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# Spring

travel guide

## EAT & BE MERRY!

EXPLORE THE CUISINES OF THE LOWCOUNTRY, COASTAL MAINE, CINCINNATI, MIAMI AND MORE.

BY BLAKE GUTHRIE | FOR THE AJC

From Maine’s rocky coast to the multifarious streets of Portland in the Pacific Northwest, here are 10 culinary destinations across the U.S. with distinctive foodstuffs worth noshing on this spring. Some dishes are more well-known than others, and some of the places are more remote, but each has something for foodies to make it worth the journey.

### Hot tamales

In the early 20th century there was a melding of cultures in Mississippi between Mexican migrant workers and African American laborers that had a major culinary impact, the result being the hot tamale. In 2005, the Southern Foodways Alliance started the Hot Tamale Trail ([southernfoodways.org](http://southernfoodways.org)), an oral history project that catalogs longstanding tamale restaurants and their stories. Most are in the Delta region, but a noteworthy one in Jackson, Mississippi, is the Big Apple Inn (\$1.50 and up, 509 N. Farish St., Jackson, Mississippi. 601-354-9371, [facebook.com/BigAppleInn](https://facebook.com/BigAppleInn)). Founded in 1939 by Juan Mora, who was born in Mexico City, it’s currently run by his great-grandson Geno Lee. It’s an affordable and historic hole-in-the-wall that served as a meeting spot for civil rights leaders in the 1960s and still has the same menu of pig ear sandwiches, “smokes” (ground smoked sausage on a bun) and hot tamales, as well as more standard fare like hot dogs and hamburgers.

**ABOVE:** Hot tamales are served by the half-dozen and dozen at the Big Apple Inn in Jackson, Mississippi. COURTESY OF VISIT MISSISSIPPI



### Natchitoches meat pie

The Natchitoches meat pie has long been a favorite street food and staple of home kitchens in Louisiana. This creole dish is a golden fried pie stuffed with seasoned ground beef, pork, onions, peppers and garlic. It’s named after the city where it originated, Natchitoches (pronounced “Nack-a-tish”), first settled as a French outpost for trading with Mexico in 1714. The meat pie closely resembles the empanada but has more of a creole and Cajun flair in the spicing, and is now on menus throughout the region. Lasyone’s Meat Pie Kitchen and Restaurant (\$5.95 and up, 622 2nd St., Natchitoches, Louisiana. 318-352-3353, [lasyones.com](http://lasyones.com)) has been serving meat pies since 1967; it’s also known for crawfish pies and puts its spin on other regional favorites like cajun crawfish etouffee and creole fried chicken. Nine miles south of town at the roadside Cane River Commissary (\$8.95 and up, 4191 Hwy. 494, Natchez, Louisiana. 318-238-6361, [canerivercommissary.com](http://canerivercommissary.com)) you can dine on jambalaya and po’ boys along with their mini meat pie appetizers.

**LEFT:** Lasyone’s Meat Pie Kitchen and Restaurant, Natchitoches, Louisiana, has served creole meat pies since 1967. COURTESY OF NATCHITOCHES CONVENTION AND VISITORS BUREAU



# SPRING TRAVEL GUIDE



Whole lobster, lobster rolls and more are on the menu at Nubb's Lobster Shack at the Cliff House Maine on the southern coast of Maine. COURTESY OF CLIFF HOUSE MAINE

### Maine lobster

Perched on the edge of Bald Head Cliff overlooking the Atlantic Ocean, Cliff House Maine (\$400 and up, 591 Shore Road, Cape Neddick, Maine. 833-206-1351, cliffhousemaine.com) is a chic, luxurious property surrounded by drop-dead gorgeous views. And when hunger strikes, you don't even have to leave the grounds because the hotel is home to Nubb's Lobster Shack (\$19 and up), a casual order-at-the-window eatery serving whole steamed lobster, lobster rolls and an appetizer called lobster "totchos," their version of nachos with steamed brown-buttered lobster meat over tater tots with jalapeño cheese curds. Five minutes away in Ogunquit, Perkins Cove is the quintessential picture-postcard New England fishing village with seasonal seafood restaurants like Barnacle Billy's (\$16 and up, 70 Perkins Cove Road, Ogunquit, Maine. 207-646-5575, barnbilly.com). Dine on clam chowder, lobster and crab salad while overlooking the boat basin. The seasonal restaurant opens this year April 7.



