

Gourmet

Chefs + Restaurants



JOHN T. EDGE

LITTLE ROCK TRAVELER

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Projecting a bright future for Arkansas eats.



Never heard of Arkansas food? That may soon change, thanks to Lee Richardson, the dynamic chef at the Capital Hotel in Little Rock.

Arkansas has long gotten short shrift. Even by Southern standards. Writers for culinary glossies haven't often deigned a visit, a taste, a report.

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Sure, chow geeks have [Craig's Bar-B-Q](#) and [Family Pie Shop](#), both in Devalls Bluff, programmed into their GPS systems. Ditto [McClard's Bar-B-Q](#), since 1928, the Hot Springs purveyor of hot tamales and sliced pork.

Kitchen wonks know about [Microplane](#), the Russelville-based company that discovered high-grade rasps and planes could be used in the kitchen as well as the woodworking shop. And students of agri-activism will no doubt point out that [Heifer](#)

International, the nonprofit that promotes animal husbandry in the developing world, is based in Little Rock.

But for most of us, Arkansas has always just been the place that gave birth to Bill Clinton. It's been that state wedged, somehow, between Mississippi, Louisiana, and Oklahoma. It's been a province without a personality, a place neither here nor there. (Such sentiments are unfair and inaccurate, but they're honest reflections of the culinary and cultural zeitgeist.)

Don't despair, citizens of Arkansas. There's hope for you yet. Soon, your culinary treasures will be trumpeted. Soon, the blogocracy will descend, in search of **Petit Jean** ham and White River paddlefish caviar.

If that comes to pass, Lee Richardson, chef at the **Capital Hotel** in Little Rock, will have earned a large measure of the credit. He's not a local—he's a native of Louisiana, who made his bones at **John Besh's** grand **Restaurant August** in New Orleans. But he's intent on showcasing all that is localish.

To prove my point, I could walk you through the menus at **Ashley's**, where breakfast means sausage gravy, poured from a warmed porcelain pitcher, over cat-head biscuits. And dinner means sorghum-roasted duckling with black apples and bitter oranges. Or I could plant you at the **Capital Bar and Grill**—where lunch in this, the capital of American rice growing, translates as rice-fried catfish and pickled green tomatoes, served on a disk of jalapeño cheese pudding with a dipping sauce of malt vinegar remoulade.

But I'll direct your attention, instead, to the gift basket I found in my room when I checked into the Capital. I was in Little Rock to give a talk at a literary benefit. It wasn't a paying gig. But it did come with payoffs: dinner in the wine cellar beneath Ashley's; a breakfast, also at Ashley's, of buckwheat pancakes and house-made sausage; and that gift basket, a hamper really, overflowing with Arkansas provender.

I spied three different sorts of Arkansas apples. And some Arkansas squash, too. And two paper pails of spiced Arkansas pecans. And a jar of Arkansas rice meal, accompanied by a handwritten recipe card. Yes, there's a bottle of Australian Shiraz in the mix; but you'll note that it's flanked by two jelly jars filled with honest Arkansas moonshine.

All of which is to say that Richardson, it seems, has his head on straight. He knows what curious culinary folks want, and he's committed to delivering the best Arkansas has to offer. And that's a good start.

Craig's Bar-B-Q Rte. 70, DeValls Bluff, AR (501-998-2616)

Family Pie Shop Rte. 70 DeValls Bluff, AR (870-998-2279)

McClard's Bar-B-Q 505 Albert Pike, Hot Springs, AR (501-623-9665; mcclards.com)

Microplane 614 SR 247, Russellville, AR (866-968-6665 ext. 4999; microplane.com)

Heifer Project International 1 World Ave., Little Rock, AR (800-422-0474; heifer.org)

Petit Jean Meats 51 Blue Diamond Dr., Morrilton, AR (800-264-2475; petitjeanmeats.com)

Capital Hotel 111 W. Markham St., Little Rock, AR (501-374-7474; capitalhotel.com)

PHOTOGRAPH BY AMANDA KOSTER

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