearly any kind of use. Whether you're looking for a quiet place to crack the cover of a novel over a glass of wine, to gather with friends for a leisurely lunch, or to impress a date, Lucian offers a tightly curated experience built for discovery. Part bookshop and part restaurant, it's a reflection of owners Katie Barringer's and Jordan Smelt's own interests and, perhaps more importantly, their expertise. Barringer (a former bookstore owner with an eye for art and design) and Smelt (who has worked in wine distribution) smartly brought on chef Jason Paolini to lead the kitchen in this tiny alcove in Buckhead. Expect upscale plates like oysters with a seasonal-fruit mignonette and polenta with black truffles and Parmesan. Learn about a new wine producer, savor a perfect French omelet with a smear of caviar, or pick up a coffee-table tome—it's all possible here.

petite corner building that glows with neon pink light, Castro delivers a five-course tasting menu introducing diners to dishes inspired by her travels and the traditional Mexican food she ate in her grandmother's kitchen. A meal might begin with briney shrimp broth delivered in a clay demitasse (a vessel shaped by Mexican artisans) kept warm within a plate of colorful maize kernels. The margaritas are stellar, but so are the cocktails made with Mexican spirits like purple corn whiskey. The following courses, which could range from beef-cheek tacos to crab-stuffed banana peppers, each land with a short tale of their origin. It feels as though you've been let inside someone's story, like you've been cared for.

## South Carolina

### CHARLESTON

#### **Pink Bellies**

Walking into Pink Bellies feels less like you're entering one of Charleston's hottest new eateries and more like submerging yourself in a whimsical aquatic world. The Vietnamese-American restaurant was making waves even before its doors opened thanks to chef Thai Phi's beloved food truck. The interior of the new brick-and-mortar spot is decorated with undulating wooden panels and ceiling tiles that shift between the colors of the sunset

over open water. Phi leads his team in cooking up bowls of Brussels sprouts flavored with fish sauce; garlic noodles with pork and pickled onions; and lamb dumplings in a smoky and spicy sauce. Dive in, and learn exactly why Pink Bellies earned its residence on King Street.

## Tennessee

### KNOXVILLE

#### **Potchke**

On downtown Knoxville's bustling Gay Street, what started as a temporary

pop-up became a permanent fixture in the fall of 2022 in the form of Potchke deli. This place is the brainchild of co-owners and life partners Laurence Faber and Emily Williams. Both of their résumés feature stints in popular regional kitchens—Blackberry Farm for Faber and J.C. Holdway and Emilia for Williams. During the height of pandemic lockdowns, Williams explored Faber's Jewish heritage through babka baking. One thing led to another, and the pair ended up spending most of the fall of 2021 traveling through Ukraine and Moldova to experience Jewish cuisine more deeply. Upon their return home, the deli was born—its name



### TAMPA, FLORIDA

#### **Willa's**

This all-day cafe serves elevated classics in a well-designed space

W

**HEN** Nate Siegel and Merrin Jenkins opened Willa's in Tampa's North Hyde Park neighborhood, two things were clear: The pair—both Tampa natives who had spent time living in New York—wanted to bring a piece of the Big Apple's something-for-everyone,

all-day restaurant culture home while also creating a more equitable work environment. That's no easy task in an industry that has recently struggled to balance staff schedules and an inconsistent supply chain—let alone the bottom line. Siegel and Jenkins appear to have done it with a transparent pay structure, company-supported insurance, a tip share, and paid time off—and all while supporting chef Gabriel Lopez's menu of contemporary comfort food. At Willa's, you'll find croque madames and smash cheeseburgers alongside updated favorites like a Caesar salad with tahini or fries topped with pork belly and Mornay sauce.





## SAVANNAH, GEORGIA

### Common Thread

A farm-to-table eatery reimagines industry standards

**“FARM TO TABLE”** typically describes food made with ingredients that are grown and sourced locally, but at Common Thread in Savannah, that phrase has come to mean so much more. Yes, chef Brandon Carter and his chef de cuisine Joseph Harrison often serve dishes made with produce from the owners’ nearby farm, and the menu is globally influenced but grounded in Southern flavors (like wreckfish with butter beans, tomatoes, and salsa verde). But here, “farm to table” also includes an effort to tie together the people who prepare and serve food. The partners behind Common Thread and its sister restaurant, Farm Bluffton, created the Rootstock Community Foundation, which offers free mental health resources to restaurant-industry workers nationwide. Common Thread may be housed in a restored Victorian home from the late 1800s, but the food and culture are all about pushing things forward.

translates to “fuss around in the kitchen” in Yiddish. The menu at Potchke changes often, but you can always expect respectfully interpreted takes on traditional flavors: borscht served with garlic pampushki rolls, bialys draped in reddish-pink lox, and blintzes with potatoes, eggs, and caramelized onions.