The Cuban sandwich at Versailles in Miami's Little Havana. COURTESY OF THE GREATER MIAMI CONVENTION AND VISITORS BUREAU

### Cuban cuisine

A mouthwatering mainstay of Cuban cuisine is the Cuban sandwich – sliced ham, roasted pork, Swiss cheese, dill pickles and mustard pressed on the grill between two slices of crunchy, buttery Cuban bread. Menus all over Miami serve the sandwich, but to immerse yourself in Cuban culture head to the Calle Ocho section of Little Havana to try one at Versailles (\$9.75 and up, 3555 SW 8th St., Miami, 305-444-0240, versaillesrestaurant.com). Also in Calle Ocho, Sanguich (\$10 and up, 2057 SW 8th St., 305-539-0969, sanguich.com) is a narrow 25-seat eatery serving traditional Cubanos and inventive hand-helds such as the pan con bistec with sliced steak, crispy shoestring potatoes, Swiss cheese and topped with mojo rojo sauce. For wider explorations of local Cuban culture and food, take a walking tour with Little Havana Tours (\$35 and up, 1637 SW 8th St., 305-338-2300, littlehavanawalkingtour.com) offering leisurely strolls through the district guided by an expert and lasting between two and three hours.

### Food pod tours

The food truck scene is booming everywhere, but Portland, Oregon, takes it to another level. There are 500-plus food trucks – called food carts locally – and most are part of a collection of carts called "pods." Even the number of pods can overwhelm a first-timer, so get your bearings by taking the Portland Food Carts, Pods and Patios tour with local operator Lost Plate (\$89, 503-409-5593, lostplate.com/portland-food-cart-tour). The 1-mile walking tour lasts three hours and stops at two pods and a brewery. Forktown Food Tours (\$115, 503-234-3663, forktown.com) has tour options that include food carts and restaurants in different sections of the city. Expect a variety of international fare on any tour. The Portland Mercado



Portland Mercado focuses on the flavors of Latin America such as traditional Oaxacan cuisine found at Tierra del Sol cart. COURTESY

pod (7238 SE Foster Road, Portland, Oregon, portlandmercado.org) focuses on the flavors of Latin America such as traditional Oaxacan cuisine found at Tierra del Sol cart (\$3.50 and up, 503-975-4805, tierradelsolpdx.com), serving handmade tlayudas, tetelas and authentic mole.



Hell's Backbone Grill and Farm in the remote high desert of southern Utah has been recognized as one of the nation's outstanding restaurants by the James Beard Foundation. COURTESY OF UTAH OFFICE OF TOURISM

### Eat like a cowboy

The tiny high desert town of Boulder, Utah – one of the most remote towns in the continental United States – seems an unlikely spot for a culinary gem, but according to the 2023 James Beard Awards, it's home to one of the 20 best restaurants in the nation, Hell's Backbone Grill and Farm (\$25 and up, 20 N. Hwy. 12, Boulder, Utah. 435-335-7464, hellssbackbonegrill.com). Chef-owned by Jen Castle and Blake Spalding for the past 24 years, the restaurant reopens for the season on March 31 and serves a blend of Western range and Southwestern fare. All the food is sourced from the restaurant's organic and sustainable "no harm farm" with grass-fed lamb and beef coming from local ranchers. The ever-changing menu matches the seasons. Last season's entrees included juniper lamb posole, pumpkin risotto stuffed poblano, and Spicy Cowgal chipotle meatloaf with an array of salad options available. Bed down in scenic surroundings at the Boulder Mountain Lodge (\$285 and up, 435-335-7460, boulder-utah.com) located on the property but operated separately.



