



# JUST PEACHY, A TASTE OF ALABAMA

Simon Urwin takes a trip across the Yellowhammer State to savor the flavors of its burgeoning food and wine scene.

From a menu richly imbued with a sense of history and community, he discovers sublime seafood, heritage grape wines, sugar-filled surprises, and the freshest, friendliest farm-to-table food in the Deep South.

WORDS AND PHOTOS BY SIMON URWIN

A TASTE OF ALABAMA

Iconic Americana -  
the water tower in  
Clanton, the peach  
capital of Alabama



BIRMINGHAM | ALABAMA

# A TALE OF TWO MENUS

Alabama is best known for its barbecued meats, but with Gulf Coast waters abundant in marine life, it serves up superb seafood too. While many restaurants specialize in traditional fishy fare, there are new kids on the block making waves with contemporary takes on the classics.

WORDS AND PHOTOS BY SIMON URWIN



Adam Evans in the dining room of Automatic Seafood.

As God is my witness, I'll never be hungry again." So said Scarlett O'Hara in the historical epic *Gone with the Wind*. It's a line that regularly springs to mind on a day spent sampling the menus of two award-winning restaurants in the city of Birmingham, often referred to as the 'Dinner Table of the South.'

I start with lunch at the Bright Star, Alabama's oldest restaurant, located in Bessemer, some 13 miles southwest of downtown. Recognised by the James Beard Foundation - the Oscars of cooking - as one of 'America's Classics', it was opened in 1907 by Tom Bonduris, a native of the farming village of Peleta in the Peloponnese region of Greece.

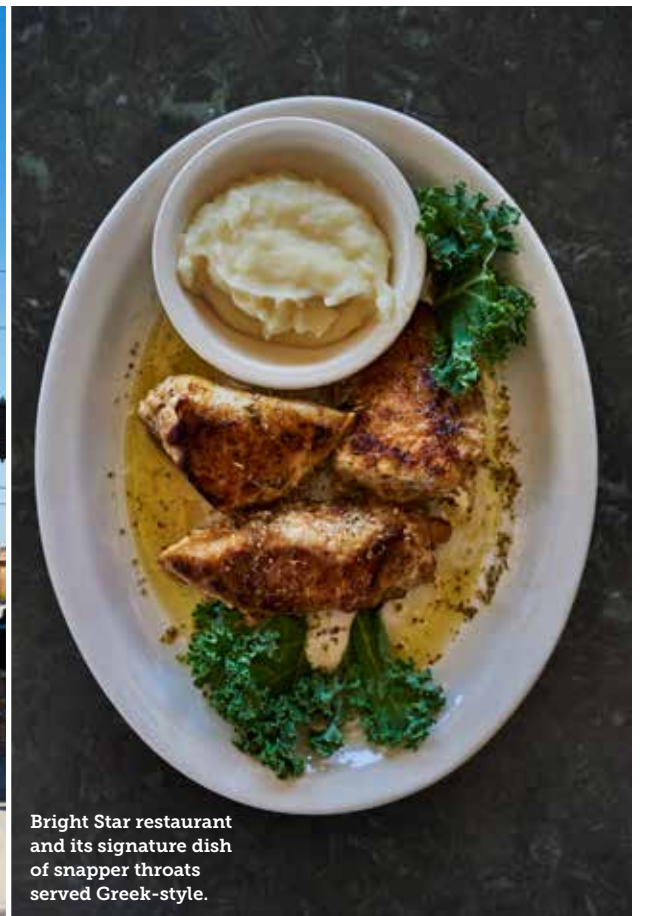
"He came in search of a better life and found a safe haven here," says server Sonya Twitty in her honey-thick Alabama accent. "That's why he called this place the Bright Star." Bonduris was one of thousands of Greeks

who crossed the Atlantic at the turn of the century and ended up in the Birmingham area - for many, their exodus was precipitated by the defeat of Greek forces in a war with Turkey, as well as thousands of families losing their livelihoods when the global market for dried seedless grapes disappeared.

