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Visions of Durham

[Metro Magazine](#)
[March 2009](#)

Durham: America's Foodiest Town

By Moreton Neal

By the time you read this, Tony Bourdain, author of Kitchen Confidential: Adventures in the Culinary Underbelly and star of Travel Channel's hit show, No Reservations, will have already appeared at his sold-out event at the Durham Performing Arts Center (DPAC). Television's "bad boy" chef came to town five years ago to promote his Les Halles Cookbook on a local radio show. After the interview, Bourdain admitted to the show's hosts — Fred Benton and me — that he had never heard of Durham before his arrival, nor did he have a clue where to eat in the area.

This time around, Bourdain will find the Bull City a very different place, not only visually, but also gastronomically. Linked with neighboring Chapel Hill, Durham is "America's foodiest small town," according to Andrew Knowlton in his October 2008 Bon Appétit article.

Durham is hardly a small town, evolving into a city right before our eyes. New restaurants in the ambitiously revamped City Center are thriving, filled with a critical mass of hungry customers from nearby tobacco warehouse condos, Bulls games and Durham Performing Arts Center events.

Joining Rue Cler, Piedmont and Toast in downtown is Revolution, just opened in January. Two blocks from DPAC, the sleek and sexy looking restaurant is perfectly situated for concert traffic. Chef/Owner Jim Anile, well known from his years at Il Palio, has shifted gears from Northern Italian cuisine to "global contemporary" in his own place but hasn't entirely abandoned his roots. One bite of house-made pappardelle, simply adorned with shaved black truffles, proved to me that Anile still has a special touch with the purest Umbrian dishes. Anile's restaurant is more a revelation than a revolution. Its crowded interior foreshadows a revitalized urban neighborhood, just as Durham developers and planners envisioned years ago.

The culinary transformation of downtown Durham can be traced to the renovation of the old American Tobacco Warehouse in 1981. Brightleaf Square's visionary owners, Clay Hamner and Terry Sanford Jr., pulled in an anchor restaurant, Taverna Nikos (still there after more than 20 years), and the legendary gourmet market Fowler's Food Store.

Fowler's and other eateries have come and gone over the years, but the location still lures food lovers who can enjoy diverse restaurants such as Piazza Italia, Chamas Churrascaria, Amelia's Café, El Rodeo, and Mount Fuji. In the vicinity are other food lovers' favorites, including Pop's, Parker and Otis, Alivia's, the Federal and the enduring Anotherthyme.

On the other side of Duke's East Campus, Ninth Street has always attracted students to its pizza joints and sandwich shops, but the inimitable George Bakatsias converted the neighborhood to a foodie magnet with his ambitious George's Gourmet Garage. Bakatsias, also responsible for the extravagant Mediterranean venue Parizade, opened Vin Rouge across the street from the Garage, and the bistro quickly became a favorite haunt of Triangle Francophiles. Other anchor restaurants — Metro 8, Blue Corn and Tim Lyons' excellent blu seafood and bar — attract their share of food lovers to the block.



Down the street and beyond the fray of Ninth Street's bustling center is Magnolia Grill, undoubtedly Durham's most famous restaurant. Magnolia Grill established Durham as a food destination immediately after opening in 1988. Owners Ben and Karen Barker were well-known for their brilliant cooking at La Residence and Ferrington House before tackling their own place. Over the years, the two talented chefs have each won a James Beard Award (Ben for best Southern chef, Karen for best American pastry chef), written two successful cookbooks and mentored many of the Triangle's finest professional cooks. Magnolia has been consistently cited by Gourmet magazine as one of the top 50 restaurants in the country.

One of the Barkers' protégés, Scott Howell, moved on from Magnolia to open Nana's, a perennial favorite with Triangle gourmets. The expansive Howell opened the Q Shack next door, then last year added Rockwood Filling Station (pizzas and light fare) to his culinary enclave on University Drive.

As the reputation of Durham's culinary scene grew over the years, chefs from outside the area arrived to open their own restaurants. Martha Stewart's personal chef, Sara Foster, re-invented the coffee house with Foster's Market; Shane Ingram brought his creative expertise to Four Square from The Inn at Little Washington. Blu seafood and bar's Chef/Owner Tim Lyons emigrated from Louie's Backyard in Key West.

Hometown girl Amy Tornquist apprenticed at Chapel Hill's Crook's Corner and later in French kitchens before returning to Durham to establish Sage and Swift Catering. Last year she opened her dream Southern contemporary restaurant, Watts Grocery, a block from where she grew up and now lives.

A new generation of locally trained restaurateurs has produced some of the town's most interesting eateries. Piedmont's chef/owners, Drew Brown and Andy Magowan have accumulated experience from Pop's, the Fairview, and the Federal (with a detour to the Italian Piedmont and Thomas Keller's Las Vegas Bouchon); Rue Cler and Pop's owners, Chris Stinnett and John Vandergrift, worked with Howell at Nana's.



Though all the new downtown restaurants, as well as most of the better restaurants in Durham, are committed to using local produce, a restaurant will open this summer that should truly be a revolution. Partners Richard Holcomb, Sarig Agasi (from Zely & Ritz in Raleigh), and Durham farmer Jamie DeMent are renovating the old fire station building downtown for an almost exclusively farm-to-table experiment, Eno Restaurant & Market. The menu will offer classic Southern dishes using Holcomb's Coon Rock Farm's heirloom vegetables, chickens and even honey. The kitchen promises house-cured bacon, whole hog terrines, pâtés and sausages from its own pigs. "The whole animal will be used ... everything but the oink," says DeMent.

Eno is just the kind of place Bourdain will love to check out on No Reservations. Whether he chooses to dine at upscale Magnolia, or to get down with locals at the legendary Bullock's Barbecue, Bourdain is sure to be pleasantly surprised in Durham. The ravenous television host always manages to find a fascinating kitchen story wherever he lands, though in a recent mellow phase, he seems to have abandoned the "underbelly" of restaurant life.

The underbelly of "America's foodiest town" is another story, one I was a part of, and sometimes still tempted to write about. But then I might be run out of town, and wherever I landed, the food couldn't possibly be as good.