Prince's Hot Chicken has been serving spicy chicken in Nashville for decades. COURTESY OF TENNESSEE DEPARTMENT OF TOURIST DEVELOPMENT

### Nashville hot chicken

The popularity of Nashville hot chicken has grown so fast that it's become Music City's most iconic food. For decades this form of Southern fried chicken coated in a reddish spicy paste and served atop white bread with slices of dill pickles was common only in the city's Black neighborhoods. It began to find a wider audience in 2007 after the inaugural Music City Hot Chicken Festival (free, July 4, East Park, Nashville, Tennessee. hot-chicken.com). Prince's Hot Chicken (\$7.50 and up, 5814 Nolensville Pike, 615-810-9388, princeshotchicken.com) – founded in 1945 – is considered the birthplace of Nashville hot chicken and is run today by the great-niece of founder Thornton Prince. Prince's recently opened another location inside the new Assembly Food Hall (5055 Broadway Place, 615-800-5395, assemblyfoodhall.com), a multilevel complex featuring more than 30 local food and drink vendors, three live music stages and Nashville's largest rooftop patio bar, Skydeck.

### Cincinnati-style chili

Chili in Cincinnati isn't eaten with a spoon but is served as a Mediterranean-style meat sauce over spaghetti in chili parlors. The late Anthony Bourdain was a fan and called it a "topping gone wild" on his show "No Reservations." Concocted by Greek immigrant restaurateurs in the 1920s, the stewlike sauce caught on. It features spices not normally found in chili such as cinnamon, cloves and even dark chocolate in some recipes. Ordered in "ways" with various toppings, the most common is three-way chili: noodles and sauce topped with a heap of shredded cheddar cheese. Four ways adds onion and five ways adds beans. Two ubiquitous chili parlor chains are Skyline and Gold Star, each with dozens of locations throughout the region. The renowned independent chili parlor Camp Washington (\$6.50 and up, 3005 Colerain Ave., 513-541-0061, Cincinnati, Ohio. campwashingtonchili.com) has been dishing it out at the same location since 1940 and is a James Beard Award winner in the America's Classics category.

### Chicken bog

Rice plantations once populated the South Carolina Lowcountry, which gave rise to a specialty dish most people outside the Palmetto State have never heard of called chicken bog. Made with Carolina golden rice, boiled chicken and smoked sausage, it has the consistency of a pilaf, and it can be found at mom-and-pop diners and cafes in Myrtle Beach and the nearby towns of Conway and Loris, often served as an off-menu special on certain days of the week. Bog is on the menu all the time at the Crafty Rooster (\$7.49 and up, 1125 Third Ave., 843-438-8330, Conway, South Carolina. craftyrooster.com), a bar and grill with a large selection of craft beers on draft. For a different take head to Socastee Station (\$5 and up, 4504 Socastee Blvd., Myrtle Beach, South Carolina. 843-831-0527, socastee-station.com) for their bog balls – beer-battered and fried orbs of chicken bog served as finger food with spicy remoulade sauce.

### Southern hospitality

At Auburn University's new Rane Culinary Science Center, students learn about the hospitality industry and the culinary arts in a real-world setting open to the public. There's a commercial component where guests can enjoy a stay in luxury accommodations at the Laurel Hotel and Spa (\$348 and up, 130 E. Thach Ave., Auburn, Alabama. 334-249-4250, laurelhotelandspa.com) and dine at the teaching restaurant and food hall helmed by professionals and staffed with students. 1856 Culinary Residence (\$15 and up, 205 S. College St., 334-249-4250, auburn1856.com) is the hotel's upscale restaurant serving regional and international fare such as duck confit and Cajun-spiced red snapper for lunch and a tasting menu for dinner that recently featured chawanmushi, a Japanese egg custard dish, and Wagyu beef. Discover American and global flavors in the food hall, Hey Day Market (211 S. College St., heydaymarketauburn.com), currently home to nine food stalls serving dishes ranging from Malaysian noodles and Vietnamese bánh mì sandwiches to artisanal pizza and Hawaiian poke bowls.