## SERVING HEARTY AND HONEST FOOD

Bonduris arrived to find the city and its suburbs booming with industry and he - like many of his compatriots - quickly saw an opportunity to make money serving weary workers with hearty, honest food. "At one point, 95% of all the restaurants in and around Birmingham were owned by Greeks," Twitty explains. "They served Southern dishes with a touch of the Mediterranean, something we still do to this day."

Twitty brings me a selection from their menu to try, starting first with a bowl of seafood gumbo, then a bright, leafy salad made with briny olives and tart, salty feta cheese. Next, comes a Southern classic: snapper throats (the succulent cut of meat from the underside of the fish



Bright Star restaurant and its signature dish of snapper throats served Greek-style.





Mural at Pepper Place  
Farmers' Market,  
Birmingham, AL.



Birmingham's  
landmark Alabama  
Theatre, built in 1927



“PEOPLE HAVE ALL THESE PRECONCEPTIONS - AND MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT ALABAMA,” SAYS EVANS. “BUT THERE’S WAY MORE TO FOOD HERE THAN YOUR TRADITIONAL CHICKEN POT PIE AND MEAT-AND-THREE. THE FOOD SCENE IS EXCITING, IT’S EVOLVING FAST AND IS GETTING BETTER AND BETTER.”



behind the gills) which is grilled Greek-style with oregano and olive oil. Fit to burst, she refuses to let me leave until I’ve had a dessert. I relent and pick the Lemon Ice Box – a creamy concoction of condensed milk, lemon and eggs that sits under a Graham cracker crust. “That’s the thing about Southern hospitality, it’s impossible to resist,” she says, delivering a vast slice to the table. “We’ll treat you good in so many different ways, you have to like at least one of ‘em.”

#### FOR THE SEAFOOD LOVERS

I drive across town to Birmingham’s Lakeview neighbourhood in time for dinner at Automatic Seafood and Oysters, for which owner and executive chef Adam Evans recently picked up a James Beard Award for ‘Best Chef in the South’.

“My love of food came about as a young kid picking okra, corn and tomatoes in my grandfather’s garden,” says Evans, originally of Muscle Shoals, Alabama. “I can still remember the intense flavours of all that super-fresh produce. That’s what got me hooked.” Evans got his first paid job serving soft-serve ice cream at the local Dairy Queen before graduating to the world of fine dining; he learned his craft in kitchens in New York, New Orleans, and Atlanta - finally returning to his home state to launch a restaurant in a converted sprinkler manufacturing facility in the heart of Birmingham.

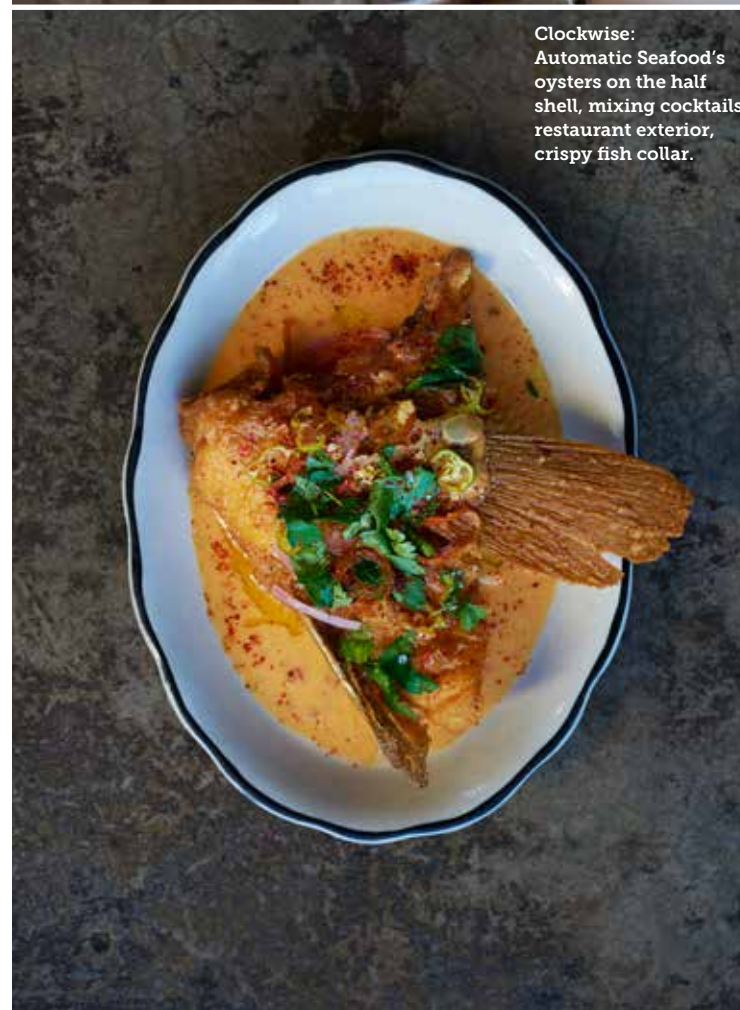
“One important thing - I wanted it to be open seven days a week,” he says. “Many places take two days off, but I wanted folks to feel welcome all the time. I guess it’s a Southern thing.” He settled on a seafood menu – a reflection of happy childhood summers spent on Alabama’s beaches along the Gulf of Mexico. “The Gulf produces all this incredible fish and I really wanted to show it off as best as I could,” he says. So, Evans found

