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Mint Juleps in Little Big Town

By [Julia Smillie Carey](#)

My family moved to Louisville, Kentucky, in 1981 and seven years later, I took the first scholarship out. I swore to myself that I would never, ever again make Louisville my home. Instead, I wound up in St. Louis and, save for a couple of brief forays, this has been my home for well over a decade.

However, [Louisville](#) remained home to my parents and, at various times, was home to all of my siblings. And I have visited for numerous holidays, vacations and birthday weekends, venturing out from the safety of my neighborhood once in a while to go Krogering.

It has taken me years to come understand that I don't hate Louisville. I hated high school. It is no place for fat chicks with thick glasses, funny accents and a genuine sense of self-loathing. My high school happened to be in Louisville, and so I transferred my ill will to the city as a whole. I somehow doubt tourism suffered as a result.

When approached—not by the board of tourism, obviously—to write about the city that lies just 270-odd miles from St. Louis, I thought it would be a struggle. I'd started to know a little of it. Should I travel homeward and explore...or should I pick up the phone and call my brother Dave, 26, and proud Louisville scene-ster? It's just so much easier to dial.

Whistling Dixie

This stuff I know without calling Dave. Louisville, Kentucky, is a city roughly half the size of St. Louis and has a pride that runs as deep as its history. The comparisons to St. Louis are impossible to avoid. Both are river cities, Louisville staring across the Ohio River to Jeffersonville, Indiana, the way St. Louis stares at East St. Louis. In the summer, the humidity in both places sucks.

Louisville is in the South...when it feels like it. In truth, during the Civil War, Kentucky was a divided state and Louisville a divided city. The city takes advantage of such mixed heritage by claiming many genteel Southern traditions as well as defying stereotypes by becoming the state's cutting-edge cultural and artistic center.

Repetez, Por Favor

If you know only one thing, know this: it's pronounced Loo-ah-vull. Like you're choking on it. Master that and you'll pass.

Doin' Loo-ah-vull

Let's get the immediate questions out of the way. Yes, we have the

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Derby. Second Saturday in May. Not unless you're absolutely nuts. (Although who could pass up the nail-biting steamboat race between the historic Belle of Louisville and the Delta Queen?)

If you're not nuts, you can still enjoy betting, horsies, racing and Mint Juleps at Churchill Downs. (Louisville is a town built on cigarettes and booze, so you won't have to shy away from your vices here.) Turns out it's open more than that one day in May. Who knew? Even if you're not up for the races, the Churchill Downs Museum is a suitably impressive homage to the most exciting sixty seconds in sports.

Now, if you're into the museum thing, you can't possibly look yourself in the mirror without a visit to the [Colonel Harlan Sanders Museum](#), located at the Kentucky Fried Chicken headquarters. Sure, it's a little bit outside the city center, but you get to stare at the actual very pot in which the bearded one fried up his first batch. Would I make something like that up?

I'm told, by those who enjoy that whole baseball thing, that [The Louisville Slugger Museum](#) is a fitting tribute to the sport and the bat that was actually made, for the most part, directly across the river in Indiana. Not to take the fun out of it or anything. Plus you can stand outside the building and get your buddy to take a photo of you next to a really, really giant baseball bat. It's hard to find fun like that in St. Louis, Dave tells me. I'll have to give him that one.



Oh, you want sports? You got 'em. But you have to remember that Louisville's basketball country, yet it works at not getting an NBA team. Louisville is college basketball country, and citizens are divided into two teams: those who follow the University of Louisville and those who follow UK. People will hurt each other over these loyalties. Unless you know what you're doing, when someone asks you "UK or U of L?" pretend you don't speak English.

Louisville Slugger Field is a relatively new AAA ballpark that's not only beautiful to look at, but an affordable way for an entire family to spend the night at the game. Dave says that with seasonal specials you can see a game for as little as two bucks. The home team? "The River Bats," Dave says. "You know, after all those...bats...we're always seeing. On the river." He pauses. "Yeah."

I Love the Night Life, I Love to Boogie

One of the areas in which Louisville has suffered for years is supporting a number of solid music venues to house different-sized acts and support local music. "What about Tewligans?" I ask Dave, recalling an old Cicero's-like venue. He pauses. "Uh, yeah, Jules. That was good. You know, a decade ago, when it still existed." He may exaggerate, but the point remains true. Louisville has been through a number of venues and today many Louisvillians head out of town to nearby Lexington, Cincinnati or Indianapolis to see big name acts and festival shows.

