



# The Capital Hotel

My Southern heaven can be found in Little Rock, Arkansas, where Southern hospitality and fare satisfy my soul. BY **BRENDA MCCLAIN** / PHOTOGRAPHY COURTESY OF THE CAPITAL HOTEL

After two years of renovation, the Capital Hotel is back with all its Victorian charm and modern amenities. The hotel originally opened in 1872 as an office and retail space. Five years later it reopened as the Capital Hotel, and the price of a room was \$4 a day. Today prices range from \$200 to \$500 for a suite. Always known as one of the most prestigious hotels in the South, with the renovations the Capital Hotel has raised the bar.

Chef Lee Richardson moved to Little Rock from Louisiana after Hurricane Katrina and is clearly in love with his newfound home. He says, “Being here warms my heart and makes me think about the ‘good old days’ when life was slower, relationships closer. And my father, as a boy, could ride his bicycle a mile from home with a .22 to shoot rabbits. Did I mention the Arkansas black apple?”

As a chef there are lots of other things Richardson finds great about Arkansas. The state produces heirloom lamb, hogs, and turkeys and other fowl. They farm crawfish, catfish, and shrimp. Grass-fed cattle is another major agricultural product. Arkansas is the No. 1 exporter of rice in the country. Richardson says

he has even found a goat’s-milk dairy farm. The rivers are a source for cold-water trout. Panfish, bluegill bream, and other sunfish are available locally as well.

Today Richardson mans five kitchens at the Capital Hotel. Everything is homemade using fresh, local ingredients: the pimento cheese, potato chips, pickles, even the Worcestershire sauce. He re-creates such Southern delicacies as Fried Black-Eyed Peas, Country Pâté, and Pumpkin Jam. He even makes his own moon pies and grape soda. Even the catfish, long known as an Arkansas staple, is battered in home-grown rice. And if you eat soda crackers in bed and drop crumbs, yes the crumbs are homemade too!

It makes one wonder if five kitchens for this beautiful 94-room hotel are enough. Chef Richardson’s tasty Southern cuisine can be found in both Capital Hotel restaurants: Ashley’s and the more casual Capital Bar and Grill.

When it first opened in 1872, the hotel was home to Southern fare and charm and it continues to offer hospitality to guests today. There is no pretense of sophistication here. The Capital Hotel is truly a new Southern destination. 🍀