

PALMETTO STATE | SOUTH CAROLINA

DAZED AND CONTENT

on The Grand Strand

Long a haven for sun-soaking vacationers, South Carolina is secretly also a top-notch culinary destination, with everything from five-star shrimp and grits to perfectly executed dive bar burgers. We pick up some hot boiled peanuts and meet up with Chef Jamie Daskalis to cure our grumbling stomachs – and discover much more to fill our plates.

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Chef Jamie Daskalis from Johnny D's Waffles and Benedicts in Myrtle Beach, South Carolina.

Chef Jamie Daskalis enters a room like a whirlwind. It's a stark contrast to the slow, peaceful pace of the rest of Myrtle Beach, South Carolina, a town that thrives on its beach-season vibe.

Jamie didn't get the memo. She somehow manages to answer my questions at the same time as picking up the phone, making a note to the serving staff, and greeting new customers by the door. When she tells us she grew up in New York, it all makes sense.

We've rolled up to her restaurant, Johnny D's Waffles and Benedicts, for some good home Southern breakfast cooking. The menu is genuinely American, an atlas-sized, laminated version where most dishes are served with that Southern staple, grits. But the real star is the waffle selection. Red velvet is the most popular, our server prefers the cinnamon roll version. Waffle purists, we order the classic waffle with strawberries, and it arrives puffy as a pillow.

I could listen to the way Jamie talks about food all day long. It's better than poetry. Her descriptions of even the most mundane details make my mouth salivate, and her new takes on quintessential Southern cooking – and on diner breakfast foods – make it easy to see that while Johnny D's looks like your typical, old-school diner, what's coming out of it is anything but.

"I grew up in the restaurant industry," she explains. "My dad ran a diner up in New York, so I started as a server at 13 and eventually went on to study at the Culinary Institute of America." Together with her dad, the original Johnny D, she brought the family business to South Carolina and now owns, runs, and is head chef at their three locations.

"We have a cult following," she says, and it's easy to see why. With her infectious energy, focus on really good, local food, and welcoming environment, the restaurants attract both locals and tourists, which can be a tricky feat.

"The feeling at these diners is anyone might be a regular. Big families come here to eat together, with in-the-know tourists mixed in," Jamie says while simultaneously answering a question from the next table over. "No, I wouldn't put dried greens on anything, that's rude."

DINER TO WINER

At this point, we're ready to follow Chef Jamie anywhere she points, so when she tells us tonight is the grand opening of her new wine bar downtown (because of course it's not enough to own three very busy restaurants), we immediately change our plans so we can go.

The Tasting Room wine bar is in a former warehouse in what is now the Arts and Innovation District, a district with the air of a neighborhood in the making. Their focus is on making wine fun and approachable.



Angela's Fresh Market is known for its h hot boiled peanuts.

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“I BRING MY OWN BOTTLE OF HONEY TO RESTAURANTS TO POUR ON THE FRIED CHICKEN,” SHE REVEALS. “DON’T GET GENERIC HONEY IN THE BEAR BOTTLE, IT’S GOTTA BE REAL HONEY.” SHE SCOOPS UP BOILED PEANUTS INTO A PLASTIC BAG. THEY’RE WARM, AND SALTY, AND ENTIRELY ADDICTIVE.



“You don’t have to talk about soils,” says Lisa Lee, sommelier and co-owner of the wine bar. “We just wanted a place for people our age group to go have really good wine or cocktails without being stuffy.”

“The food here will be different from the diners,” Jamie says as she sends charcuterie boards, salads, and dips our way. “Like, this here, see how the flavors are balanced? There’s the sweetness from the strawberries, acidity from the pickled onions, the prosciutto is cut really thin...” I drift off into a happy place, stuffing my face as she continues describing her food ambitions.

