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Durham, a Tobacco Town, Turns to Local Food



Travis Dove for The New York Times

Watts Grocery, near Duke, offers braised rabbit, polenta and seasonal vegetables. [More Photos >](#)

By **JULIA MOSKIN**
Published: April 20, 2010

Durham, N.C.

Multimedia



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Local Food for Local Diners in Durham

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TEN years ago, Matthew Beason's duties as a restaurant manager here included driving to the airport to retrieve a weekly shipment of duck confit and pâté from New York.

"We couldn't even buy anything like that around here," said Mr. Beason, who went on to open Six Plates Wine Bar, now one of many ambitious restaurants around Durham. "Now, virtually every place in town makes its own."

Of the rivalrous cities that make up the so-called Research Triangle — Chapel Hill, Raleigh and Durham — Durham 10 years ago was the unkempt sibling: scruffy and aging.

"There was no one on the street at night, just the smell of tobacco drying in the warehouses," Mr. Beason said.

Now, a drive around town might yield the smell of clams from the coastal town of Snead's Ferry, steaming in white wine, mustard and shallots at Piedmont restaurant; pungent spice and sweet fennel from the "lamby joe"

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Photographs by Travis Dove for The New York Times

Barbecued beef brisket with potato salad, and chicken-fried South Carolina quail with spoon bread, from Watts Grocery in Durham, N.C. [More Photos »](#)

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Matt Neal of Neal's Deli in Carrboro, N.C. announces the return of tomatoes to his menu. [More Photos >](#)

sandwich at Six Plates; and seared mushrooms and fresh asparagus turned in a pan with spring garlic at [Watts Grocery](#).

The vast brick buildings still roll through the city center, emblazoned with ads for Lucky Strike and Bull Durham cigarettes. They are being repurposed as art studios, biotechnology laboratories and radio stations.

More important for food lovers, hundreds of outlying acres of rich Piedmont soil have “transitioned” from tobacco, and now sprout peas, strawberries, fennel, artichokes and lettuce. Animals also thrive in the gentle climate, giving chefs access to local milk, cheese, eggs, pigs, chickens, quail, lambs and rabbits.

“You can see the change, just driving from here to the coast,” two hours away, said Amy Tornquist, the chef and an owner of Watts Grocery, a restaurant near the Duke campus. Ms. Tornquist, 44, has lived in the area all her life. “You never saw sheep when I was young, you never saw cattle in the fields — it was all tobacco all the time,” she said. Ms. Tornquist’s restaurant isn’t blatantly farm to fork: it’s simply a given in Durham these days.

“One of our farmers said that at this point, it would make more sense for us to list the things on the menu that *aren’t* local,” said Drew Brown, a chef-owner of Piedmont, a restaurant a few steps from Durham’s farmer’s market and right next door to the city’s public herb garden.

Spring is just blowing into the Triangle, bringing strawberries, mushrooms and the first Sugar Snack carrots and small white turnips. “We’re raising things I never would have dreamed of,” said Michael Brinkley, a farmer whose family farm in nearby Creedmoor produced up to 60 acres of tobacco until about five years ago, when the Brinkleys shifted entirely to produce.

There are still plenty of good places for a barbecue plate, excellent French bistros like Vin Rouge and Rue Cler, and some white-tablecloth dining rooms, both traditional and modern.

But the most intriguing cooks here have a few things in common: an understanding of how to give a menu a sense of place; a true love of pork and greens in all their forms; and a lack of interest in linens and glassware. Watts Grocery, for example, looks like an upscale sports bar, but it tastes like a Southern-artisanal Union Square Cafe.

“In the old days, people would have to get out of here to really learn about food,” said Matt Neal, the owner of Neal’s Deli in Carrboro, near Chapel Hill, where he grew up.

These days, a chef here is made by learning all the ways to cook cornmeal and butcher hogs, not by taking a Grand Tour of Europe followed by hotel school in Switzerland.

Tanya Catolos, the pastry chef at the formal Washington Duke Inn in Durham, moonlights at the city’s farmer’s market, selling handmade “Pop’t-Arts” filled with Nutella or jam from a vintage Airstream trailer. “You can be very playful with food around here” she said. “People really get it now.” (She’ll be making local-rhubarb ones soon.)

The food at Neal’s Deli is resolutely everyday and American — like breakfast biscuits stuffed with egg and sausage — but the eggs are steamed tender with a touch of pepper and parsley, and the wide, crisp biscuits are mixed from high-fat local buttermilk and

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organic flour from a nearby mill that's been held by the same family for nine generations. The sausage patty is from Cane Creek Farm in Alamance County, where Eliza MacLean, an owner of the farm and a former veterinarian, advises farmers across the state on the transition from tobacco to pork. Every bit of that care comes through in the flavor of the finished product, a stunning bargain at \$3.25.

Mr. Neal prides himself on high-quality, low-brow food, like a house-made porchetta sandwich with spinach and pickled peppers, served with a bag of Zapp's potato chips from Louisiana. "I honestly do not know how to make a soufflé," said Mr. Neal, whose father, Bill Neal, was the founding chef of [Crook's Corner](#) and La Residence in Chapel Hill and one of the most famous chefs in the South until his death in 1991.

Bill Neal, his son added hastily, certainly did know how to make a soufflé. "But soufflés are not what I want to cook," he said.

What Mr. Neal and others like him do want to cook are full-flavored versions of the food they learned at their parents' elbows, and in influential local kitchens like Crook's Corner, [Nana's](#) and [Magnolia Grill](#), where many of them polished their craft. The tender cornmeal butter cakes at Watts Grocery are like a combination of a French financier and Southern spoon bread; at Six Plates, the slick-sounding sautéed crawfish on red pepper polenta with tomato broth is a take on shrimp and grits, the Carolina coastal classic.

Mr. Brinkley, the farmer, says that his family's farm, and many others, might not have made it through the loss of the tobacco cash crop without the lucky coincidence of the rise in the [local food](#) movement. Now, chefs compete over his lady peas, pink-eyed peas and butternut squash — a relatively exotic vegetable here, he said, where the sweet potato was once the king of the winter table.

Then again, "We're also working hours I never would have dreamed of," he said, adding that raising such diverse crops and marketing them has more than doubled his workload. He makes weekly appearances at the Durham farmer's market. Mr. Brown, of Piedmont, said that the farmers there are treated like rock stars, that dogs and babies abound and that hipsters mingle with hippies.

As Mr. Brinkley said, "It's a lot different from dropping off your tobacco at the station and picking up your check."

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