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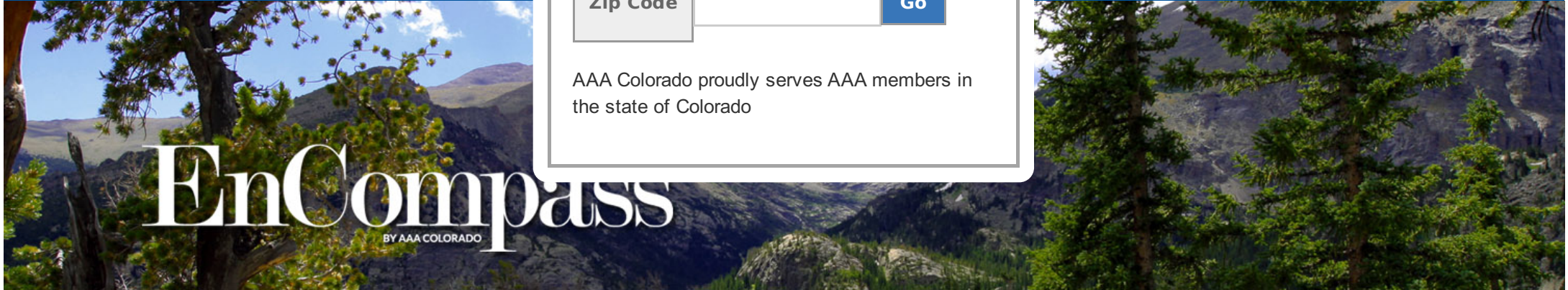


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COLORADO EVENTS

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**WOMEN OF THE WORLD:
PAINTINGS BY REBEKAH
MERINO**

AAA TRAVELER: SOUTHERN DE-LIGHTS



Boiled crawfish is one of many Southern delights. © Shutterstock/Olga_Phoenix

To this food writer's unexpected surprise, Colorado chefs are creating some of the best Southern food around.

By Davina van Buren

When I set out to find the most authentic Southern-style restaurants in Colorado, it was more than just a fun assignment—it was a mission to find a true taste of home.

I moved here four years ago from North Carolina and enjoy living in the Centennial state immensely. I've explored hundreds of miles of backcountry trails on foot, bike, and snowshoes. As a writer, there is a never-ending supply of interesting story material. And as a citizen, I've become enamored with the landscape, people and

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cultural aspects of the state. But there are two things I miss about home almost every single day: The ocean, and the comfort food.

I grew up in Lee County (named after General Robert E. Lee), near the geographical center of North Carolina. It's mostly farm country and my great-grandparents owned a sizeable piece of land where we grew almost all of our own food. We had chickens, goats, cows, pigs, fruit and nut trees, and a huge garden with every vegetable imaginable. In fact, the only things I can remember my Grandma Anna (who was born in 1898) ever buying from the grocery store were bread and Crisco. Although I am thankful for the awareness the recent "farm-to-table" dining trend has created, I also find it sad that we now have to name it, because that was just normal life for us.

Back home, it was a tradition to get together with family and friends for big Sunday dinners—or, as Southerners call it, "supper." Most health-conscious Coloradans would scoff at the fare—fried chicken, fried okra, fried catfish...you get the point. Almost all the vegetables were cooked with some sort of pork and/or bacon grease. Astonishingly, no one was overweight back then —we worked it off on the farm, trust me!

As I got older, moved to bigger cities and was exposed to more—how should I say—"elevated" cuisine, my tastes naturally evolved. I liked seeing the results of a regular fitness regimen, so my food choices were healthy for the most part. Still, I have never been afraid to indulge, as long as I burned the calories to justify it. So I made it a point to get home for supper as often as I could. I miss those meals.

Contrary to popular belief, most Southern people don't eat the foods I described earlier every day. Things like smoked meats, savory greens, candied yams and slow-cooked beans are part of



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our cultural heritage. They take a long time to prepare and deserve a ceremony and a blessing before you eat them. It's the feeling that eating comfort food gives you that makes it so indulgent. Warm, buttery, filling, stick-to-your-ribs...I make no apologies for loving everything about it.