I get online, checking out [Louisville.com](#) and [LouisvilleScene.com](#) for upcoming shows, and Dave's right. Many of the big shows seem to be hitting surrounding cities, with the notable exception of Tool playing at the Fairgrounds. Hmmm. Also noteworthy is Jay Farrar's upcoming gig at Phoenix Hill Tavern, one of few music venues that could get away with claiming to be institutions. (If you really want to impress your friends, it's also the "bar in Louisville" that the Jayhawks refer to in the lyrics of the song "Miss Williams' Guitar.")

If you wanna dance, you need to head to the Connection—provided

you don't shock easily and you're not terrified by homosexuals. This is a gay bar unlike any you've ever seen. It's actually a complex, encompassing a piano bar, a pool room, and the best dancing found in the city. And your life will never be the same if you don't get there in time for one of the drag shows, performed in a cabaret-style theater inside the complex. I can't even walk in heels like that, let alone dance...

The Plays Must Go On...All of Them!

I've learned through traveling that one can always provide one's own theatrics, but the great thing about Louisville is that you really don't have to. The city supports more than a dozen theatrical groups—from the nationally renowned Actor's Theatre and youth Walden Theatre to independent troupes such as the As Yet Unnamed Theater Company. (Hey, the mom from Little House on the Prairie acts at Actor's Theater! Yeah!)



From the three different-sized stages at the Kentucky Center for the Arts to makeshift stages at such beloved locations as The Rudyard Kipling, Louisville bends over backwards to accommodate theater groups of all shapes and sizes. In fact, the Kipling deserves an honorary mention on its own, truly a rare jewel in any city. It's a cozy neighborhood pub with more focus on quality drinks than atmosphere and makes a point of hosting all manner of acts—from local bands to spoken word nights to locally-written plays.

Southern Culture Not On the Skids

Theater isn't the only art form Louisville supports fiercely. The city is also home to the Louisville Ballet, the Louisville Orchestra and Kentucky Opera. If your culture comes on the big screen, you're still taken care of. The Baxter Avenue Theater, renovated to rival our Tivoli, hosts independent and foreign films on eight screens. Yes, eight.

Bardstown Road

Bardstown Road stretches for miles in Louisville, but the area that begins downtown at Broadway and runs out to Taylorsville Road provides a ten- to 15-mile stretch that's best described as the Loop, the Central West End and South Grand all mixed together and drawn out in a lazy, leisurely manner.

This is the part of town to be for independent bookstores, vintage and thrift shops and a handful of music stores. It's easy to spend a day strolling from one end to another, stopping in at anything that catches your fancy. Hungry? Sweat not; Bardstown Road has become the center of Louisville's cuisine. Where once your options were fast food or fancy food, ethnic food owns the strip with Thai, Indian, Vietnamese, Cajun, Italian, French and much more all in the area.

In essence, Bardstown Road has accomplished what the city itself longs to bring downtown—small, independently owned businesses, a wealth of different restaurants. "It's really striving to turn downtown into a destination location," Dave says, and I'm left in awe thinking, My Little Brother Said That.

If You Only Eat One Meal

Let it be brunch. Louisville does it like no one else. The hard part is choosing between two of the finest destinations—but your wallet might do the choosing for you. The brunch served at the Seelbach

Hotel turns the meal into an event. Sure, it's \$25 a head but you can easily eat your money's worth in jumbo shrimp, tenderloin, customized omelets and waffles, tables brimming with gourmet breads and desserts and all the fried breakfast meats.

The other option is Lynn's Paradise Café, where you can breakfast or brunch just about any day of the week. Sure you gotta go to check out the eclectic and wacky-go-crazy mish-mosh décor, but the beauty here is more than skin deep. In fact, it's homemade biscuit-thick, with old-fashioned grits, and breakfast potato concoctions that have me wiping the drool off the keyboard as I write this.

So should you visit Louisville? Dave says, "Yeah." I'll leave it up to you, but I know that I'll be paying it a visit in the near future.

[Julia Smillie Carey](#) is best known for her droll and daring advice as "[Ask Julia](#)" on [STLtoday.com](#). She has excellent table manners and believes that spelling counts.

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