a spear fisherman based in Destin, Florida, to dive and spear-catch exclusively for the restaurant. “It’s his only job; I’m able to get pompano, amberjack, tilefish, and triggerfish - all these very different, very beautiful species. He brings me whatever he finds so I’m able to serve whatever’s in season.”

#### A FAST-MOVING FOOD SCENE

Evans invites me to sit and then heads to the kitchen to send out some of his personal highlights from the menu. First come Alabama oysters on the half-shell – their subtle saltiness offset by the sweetness of a perfectly made daiquiri cocktail. They’re followed by a bowl of crab claws in a punchy citrus-herb marinade that delivers an extra kick from some Korean chilli pepper. I pick a summery glass of Chenin Blanc to accompany the next dish: speared mangrove snapper on a bed of apple and radish and topped with an ingenious and delicious garnish: in an effort to avoid food waste, Evans has perfected a way of crisping up the fish’s swim bladder to taste like a marine version of pork crackling. The pièce de résistance though is his own take on snapper throat: an Asian-inspired, crispy fish collar with chilli butter, lime, and farm pickles, which is spectacular, as good as anything I’ve tasted on my travels throughout the Far East.

“People have all these preconceptions - and misconceptions about Alabama,” says Evans. “But there’s way more to food here than your traditional chicken pot pie and meat-and-three. The food scene is exciting, it’s evolving fast and is getting better and better. I think if people come and try it for themselves, they’ll be surprised, not only by the quality, but by how much thought and love goes into our cooking.” **AT**



Clockwise:  
Automatic Seafood’s  
oysters on the half  
shell, mixing cocktails,  
restaurant exterior,  
crispy fish collar.





## NOTASULGA | ALABAMA

## HOLY WINE

While the state beverage is Conecuh Ridge Whiskey, the word on the grapevine is that local wines are fast becoming the drink of choice for discerning palates. Praise be for the reds, whites and rosés of Alabama!

WORDS AND PHOTOS BY SIMON URWIN

A lot of praying gets done if you're a farmer," says Tim Watkins when we meet under the old, rugged cross that marks the entrance to his winery, Whippoorwill Vineyards, just off Highway 14 in Notasulga, central Alabama. "The vagaries of the weather make us all a little more religious. I certainly call to a higher power to help me out. The Lord then delivers the rain and the sunshine; I just gotta deal with what he decides to give me."

Watkins's faith is clearly working wonders. As he leads me around the vineyard – named after a local nightjar with a distinctive three-note call that sounds like 'whippoor-will' – his vines are all heavy with bunches of plump muscadine grapes. "They're the only variety endemic to Alabama," he says. "Having nourished the Native Americans, they were then found by Europeans colonizers growing wild in the forests and tangled up in the brush. Pretty much everyone in the South has grandparents and great-grandparents who tell stories of going on adventures to harvest them, climbing up trees and shaking them down to eat or making a little wine on the back porch. It's a grand old Southern tradition."