My research led me from the Front Range to the San Juan Mountains, and many places in between, but I finally found the home cooking I have been looking for. Not only that, but I was pleasantly surprised to find that Coloradans are actually doing Southern food better than most Southerners. (Shhh, don't tell them that.) Chefs at these restaurants have taken classic recipes and put their own unique, Western spin on comfort food. Some of it is even—dare I say—healthy.

Here are nine Southern-inspired restaurants across the state. Y'all grab a sweet tea and enjoy.

CORAFAYE'S CAFE

2861 Colorado Blvd., Denver
303-333-5551

You know a soul food joint is not messing around when you find things like pig ear sandwiches, frog's legs, neck bones, oxtails, smothered rabbit, chitlins, chicken necks and pig's feet on the menu. Owner Priscilla Smith uses centuries-old family recipes at CoraFaye's, which is named for her mother and her aunt. She uses her family's own spice mix recipe to flavor many of her meats and vegetables, adding a depth of flavor that is lighter and much more interesting—but every bit as tasty—as using a ham hock. Smith also insists on using oils with no trans fat. Imagine my delight when I not only found sweet tea on the menu, but Kool-Aid in three

flavors—red, blue or orange. (Order them by color, not flavor, just like when you were a kid.)

Bonus: This place may look like your grandmother's living room (complete with accessories like a church hat and pocket book on a side table), but CoraFaye's is high tech, too. In May 2014, the restaurant released its own app!

TOM'S HOME COOKIN'

800 E. 26th Ave., Denver
303-388-8035

Tom's Home Cookin' flies under the radar, but I'm not sure how. They don't have a website, but they do have a very active Twitter account. I couldn't find their menu online, but did find plenty of reviews and photos. I'm convinced that people who know about this place want to keep it to themselves—and now that I've been there, I can understand why.

Tom's reminds me of the story of Goldilocks and the Three Bears because everything is *just right*. The yams are not too sugary, the lima beans are served sans ham, but perfectly seasoned, and this place has mastered the art of frying okra—it came lightly breaded but still firm with a bit of crunch, not slimy. And the catfish—wow. They serve so much of it at lunch that you don't even have to wait for it. Get there early—Tom's is only open weekdays from 11 a.m.–2 p.m., and has a line out the door nearly every day.

Bonus: Any place with a hot sauce bar is alright by me.

SOUTHERN HOSPITALITY

1433 17th St., Denver
303-298-5398

Normally I wouldn't include a franchise in a story like this. However, I'm a huge Justin Timberlake fan and when I heard he was the co-creator of the concept, I reconsidered. I figured if the food was a fraction as exciting as his live show, then it'd be a hit—and I was right. Southern Hospitality serves Memphis-style ribs and barbeque (dry or wet), and traditional Southern favorites like deviled eggs and fried green tomatoes. Don't miss the smoked prime rib egg rolls, shrimp and grits and bourbon-glazed grilled salmon.

Bonus: Southern Hospitality brings sexy back to down home cooking, and you'll find plenty of bourbon and micro-brews to wash down your 'que. Check out the Bourbon Lounge or book an event in the private VIP bar area downstairs.

KIRK'S SOUL KITCHEN

14107 E. Colfax Ave., Aurora
720-474-1996

Kirk's lacks the down-home feel of the other restaurants on the list—it's located in a brightly-lit, standalone building off busy Colfax in Aurora—but the place has its own interesting history nonetheless. Owner Jay Berry named the restaurant after his beloved stepfather Kirk. A few years after Kirk married Jay's mother, he was in a terrible car accident that left him paralyzed. But that never dimmed his bright outlook on life, giving him the nickname "Captain Kirk."

Berry serves up favorites from the "dirty south" like red beans and

rice, smothered chicken, and savory meatloaf. My personal favorite, though, was the velvety Cajun-style gumbo, served chock full of okra, tomatoes, chicken, shrimp, celery and beef sausage.

Bonus: The biscuits are fantastic. I asked for a to-go order of them for breakfast the next day, and ate them drizzled with locally-made jam and honey.