SOUTH CAROLINA ON THE MENU

She’s picked the right place for a culinary expansion. The Grand Strand – an area of South Carolina that stretches 60 miles up and down the coast around Myrtle Beach – boasts over 2000 restaurants. Per capita, that’s more than Paris. Whatever you are looking for, you can find it here, from low-brow to high-brow (don’t worry, grits come with both).

The state has noticed. Ten years ago, they started a South Carolina Chef Ambassador program, to highlight chefs who not only represent the best cooking in the state but who are actively involved in their communities. Jamie was Chef Ambassador in 2020-2021, and after buttering us up at the wine bar, she sends us to 2017 ambassador, Adam Kirby.

“I’m a farmer first,” he says on a rare break from the kitchen, explaining how his 217 Bistro on Pawley’s Island sources a lot of their local ingredients in his own backyard. He also finds time to go fishing and hunting. “I wanted to leave Atlanta for the quiet life in the country,” he claims, but I wonder how much quiet life you get as a farmer slash chef slash hunter slash Little League baseball coach.

“Food is feeling,” he continues. “You have to feel it, taste something.” His soft-shell crab has us crying, so I point out that he must have unlocked that skill.

“Yeah, but I fucked up all the time,” he intervenes, describing early culinary mishaps. “Then there was the time all the tomatoes flew off my pickup truck on the highway. So if you find some beautiful heirloom tomatoes growing along the highway, they’re from me.”

The food of the region is a marvel. The chefs are keen to bring out local flavors, making something fine out of what has historically been poor man’s food and what’s been dredged from the bottom of lakes, rivers, inlets or ocean. The Coast is key. Even heading inland, you’re never more than a few hours from the sea. Grilled fish, oysters and clams, fried soft-shelled crabs, and shrimp every way abound. Family restaurants rule, and even fancy restaurants feel familial and informal. Be yourself, and add pimento cheese to taste.

(Quick aside: what is pimento cheese? No one knows. Is it cheese? Don’t worry about it. All you need to know is everyone has their personal favorite brand, and that when you’ve scooped a little dab onto a cracker and put it in your mouth, you’ll want another. And another. Try it, and thank us later.)

DON’T GET THE BEAR

It’s time to leave the coast and continue the foodie journey inland. But you can’t put the Grand Strand behind you without stopping in at Angela’s Fresh Market for some hot boiled peanuts.

Debbie behind the counter tells me Angela’s has always had a stream of regulars who make this their first and last vacation stop year after year, picking up homemade pimento cheese (See? Told you!), boiled peanuts for the road, and local honey.



Myrtle Beach is so much more than just the beach.

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The Tasting Room wine bar focuses on making wine fun and accessible.



euphoria food festival in Greenville offers oysters and a diverse selection of local foods.



"I bring my own bottle of honey to restaurants to pour on the fried chicken," she reveals. "Don't get generic honey in the bear bottle, it's gotta be real honey." She scoops up boiled peanuts into a plastic bag. They're warm, and salty, and entirely addictive.

EUPHORIC BITES

The reason for heading inland is that sometimes, just one meal from just one chef isn't enough. Sometimes, you need a baseball stadium full of local food and drinks, minimum. If this sounds like your dream, euphoria in Greenville might be for you. A days-long food festival, it hosts wine and food events, cooking demonstrations, special dinners from award-winning chefs, and concerts around town.

In true American Trails style, however, we headed straight for the Fluor Field baseball stadium, where chefs, restaurants, and food producers from the region tempt

you with their delights. The pro-tip is to set aside the full day, grab a refillable glass, and graze the food stands until you can't move anymore. (Baseball stadiums are blissfully full of seating.)

At one of the stands, we run into Jamie again.

"You know, it was such an honor to be named Chef Ambassador as an out-of-stater," she says while serving up delectable morsels to the crowds and waving at someone behind us. "I think it's because I'm always looking for anything local." No better place to do it, frankly. We saunter over to the stands, ready to pass out in the hot afternoon sun. But passing by a table of pimento cheese and chips, we just have to stop and try one.

Just one.

Or so we say. **AT**