#### VITIS ROTUNDIFOLIA - BROTHER OF ANOTHER MOTHER

Watkins picks a handful of greenish-purple scuppernongs – one of the oldest and best-known muscadine varieties, its name derived from an Algonquin Indian name for the sweet bay tree, 'ascopo'. He offers me a taste – the fruit is intensely sweet with a smoky finish. "The muscadine - *Vitis rotundifolia* - is a cousin to the common grape, *Vitis vinifera*, so it has a distinctive flavour," he explains. "The muscadine skin is also thicker than a *vinifera* grape and has seven times more antioxidants. It's a superfood like the blueberry or the pomegranate. We ferment with those skins for a week to get the goodness out; that's why at Whippoorwill we call our wines 'heart medicine'."

#### SWEET TOOTH

Together, Watkins and his family have turned what was traditionally a back-porch pastime into a busy and successful small-batch operation. One of just 22 wineries in the state, Whippoorwill now produces around 2,000 cases a year, including a dry Cynthiana – known as the 'cabernet of the South' – and a Lenoir or 'Black Spanish', made from a grape once used on the Iberian Peninsula for a communion wine. His most popular labels though are light and fruity, similar to dessert or ice wines, such as his Tail Gate



Tim Watkins enjoys a glass of red at the end of a day's wine-making.





Some of Whippoorwill's award-winning wines.



Muscadine grapes ready for harvest.



The vineyard's old, rugged cross.

MOST FOLK HERE LIKE THEM SWEET JUST LIKE EVERYTHING ELSE: WE LIKE OUR TEA SUGARY AND COLD; WE LIKE OUR BARBECUE MEATS COOKED WITH MOLASSES AND BROWN SUGAR. BESIDES, PEOPLE IN ALABAMA HAVE NOT BEEN DRINKING WINES THAT LONG AND THE LONGER YOU DRINK WINE, YOUR TASTE CHANGES, YOU WANT THINGS A LITTLE DRIER.



Red, a muscadine blended with a touch of strawberry. “Most folk here like them sweet just like everything else: we like our tea sugary and cold; we like our barbecue meats cooked with molasses and brown sugar. Besides, people in Alabama have not been drinking wines that long and the longer you drink wine, your taste changes, you want things a little drier.”

**THE LOCAL PREACHER BLESSES THE VINES**

Watkins's wines have won considerable acclaim, even garnering accolades in the USA's most notable wine-growing state: California, but he tells me he didn't choose wine-making for the medals or indeed the financial rewards. “For me, it's a profound experience to do something that brings people together and shows respect for the past,”

he says. “We do everything by hand here and use traditional methods. Our local preacher blesses the vines to protect them and ensure an abundant harvest and we invite the community to join us to bring it home, just like in the olden days.”

Watkins says he also cherishes how wine-making allows him to get closer to nature. “After sunset, when the whippoorwills are crying and the owls are hooting, I pour me a glass of wine and go out into the vineyard. Sometimes I get talking to the vines. I say to them, ‘What do you need so that you can give me what I want?’ Working with the land and seeing the miracle of it bearing fruit is a spiritual experience; it's as close to divine as you can get.” **AT**





AUBURN | ALABAMA

## GREEN FINGERS

For a small-batch farmer and a leading chef, friendship is a key ingredient in delivering flavour-packed produce in innovative style at one of the finest food joints in the South. Bring out the silverware – dinner is served.

WORDS AND PHOTOS BY SIMON URWIN





Acre restaurant's signature butcher's block.



David Bancroft picks Meyer lemons in his kitchen garden.



Ripe okra at Hornsby Farms.

Okra loves the heat, so okra loves Alabama,” says farmer Josh Hornsby of the Deep South staple crop, as iconic on menus here as grits, gumbo, and collard greens. “It blows my mind the rate they grow at,” he adds, flicking open a jack-knife to harvest a batch of the edible seed pods by hand. “If they’re not ready in the morning, they will be by dusk. But you have to catch ‘em at just the right size. Too small and they lack flavor, too big and they’re tough as old boots.”

