

time TRAVEL

Retracing memories on a family road trip
from Alabama to Tennessee

BY JENNIFER KORNEGAY



C/O WINDY HILL FARM AND PRESERVE

A serene pastoral scene
greets guests at Windy Hill
Farm and Preserve.



W

hen I was 11, we moved from the low-slung landscapes of Jackson, Mississippi, to Gadsden, Alabama, resting between two dogwood-covered peaks at the tail end of the Appalachian Mountains. Montgomery, Alabama, has been my home for the last 26 years, so I'm back in the flats. But the gentle, rolling hills and lush valleys of lower Appalachia still call me, and last fall, I answered.

I planned a road trip from Gadsden to Chattanooga and then Knoxville, Tennessee, to delve into the area's offerings, culinary and otherwise. And I decided to forgo the convenience of interstates and take highways and byways instead.

Not long before I left, my dad mentioned his childhood journeys from Saltsburg, Pennsylvania, to see family in Gulfport, Mississippi, that traversed some of the same roads on my route. Anticipating the thoughts sure to spill out of Dad on a literal trip down memory lane, I invited my parents to tag along. (Plus, the addition provided me with a chauffeur; when my dad's in the car, he's at the wheel.)

Country Roads

Dad, Mom, and I leave Gadsden on a late October morning, headed to Fort Payne, Alabama, via Highway 11. Right outside city limits, Dad is reminiscing, steering a white Honda minivan but in his mind looking out the window of his dad's 1955 sky-blue Chevy Bel Air station wagon. "It had no radio, so the scenery flying by was my entertainment," he says. "And [we'd] go through all the little towns. You see where life really happens in this country."

Soon, we're in the outskirts of Fort Payne, which summons a fond recollection for Dad; it was where his dad usually pulled over for a meal. "I remember the place, Cabin Kitchen, I think," Dad says. "Its front was all glass, and we'd get a booth where I could see the mountainside across the street." We find the building, but its restaurant days are long gone; now it's a doctor's office, so we continue into the city's center.

Fort Payne has survived some lean times. Once the Sock Capital of the World, it took a hit when textile manufacturing moved overseas. While its Hosiery Museum honors this past, Zkano Socks, founded by a Fort Payne native, is reviving it, spinning foot fashions in vibrant colors and bold, whimsical patterns. And the enduring fame of the homegrown band Alabama continually draws visitors to the country trio's museum. All three are worth a stop.

These (and other) bright spots mean many newer businesses in old buildings line downtown's hilly streets, including **The Bakehouse**, our first stop. We snag window seats in the bright white café and fuel up with grilled pimento cheese sandwiches on thick house-baked bread. Before we leave, we grab cranberry-orange muffins to keep our to-go apple-crisp lattes company.

Cheeses from Sequatchie Cove Creamery, from top: Walden, Coppinger, Cumberland, and Shakerag blue. **Opposite:** Grab cranberry-orange muffins and coffee at The Bakehouse.

Cheese, Please

On Highway 117, as we cross the Tennessee state line, we're in South Pittsburg, home of cast-iron icon **Lodge**. Its big yellow box of a building is impossible to ignore, so we park and peruse its shop, packed to the ceiling with all kinds of cooking implements. We also grab a few bags of Uncle Bud's deep-fried peanuts and rely on the salty snack (which can be eaten whole, shell and all) made in nearby Soddy-Daisy, Tennessee, to keep us satiated until our next stop.

More highway miles and a lonely country road lead us to Sequatchie Cove Farm and the **Sequatchie Cove Creamery** (both named for the river that borders one side) in the Tennessee town of the same name. Padgett Arnold greets us and shares the story behind the artisan from-age her husband, Nathan, makes and she sells. In 2006, the couple was managing the farm's produce gardens when Nathan had the idea to make cheeses that embody the character of the farm's home, a tight valley snuggled up to the base of the southern Cumberland Plateau.

The couple assembled a dairy herd, traveled all over the US and Europe to learn the craft, and in 2010, produced their first cheese. Today, the operation offers four award-winning cheeses, all prized by Southern chefs like Frank Stitt, Linton Hopkins, and Erik Niel in nearby Chattanooga, a fact Padgett relishes. "We've found our place with this," she says. "It's fulfilling to know people want what we make."

After we sample the ash-lined Coppinger (a nutty, semisoft variety) and Shakerag (a pungent blue) and load up our cooler with the same, we walk through the fading summer garden to the farm's **Trading Post**, a weathered wood shack with a sagging porch that welcomes visitors every Saturday.



It's Wednesday, but farm owner Bill Keener is on hand to welcome us nonetheless. He shows off shelves stacked with candy roaster squash, Seminole pumpkins for pie baking, and quart jars of sorghum syrup from a fellow farmer. Coolers are full of fresh lamb, and cornmeal and coarse grits milled from the farm's heirloom corn—and of course, wedges and wheels of cheese.