## NASHVILLE

### International Market

Any lucky diners who had the chance to eat at Nashville’s International Market & Restaurant sometime between when it opened in 1975 and its 2018 closure might be surprised to see it on our list of new spots. But it’s true: The International Market is back and now run by the original owners’ children,



celebrity chef Arnold Myint and his sister, Anna. But while there are many returning standbys at this beloved Thai restaurant and market—including the steam table and even several longtime employees who are deeply familiar with the way things were prepared at the first location—there are plenty of changes too. The market is more tightly curated to focus on locally made goods, the updated decor feels fresher, and the menu has expanded to include more vegan and vegetarian options. There are also new dishes like the Hatyai Thai Fried Chicken, which is made with a Thai garlic marinade and served with sticky rice and a cucumber salad. Whether you’re seeking a comforting reminder of Nashville’s culinary history or are interested in a novel experience, you’ll find it here.

Texas

AUSTIN

Birdie’s

At the bright and airy Birdie’s, folks order from the walk-up counter and seat themselves—often at outdoor picnic tables. The vibe may be casual, but the restaurant takes its food seriously. Husband-and-wife team Arjav Ezekiel and Tracy Malechek-Ezekiel offer a variety of dinner options with a tight focus on handmade pastas plus seasonally influenced small and large plates like beef tartare with pecans and rosemary or red snapper with potatoes and a saffron-fennel sauce. Fans flock here for the impressive wine list as much as for the food.

Whether by the bottle or the glass, you’ll find plenty of new things to try; Birdie’s staff prides themselves on working with smaller producers. Order dessert; whether it’s creamy vanilla soft serve topped with blood orange-infused olive oil or a warm chocolate chip cookie, you’ll be extremely glad you did.

FARMERS BRANCH

Roots Southern Table

It doesn’t take long to get cozy at Roots Southern Table, which is in Farmers Branch, a city just north of Dallas suburbs. This is the latest project from chef Tiffany Derry, who won Fan Favorite on the seventh season of Bravo’s *Top Chef*. The menu features Southern comfort food with an international twist—all while maintaining a focus on waste reduction. Settle in for a cast-iron cornbread served with Steen’s cane syrup and mesquite-smoked butter, and then try what Derry calls “My Mother’s Gumbo,” a dark roux and okra-filled homage to her Louisiana family. The space feels fresh and modern with white marble tabletops and organically shaped ceramic servingware. The atmosphere at Roots makes it hard to leave but easy to return.

Virginia

ALEXANDRIA AND RICHMOND

Kismet Modern Indian

It’s not always true that more is better, but at Kismet Modern Indian, it definitely is. The group behind Washington, D.C.’s Michelin-recognized Karma Modern Indian opened Kismet in Old Town Alexandria in

November 2021 and then added a second location in Richmond a year later. Visit Kismet in Alexandria, and take in the welcoming loft-style restaurant. Chef Ajay Kumar draws a connection to Karma with reappearances of dishes that left the D.C. menu, like the Paneer Lajawab (islands of stuffed cheese floating in a tomato-onion sauce) while also charting new territory with things like the Chingri Shrimp Curry with lemon rice.

NORFOLK

Syd’s FishPig Cafe

To say Sydney Meers’ newest venture was hotly anticipated might do an injustice to how beloved the Mississippi-born chef is within his adopted mid-Atlantic home. Meers closed his Portsmouth restaurant, Stove, in 2018 and attempted retirement, but to no avail. In 2021, he opened Syd’s FishPig Cafe. Entering Meers’ Norfolk establishment is a bit like stepping into his own colorful mind: Inky walls are covered in a whirlwind of art (including his own paintings) and a collection of found objects. The constantly revamped menu reads like a personal note. Take, for example, My Infamous Cheese Tray, which arrives with crackers, hamburger relish, and a country ham salad. The Real Deep South Gumbo is made of “changing stuff,” so prepare to be surprised with whatever protein and veggies are fresh from local providers.