His basket is soon overflowing, so Hornsby heads to the canning kitchen at the family farm outside Auburn to top-and-tail the okra, before slotting the pods into a series of jars alongside garlic cloves, slices of lemon, and a handful of spices. “Everyone in the state has their own favorite recipe,” he says, pausing to pour over a hot brine made from apple cider vinegar and pickling salt. “Whether it’s okra dusted in cornmeal and deep-fried - or slow-cooked in a stew with Gulf prawns. But in my book pickled is best because you end up with a dozen different flavours in every pod: you’ve got your sweet, grassy notes from the okra; you’ve got your seed flavours of coriander, mustard and dill - and hits of allspice, juniper and cinnamon too. Pickled okra goes with pretty much everything - meats and cheeses, you can even serve it in a Bloody Mary cocktail.”

#### HOMEMADE BY FARMER HORNSBY

Hornsby’s pickled okra are a key ingredient of the butcher’s block at chef David Bancroft’s Acre restaurant - a gastronomic work of art that resembles a still life painting by a Dutch master. Here, the okra sits amongst Bancroft’s homemade charcuterie; including slices of smoked duck, pork salami flavoured with fennel and white wine, and a braised pork shoulder rilette topped with pecan mustard.

Bancroft, like Hornsby, is a farmer himself, who has taken the concept of farm-to-table cooking one step further than most, surrounding his Auburn city-centre restaurant with its own gardens and orchards that produce everything from arbequina olives to Meyer lemons. What he can’t grow himself, he sources from nearby suppliers, including beef, pork, cornmeal, cheese - even honey from a local university professor who moonlights as a beekeeper.

“Acre is more than just about the local and the sustainable though, it’s about relationships and friendships - like the one I have with Josh,” he says, before disappearing to the kitchen and returning moments later with a pan of piping hot cornbread for me to try. “I know where all my ingredients come from, who provided them and how they were grown,” he says, cutting me a slice of the normally stodgy Southern classic, which he’s transformed into a light cake that is glazed with honey-butter hot sauce and finished with a sprinkling of benne seeds - an heirloom variety of sesame. “The guy who supplies my eggs for the cornbread for example, Charlie, he drops them off in person and is having a drink in the restaurant bar right now. That’s how well I know my suppliers.”

#### A SENSE OF COMMUNITY

Bancroft says he learnt all about co-operation as a young child - watching the farm hands and vaqueros (Mexican cowboys) working together as a team at his grandfather’s ranch in Texas where they’d end the day around the campfire over a plate of food. “It’s so much more fruitful when there’s a spirit of open-hearted collaboration,” he says. “I partner with other chefs; we share ideas and ingredients like a co-op would do. My staff will go pick okra at Josh Hornsby’s place if he needs help. In Alabama, people will give the shirt off their backs for each other. These are things that really matter to us in the South. It makes good food taste even better when it comes with a sense of community.” **AT**

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## MOBILE | ALABAMA

## SWEET HOME ALABAMA

In small-town Mobile, a transplant from New Mexico likes to push locals out of their comfort zone with her daring dessert menu, while a gay, interracial couple have become talk of the town with their deliciously alternative bakery.

Meet Arwin Rice and The Guncles!

WORDS AND PHOTOS BY SIMON URWIN

Everyone knows their neighbors in small-town Alabama,” says chef Arwin Rice. “And those people you don’t know, you acknowledge them with a smile and a hello. It’s the local custom. It’s polite society. It’s one of the first things you notice when you come here.” Rice, who moved from New Mexico to settle on Alabama’s Gulf Coast more than 15 years ago, also found that same society to be quite conservative, especially in its attitudes towards food. “People can be a bit set in their ways here, they like what they like,” she says. “I, on the other hand, like to shake things up, scare people a little, make them wonder if ingredients really should go together.”

