



FARM Fresh

CULINARY ADVENTURES
IN ASHEVILLE GIVE
NEW MEANING TO
FARM-TO-TABLE DINING

[WRITTEN BY HEATHER KW BROWN]

Few GIRLFRIEND GETAWAYS START before the sun has barely peeked above the horizon. Even fewer involve swapping running shoes for rubber boots and hats for hairnets (and yes, they look just as lovely as you might imagine!), but there we were donning our latest look, complete with full-length plastic aprons and double-layered gloves in our newly assigned roles — processing fish.

After all, we'd come to Asheville for an authentic farm-to-table experience, a literal one at that, and with our culinary trek taking us well off the beaten path, it was an adventure in the truest sense of the word. Not only did we get a hands-on experience that will linger long after the hairnets were tossed, more importantly, we were treated to a behind-the-scenes peek at what makes this city such a popular destination for foodies, and we left knowing that Asheville, like the fabulous fare found here, is in a culinary class of its own.

A Grand Time

Our itinerary looked a little something like this: Check in at brand new upscale hotel, eat; work on a farm, eat; relax at one of the world's best spas, eat; visit local farms and tailgate market with restaurateur and his talented chef, eat. Throughout these action-packed days, the only factor that remained constant, food notwithstanding, was how much we enjoyed coming back to our hotel each night and how much we absolutely despised getting out of our heavenly beds the next morning!



PHOTO COURTESY OF ASHEVILLE TOURISM & CVB



PHOTOS COURTESY OF GRAND BOHEMIAN HOTEL ASHEVILLE



Clockwise from top left:
The Blue Ridge Mountains; The Tudor-style Grand Bohemian Hotel Asheville; The hotel gallery; A four-sided fireplace in the lobby; The hotel's Red Stag Grill

I should have expected nothing less from one of the handsomely upscale properties that comprises the Kessler Collection of hotels. The Grand Bohemian Hotel Asheville is the new kid on the Biltmore block, sitting across from the entrance to the famous family estate in Asheville's historic Biltmore Village. Rustically designed with an elegant flair one might expect of a hunting lodge, perhaps one owned by a prominent family like the Vanderbilts, this Tudor-style boutique hotel is bedecked in décor collected by hotelier and art enthusiast Richard Kessler. The lobby welcomes guests with a four-sided fireplace, ornate wooden columns originating from a palace in India and distressed gothic-style paneling meant to tell the story of earlier incarnations, all of which present a masterful first impression.

Situated just off the lobby is the Grand Bohemian Gallery, which showcases more than 100 works of art by local, regional and internationally recognized artists. Each floor of the hotel even touts its own artist whose work lines the well-appointed halls, and all of the spacious 104 rooms are outfitted with modern amenities even savvy travelers don't expect, such as RoomLinx, super cool in-room technology only found in a select number of upscale hotels.

Museum-quality art pieces, newfangled technology ... and huge chandeliers fashioned in the shape of antlers? Trust me — it works. Anywhere else, the décor could be overwhelming, but at a hotel where old-world ambiance meets luxurious lodge and whose onsite restaurant is named The Red Stag Grill, it's only appropriate to find antlers and a once-



animated Red Stag, caught by Kessler himself. It was here, on a menu that boasts “We proudly support Asheville and its local farmers,” that we first spotted a dish offering trout from Sunburst Trout Farm, the first of several stops on our farm-to-table tour of Asheville.

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Bobby Flay and his “FoodNation” crew found it. French chef Jacques Pepin and his “Chefs A’Field” crew found it. But us? No, we were too busy following a bogus map that left us circling in the shadowy folds of Cold Mountain. While it took a bit of verbal wrangling by owner Sally Eason to get us there, once we arrived at Sunburst Trout Farm, it didn’t take us long to get to work — one of us feeding perfectly trimmed fish fillets through a nifty machine that removes pin bones and the other cleaning the interior of whole fish.

Eason’s father Richard Jennings, who dropped out of Yale’s School of Engineering as an honor student, originally started the business, becoming the first commercial trout farm in the South in 1948. Several decades and one huge fire later, behind the smarts and savvy of

Eason, as well as her husband and their full-grown sons Wes and Ben, Sunburst evolved into a third generation company that boasts more than 100 corporate clients including the Dressing Room in New York City, Blackberry Farms in Tennessee, and the Tasting Room here in Atlanta, not to mention a number of high-end grocery chains and more than 185 restaurants in the Asheville area. Setting their trout products apart from the competition is the 12,000 gallons of pure mountain water pouring from the Pisgah National Forest into the raceways where the trout are grown. From *Forbes* and *Entrepreneur* to *Bon Appetit* and *Gourmet* magazines, the word about Sunburst and particularly its orange caviar is certainly out.

Out, incidentally, is the only direction we didn’t go en route from one farm to the next; rather, we went up, down and around sinuous mountain roads into the heart of North Carolina’s Blue Ridge Mountains. At family-owned and operated East Fork Farm, which specializes in raising lamb, we watched the sheep as they headed out to one of the 14 rotational-grazing pastures and then sidestepped the free-range, happy-go-lucky chickens whose bravado

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