

NASHVILLE

LIFESTYLES

THE RESTAURANT ISSUE

A look inside our changing dining scene



The
Ultimate
Restaurant
Guide

THE STATE OF NASHVILLE'S DINING SCENE

OUR EDITOR'S TAKE ON THE PAST
YEAR AND WHAT'S TO COME.

BY ERIN BYERS MURRAY



Like so many living in this era of Instagram and online menus, I think about food pretty much all day long. From the moment I get up and consider where I might be eating lunch to the late-night notes I take after a good meal, dining out, and thinking about dining out, consumes most of my time

Living in Nashville these days, it feels like there's no end to good options. There are Korean, Mexican, and hot chicken food trucks lined up all over town; I can regularly track down a joy-inducing plate of pasta at places like Rolf & Daughters, City House, Pastaria, and Nicky's Coal Fired; I can have my fill of oysters at the growing number of raw bars coming to town; I'm beckoned by the bright and fresh flavors coming out of Vui's Kitchen just as quickly as I am a slice from Five Points or a two-fister found at Gabby's Burgers. I live to eat, and—thankfully, blessedly—somehow also make it my living to eat.

All of that is to say that I am very fond of this city's food scene and want to celebrate it as often as possible. In the past year, I've hungrily watched it shift and change, waited patiently for the city's official permittees to move their work along so that I can get into the latest hot spot.

In 2017, I pounced as places, like Henrietta Red, Nicky's, Pastaria, Hugh Baby's, The Mockingbird, and answer., made their debuts. The steaks and seafood called me into Oak Steakhouse, while the promise of Spanish and Portuguese cuisine drew me to East Nashville's Peninsula. All of these openings stood out—but,

tellingly, many of them came to be because someone arrived (or returned) from out of town to make it happen.

There were local up-and-comer success stories, too, like Germantown's Kuchnia & Keller, which brings a long-time City House collaboration into the next decade—but we saw far less of those than there should be in a city Nashville's size. I look forward to seeing the forthcoming openings from established hometown heroes, like Folk from Philip Krajeck (Rolf & Daughters) and Red Headed Stranger by Bryan Lee Weaver (Butcher & Bee). The team behind Nicky's Coal Fired should be opening a neighborhood Belgian beer bar soon. And local hospitality groups, including Strategic Hospitality, Fresh Hospitality, and A.Ray Hospitality, will have plenty more to entice us soon.

Last year, we saw the bubble start to burst as newish restaurants, like Prima (two years), Lulu (less than one year), and Bajo Sexto Taco Lounge (two years), joined a handful of shuttering institutions, such as Gerst House and Provence Breads and Cafe. These closings are a sign that Nashville's real estate rates are on the rise, that the labor pool shortage is serious, and that, maybe, just maybe, Nashville diners aren't quite ready for the rush. There will be more closings to come, of course. But, as with any other major American food city, that's the price we pay for opening the doors to so many shiny, new arrivals.

In better news, this past year gave us the return and rise of the neighborhood restaurant,

where, right around the corner, we can find an elevated gathering space with small plates and seasonal flavors. Sylvan Park got one with answer.; Germantown welcomed Kuchnia & Keller; in the Nations, there's now 51 North Taproom & Grill; and Wedgewood Houston now has Hemingway's—all four are built for settling in for a sturdy drink, a good plate of food, and space to share a conversation. Let's see one show up in Hillsboro Village and another in North Nashville. West Nashville and Belle Meade could each use one, too.

There are voids to fill elsewhere. Complaints from a certain segment of the food-writing world point to a lack of great international cuisines, as well as restaurants owned and operated by women or people of color. So, let's see more from the team behind Slim & Husky's and from the many immigrant chefs launching small businesses from the Mesa Komal Kitchen inside Conexion Americas. Let's spend more time celebrating spots in North Nashville, Antioch and Madison, and along Jefferson Street, Nolensville Road, and Charlotte Pike.

Speaking of food writing in Nashville, it's been a tough year for that, too. With two critical minds, Jim Myers and Steve Cavendish, currently not working full-time as food writers, we have fewer eyes and ears doing the service of good journalism for the food-loving readers of Nashville. That's not to say there aren't many,

many others doing the work—because there are. But the absence of those two critics should motivate all of us who write about food (me, included) to do a better job holding restaurants accountable, with honest, transparent criticism and with the ability to take a restaurant to task when things are going wrong. Without that steadfast reporting, we'll be left with an industry that goes unchecked and restaurants that don't have a standard to rise up and meet.

Looking ahead, here is what I hope: I'd like to see more up-and-coming chefs get funding and find support for their locally inspired projects. I'd like to see less real estate going to big chains or celebrity chefs with deep pockets, and more of it landing with those who have risen the ranks right here in Nashville. I'd like to see more female chefs and restaurateurs take up the small business mantle. Let Margot McCormack, Julia Jacsik, Maneet Chauhan, Julia Sullivan and Allie Poindexter, Sarah Gavigan, Miranda Pontes, Seema Prasad, Jessica Benefield, Deb Paquette, and the many other women who have shaped this town's food scene have voice and be mentors to those coming up around them—and, then, let's you and I, the diners, show those fledgling businesses our ongoing support. And, yes, I'd like to see more sushi, more seafood, more oysters, more Mediterranean, more Middle Eastern, more Asian, and, of course, more locally minded restaurants arrive. Let us see a swell of innovative ideas and inspiration that we've never seen before—and, then, let's all continue eating out so that it keeps on coming.

This year promises to be as thrilling as last year for this city's food scene—with the added reality check that not every place will rise with the tide. The stakes are certainly higher—if you're a chef or restaurateur looking to open a restaurant in Nashville, be sure that it improves upon what's come before. Because, another year from now, we'll be faced with another round of openings—and hopefully we'll have a stronger food scene for it.

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