In a state renowned for its sweet tooth, Rice decided it would be best to push any culinary boundaries via the dessert menu at her wine shop-cum-restaurant, Red or White, located in the Gulf port city of Mobile. “It’s hot on the coast so one dish I created early on was something cold, rooted in nostalgia but with a modern twist: peanut butter and jelly ice cream with Alabama muscadine grapes. Some people thought it sounded rather unappetizing, but that didn’t bother me, I knew they’d love it if they tried it. Anyway, I take it as a compliment if I weird people out.”

#### HOW TO EXPAND MINDS THROUGH FOOD

Next came something equally successful – a contemporary spin on a centuries-old recipe for Southern persimmon bread. “I teased diners out of their comfort zone by transforming it into a kind of tiramisu,” she says, before asking a server to bring me a portion to try. I take a spoonful; it’s deliciously sweet to the point of tooth-loosening, the delicate honey and cantaloupe flavours from the persimmons perfectly complimented by the addition of cinnamon, nutmeg, caramel, and cream. “Once you win people over and you gain their trust, you can get them to try all kinds of things they’ve never even heard of,” she says. “You can expand minds through food for sure; food is capable of breaking down all kinds of barriers.”

#### TWO GUNCLES GO GLUTEN FREE

Two chefs also creating waves on the city’s food scene in their own inimitable style are John Edward McGee and Demetrius James. Both born and bred in Mobile, after a stint of living in San Francisco the couple moved back home to set up a gluten-free bakery. “Eyebrows were certainly raised,” says James. “A gay, interracial couple opening a bakery focused on wellbeing is not something you’d traditionally associate with the Deep South.” Together they launched ‘Guncles’ – a play on the words ‘gay uncle’ – initially with a small selection of baked goods



Arwin Rice in the dining room of Red or White.





Street Art, Mobile, Alabama.



The Guncles: John Edward McGee and Demetrius James.



Arwin Rice's  
persimmon  
dessert.



including one type of cake which held a particular sentimental value for McGee. “It was a modified version of my mother’s fig-spiced cake which she served at pretty much every church social and family gathering,” he explains. “When she passed, we found her hand-written recipe for it. We turned it gluten-free and now her memory lives on through that cake. It’s still bringing pleasure to folks all these years later.”

The Guncles’ offering has since grown to include a vast array of breads, layer cakes, cookies, and cream pies. “We don’t just want our gluten-free goods to be as good as any other bakery though – we want them to be even better in terms of flavour and texture,” says McGee. “It’s also important for us to excel in things which are Southern classics,” adds James. “Our menu has allowed customers to eat a buttermilk biscuit or a cinnamon roll again for the first time in years, maybe decades. People have literally stood at the counter and cried when they take a first bite. It’s because there are so many memories tied up in food here – of family and togetherness.”

#### FOOD AND FAITH

McGee has one theory about the roots of this strong relationship between food and kinship in the South. “I think it goes back to the time of our grandparents and great-grandparents and the hardships they faced,” he says. “Even if they didn’t have much to eat themselves, they

would still provide for others and make sure they didn’t go hungry. I think a certain level of economic insecurity pulls everyone together. Historically, food has helped to cement all kinds of relationships by bringing comfort.” James thinks faith has played a role too. “This the Bible Belt. You don’t just have your blood family, but the church is family too. When the church service is over, everyone goes to have lunch. You praise God together; you eat together. Food represents community and belonging.”

He goes on to tell me that his own experience of the church was far from welcoming. “I was raised in a very religious Southern Baptist home,” he says. “It was very difficult to be accepted for who I was. But times slowly change. Now people are more tolerant and inclusive, y’all does mean y’all.” James and McGee say they’ve been able to change plenty of mindsets themselves as a direct result of the bakery’s success. “Guncles has opened up all kinds of conversations with people we did not expect to have,” says McGee. “We’ve been approached by customers who say they have never talked with any gay people before or otherwise been friends with a gay man or an African American. It’s been extraordinary. We’ve been able to build all kinds of bridges through our food.” **AT**



S Joachim Street  
in Mobile's Lower  
Dauphin Street  
Historic District.