While these same goodies are trucked every week to a Chattanooga farmers market, people still find their way to the cove. "They just like being here," Keener says. "And they linger, bringing picnics to hang out." It's easy to see why people don't want to leave the idyllic place, but our dinner promising modern takes on classic Appalachian cuisine pulls us onward.

BORIS FRANTZ; OPPOSITE: C/O THE BAKEHOUSE



The Scenic City

Sitting in the shadow of Lookout Mountain with the Tennessee River snaking through it, Chattanooga is aptly dubbed the Scenic City. Our home for the night is downtown's **The Read House**, also renowned for its beauty. Opened in 1872, it's the Southeast's longest continually operating hotel and, today, embraces its jazz age heyday with glamorous art deco décor and its **Bar & Billiards Room** speakeasy, where happy hour is "flapper hour." We pop in for truffle fries, and while we're tempted by a signature experience—in-room oysters and martinis—we resist, as reservations at Whitebird await.

Sitting on the edge of the gallery- and museum-dotted Bluff View Arts District right above the river, **Whitebird** earns rave reviews for Joseph Madzia IV's elevated approach to area standards. My pork tenderloin with silky collard greens, bacon jam, and roasted apple compote and Mom's butter-based trout seasoned with Benton's bacon over white beans and wilted dandelion live up to the restaurant's hype. But Dad declares his choice number one. Since it's our family dining-out rule to rate all dishes, we share bites, and Mom and I agree. His juicy Joyce Farms fried chicken atop "three sisters" (black-eyed peas, squash, and white corn) succotash, a nod to the area's Native American heritage, and sweet-tart pickled watermelon wins.

Sweet and Smoke

The apple donuts are warm and the apple cider steaming the next morning when we exit Highway 11 and arrive at **Apple Valley Orchards** in Cleveland. We partake of both at the communal tables, and as they often do, my parents strike up a conversation with a stranger. Minutes later, he's our new friend Kenneth

Fun flavors draw lines at Sweetwater Creamery. **Opposite:** A seafood tower at The Read House Hotel (below) is a Scenic City must.

Chance, and we're entranced by his work at another nearby property, Appalachian Foothills Orchard in Etowah. "There are so many fruits that people here survived on but are now forgotten and disappearing," he says. "We're keeping them growing and creating a seed bank, a genetic library."

Dad peppers him with questions, but Chance has places to be, so we say goodbye and then fill bags with apples plucked from trees right outside the back door. Apple Valley Orchards has blossomed from 400 trees at its founding in 1979 to 15,000 today, a diverse mix of varieties including the popular Gala and Honey Crisp, plus obscure offerings like Arkansas Black, whose skin almost matches its name when ripe. We don't stop at fresh fruit: jars of apple butter and apple jelly end up beside our apples in the back of the van.

Outside of Cleveland, Highway 411 takes us to Madisonville. We smell our destination at least a mile before **Benton's Smoky Mountain Country Hams'** modest cinder-block building comes into view. In the 50 years since the business was founded, owner Allan Benton's name has become synonymous with preserved pork goodness.

We're treated to a behind-the-scenes look by Allan's son, Darrell, who recently traded his career as a radiologist for the family business. He leads us past hanging hams, talking of Benton's humble beginnings. "It was a struggle the first three decades or so just to keep the lights on," Darrell says. "So, when I went off to college, doing this didn't seem like a viable option."

Dad recalls seeing Benton's bacon printed on the menu at Whitebird. I refer to the Benton clan as bacon royalty, but Darrell demurs. "Well, I don't know about that, but it sure has taken off now," he says. "And we're still doing the same thing the same way." That way is curing



fresh hams and bellies with only salt and brown sugar and bathing them in thick hickory smoke. One newer addition is Benton's prosciutto-style country ham. "It's aged up to 24 months and gets funky, in a good way," says Darrell. We leave with arms full of bacon and ham, all so smoke-soaked the van will smell like a campfire for days to come.

On our way to Knoxville, we veer into tiny Sweetwater, Tennessee's charming downtown. The ice cream cone icon at **Sweetwater Creamery**

catches Mom's eye, so we join the line that's almost out the door. The young girls behind the counter work quickly, and when Dad asks about the unique flavors (oatmeal cream pie, Almond Joy, cinnamon honey, candy corn, and more), one proudly explains how they're all scratch-made using milk sourced from nearby Mayfield Dairy (which buys from local dairy farmers). Mom and Dad opt for sea salt caramel in cones; I energize with an affogato shake—a few scoops of just-churned vanilla bean ice cream blended with espresso.

C/O SWEETWATER CREAMERY. OPPOSITE: C/O THE READ HOUSE

Rocky Top

Before we reach Knoxville, more sign graphics grab us for a detour into Philadelphia, Tennessee; this time an orange triangle of cheddar and a cute dairy cow pull us up to **Sweetwater Valley Farm**’s cheese-centric café and cheese shop. We didn’t time it right to hit one of the family-run dairy’s milking tours, but there’s space in the cooler, so we stock up on hickory-smoked and chipotle cheddar.