FLAVA!

15343 E. 6th Ave., #B, Aurora
303-856-3590

It's hard to pick a favorite thing about *Flava!* Is it the attention to detail? The friendly service? The array of tempting desserts at the checkout counter? Owner Sandra Hullum's infectious smile? Southern food can often look sloppy, but *Flava!* follows through with the "love" until your plate hits the table.

Two things stood out during my visits. The first is that Hullum injects all aspects of her heritage into her cooking—she was born in Philadelphia, has family roots in Charleston, S.C. and Richmond, Va., and has lived in Colorado for 27 years. I took one bite of the fried chicken and knew instantly that it had been cooked the old-fashioned way, the proper way, the *only* way...in a seasoned, cast iron skillet. (Hullum later confirmed this detail with pride.) The second thing that stood out is that Hullum is all about a local twist. She seasons her greens with local peppers instead of pork, and her cornbread has sweet Olathe kernels in the batter. If you like potato salad, don't miss *Flava!*'s interpretation. Hullum uses celery seed in the recipe and it is unlike any other version of the picnic staple I've ever had. *Warning:* the selection of homemade desserts like 7-Up cake and sweet potato pie at the checkout counter is irresistible.

Bonus: *Flava!* serves Sunday brunch, which reminds me of home. Plus, it's the best way to sample many of their signature items.

BONEY'S SMOKEHOUSE

1543 Champa St., Denver
303-825-9900

Being from North Carolina makes me an unofficial BBQ expert, and I can say with confidence that Boney's does it right. Owners Lamont and Trina Lynch both grew up by the sea—he in South Florida, she in Baltimore—and they have mastered the art of comfort food. A lunchtime favorite of downtown Denver workers, Boney's serves up a mix of Texas, Carolina and Kansas City style barbeque with all the traditional fixins like baked beans, coleslaw and creamy potato salad.

Bonus: Boney's has expanded its space, hours, and added a bar.

CAVALLO'S

630 Main St., Ouray
970-325-2042

You can't top New Orleans when it comes to food, which is why I was thrilled to find Cavallo's in the tiny mountain town of Ouray in southwest Colorado. I like this spot for weekend brunch, and my guilty pleasure dish is an omelet called Land-n-Swamp which oozes with melty cream cheese, crawfish, caramelized onions, roasted mushrooms and Andouille cream sauce. The owners, Sid and Kelly Cavallo, were both raised in lowland Louisiana, and one of them personally greets every table.

Bonus: Cavallo's has plenty of Southern-inspired cocktails. Try the White Peach (fruit purée and champagne) or the Bloody Bull (a Bloody Mary made with au jus and a Creole-seasoned rim).

LONDON'S SOUL FOOD

2593 Airport Rd., Colorado Springs
719-473-6386

London's offers solid soul food, though I was a bit disappointed with their selection of sides. Go on a Saturday, when there are more choices. The pork chops are big and juicy, and my dining companions and I went fried food crazy here (shrimp basket, fried catfish and chicken wings).

Bonus: The restaurant stays busy with a steady stream of military customers, so food is served promptly and the customer service is excellent.

HICKORY HOUSE

730 W. Main St., Aspen
970-925-2313

When I lived south of Denver, I found any excuse to take friends and visitors to the Hickory House in Parker. So on a recent trip to Aspen, I was pleased to find that my former hangout has a sister location. Here, the technique speaks for itself. There isn't a lot of extra seasoning going on—that would detract from the simple but exquisite hickory flavor of the meats. This is true Texas-style smokin'—thick steaks, jalapeño-cheddar sausages, ribs, barbecued chicken—with portion sizes to match. Vegetarians will like it here,

too. The black bean burger is every bit as exciting as the Certified Angus version, and there are plenty of meat-free options on the breakfast menu.

Bonus: Hickory House serves creamy milkshakes made with good old-fashioned Breyer's ice cream.

Davina van Buren (davinavanburen.com) is a Paonia-based freelance writer and multimedia journalist who specializes in travel, food, and environmental reporting.

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