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TASTE OF THE TOWN

Triangle Food Tours offer delicious opportunities to explore

by Molly Cinquemani

Foodies have been flocking to every corner of the Triangle for the past year to take part in a Triangle Food Tour, where participants walk in groups and sample their way through area restaurants.

Currently, there are three tour options — two in Raleigh and one in Chapel Hill and Carrboro — and there has been talk of adding another to the lineup, possibly in Durham.

“Nothing is definite yet, though,” notes Leigh Eckle, tour organizer.

Eckle works to include a cross-section of restaurants in the tour, so some places might be ideal for a date night while others can be perfect for a quick lunch.

“It gives people the comfort level to return,” she says.

“So many people say, ‘We don’t know where to eat, so we tend not to go downtown or to Chapel Hill or Carrboro,’ but once they learn about these restaurants, they tend to go back.”

Downtown Raleigh

On Saturday afternoons, the tour group gathers at Seaboard Station and enjoys its first tasting of the day at Tookie’s Grill, a casual eatery. There, guests sample some of the restaurant’s hometown menu offerings.

Attendees’ appetites are whetted and ready as they move down the sidewalk to 18 Seaboard, where they gather around the modern bar while chef-proprietor Jason Smith prepares samples.

“The tour has helped us make personal connections with our guests,” Smith says.

From there, the tour guide offers tidbits of Raleigh’s history as the group makes its way down to Fayetteville Street to sample the sweet treats at Crema, which offers ice cream, coffee, shakes, salads and sandwiches.

From Crema, they move farther down Fayetteville Street to taste spicy Cajun goodness at The Big Easy. The establishment brings a corner of the French Quarter to Raleigh, with dishes ranging from muffuletta to jambalaya.

Crossing Fayetteville Street is similar to crossing the pond as the group moves to The Oxford, an English gastro pub-style restaurant and the newest spot on the tour. While there, guests sample items from its Small Plates menu, including calamari and panko-fried avocados.

The tour then travels to Blount Street for the final tasting of the day at The Duck and Dumpling, where upscale Asian cuisine is prepared by chef David Mao.

“It’s a lot of fun for people on the tour,” says James Anderson, manager.

The group then rides the free R-Line bus back to Seaboard Station while comparing stories about their favorite treat of the day.

Carrboro and Chapel Hill

The combined Chapel Hill and Carrboro tour group meets at The Franklin Hotel in Chapel Hill. From there, it's a short walk to Carrboro, with stops to enjoy painted scenes by artist Michael Brown along the way.

The first stop is at the historic renovated train alongside Carr Mill Mall that's home to Southern Rail Restaurant and Bar. Chandeliers and art-deco aesthetics enhance the unique setting of this restaurant, which — similar to many others in Carrboro — works to promote area farmers by including locally grown items on its menu.

Next up is Panzanella, located inside Carr Mill Mall. The authentic Italian co-op eatery serves local items on its seasonal menu. From there, the group moves to Glasshalful, a wine bar, wine shop and restaurant on Greensboro Street.

“Glasshalful welcomes the urban explorers of the Triangle Food Tour with a refreshing glass of wine and a delicious taste of the cuisine of chef Ricky Moore,” says Mickey Maloney, co-owner.

Next, attendees make a pit stop at Carrboro Beverage, where they sample beer and browse the wide selection of brews in stock.

The tour then moves along shaded streets to Chapel Hill, with four stops along the famed Franklin Street. First is Talulla's, a Turkish restaurant where samples of sauces and dips with pita bread, as well as a pita pizza, are offered under its lanterns and tapestries.

Cypress on the Hill, the newest kid on the block, is next, where the group samples chilled cucumber soup.

“The food tour has given us good exposure. If we get someone in here once, they'll come back twice,” says chef and owner Alex Gallis of his restaurant, which opened in February.

Spanky's, the next stop, offers a change of pace, as the tour samples tiny barbecue sandwiches while bellying up to the bar.

The day ends on a sweet note at Sugarland, which gives guests a selection of creamy gelato, cupcakes and other sweet treats that are made fresh daily.

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