In Knoxville, we check in at **The Tennessean**, a large hotel that feels like an intimate inn. Ed at the front desk greets us (and every other visitor who comes through the doors) by name. The attached maker’s exchange introduces the works of local painters, potters, woodworkers, and more. The hotel’s tea service melds the old-world practice with Southern sensibility courtesy of petite egg- and chicken-salad sandwiches and delicate china cups brimming with peach-perfumed tea.

The hotel’s central location begs us to explore the area, so we walk to Market Square, a pedestrian-only collection of restaurants, galleries, and boutiques in the heart of downtown. We fall down the rabbit hole at **Alice in Appalachia**, a whimsical Wonderland-themed bar and shop. (A Glitter Cat cocktail amplifies the vibe.)

Come dinnertime, we squeeze into seats at **Sticky Rice Cafe**, a family-owned and -operated Laotian restaurant buzzing with the sounds of happy diners. Our server is as delightful as our meal, patiently guiding us through the menu and sharing not just what she likes best but the memories—“The scent is my grandmother”—that make them favorites. Her suggestions prove spot-on. Mom and I will talk of her chicken leg with ginger broth and fried onions and my nam kow (crispy coconut-curry rice mixed with sour pork sausage) for weeks to come.

Knoxville was invigorating, but back on a two-lane highway the next morning, I can feel myself unwinding. Any tension in me unspools so completely when we get to **Windy Hill Farm and Preserve** in Loudon, I almost need a nap (and I haven’t napped since forced



siestas in kindergarten).

Opened in summer 2022, the pastoral property tucked into a horseshoe bend of the Tennessee River was previously a family’s private playground. It’s kept the familial vibe, with friendly staff doling out personal service from arrival until departure. All red curls and easy smiles, Jude meets us at the van and whisks our bags to sleek but cozy cabin rooms. As he drives a UTV to tour us around the grounds’ blend of field and forest, he shows where guests quail hunt, hike, paddle down the river, and roast marsh-

mallows around nightly campfires. His love of the land shines as he notes a bonus amenity: an immersion in eastern Tennessee’s native upland habitat that (hopefully) underscores the importance of its preservation.

We discover an equal emphasis on food when we meet chef Ben Warwick in the kitchen of **Wilder** for a cooking class and lunch. With onion and garlic sizzling around browning chicken thighs (the beginnings of our chicken sofrito), he praises the area’s abundance. “There’s so much growing here at our farm and all around us and being made locally,” he says. “I simply take advantage of that and highlight it.”

After a walk where we watch apiary workers get Windy Hill’s bees ready for winter, spy an eagle overhead, and soak in the quiet and calm, we dine on the results of Warwick’s approach: grilled scallops seasoned with a salty punch of county ham, grilled radicchio with figs, buttermilk-brined and fried quail with honey, and smoked pork belly sweetened with maple syrup and apple. We ignore our stomachs’ “full” signals and tuck into griddled pound cake drizzled with brown butter and warm cherries for dessert.

The next day, we make our way back to Alabama. We chat about what we enjoyed, trying to name favorites but realizing we loved it all. Dad reboards the train of thought he’d hopped when we left Gadsden. “I think it’s harder for people to relate to each other now because of travel on interstates,” he says. “You don’t get the knowledge of or appreciation for other places’ architecture, industry, culture, or people when you whizz past it. It detaches us from other perspectives, making differences seem bigger than they are.”

Sure, we ventured off the beaten path a bit. We experienced new places. We feasted on origin stories and makers’ enthusiasm. We ate, and ate, and ate. But none of it, not even the food, truly filled us up. It was the connections created with the new people we took the time to meet that delivered the most meaningful moments.

FROM TOP: C/O WINDY HILL FARM AND PRESERVE; C/O THE TENNESSEAN. OPPOSITE: C/O WINDY HILL FARM AND PRESERVE



Fresh dishes at Wilder. **Opposite from top:** Beehives at Windy Hill Farm and Preserve; take the time for tea at The Tennessean.

More WORTH-A-STOP SPOTS

Fort Payne, Alabama

- Explore **Little River Canyon Preserve**, a 15,000-acre protected site including Little River, the canyon it cut, and the foamy torrent of Little River Falls.
- Visit **Orbix Hot Glass** to grab a vase or water pitcher made by glassblower Cal Breed.

Chattanooga, Tennessee

- Fill up on hearty selections (big burgers and thick hangar steaks with Maldon-salted fries) at **Main Street Meats**, or breakfast greats at **Bluegrass Grill** like Joan Marie’s omelet (named for the eatery’s matriarch), fluffy eggs folded around spinach, tomatoes, and herbed cream cheese.
- Sleep in a luxury treehouse overlooking the city at **Treetop Hideaways**.

Cleveland, Tennessee

- Visit **Appalachian Bee** apiary and store in nearby Ocoee for honey and other honey-based lip balm and soap.
- When it’s warm, raft the raging rapids of the **Ocoee River** to cool down.

Knoxville, Tennessee

- Enjoy an aperitivo at **Brother Wolf** before going Greek for dinner at **Kefi**.