



Escape to Asheville, N.C.

BY KRISTEN MANIERI

TUCKED IN THE COOL Blue Ridge Mountains, quirky-yet-charming Asheville, N.C., is a drivable getaway for Central Floridians. With its mushrooming food scene, a craft beer industry that seems to swell daily and the influx of travelers trying to keep it their best-kept secret, here's our must-do list for summer.

STAY

INN ON BILTMORE ESTATE

This four-star property on the sprawling 8,000-acre Biltmore Estate is one of the best hotels for a room with a view. In addition to the Biltmore mansion and gardens, guests also get close access to fly-fishing, biking, river float trips and several dining options, including a lovely afternoon tea served daily from 2:30 to 4:30 p.m. in the Inn's Library Lounge. (In November, Biltmore's second hotel, the 209-room Village Hotel on Biltmore Estate, will open adjacent to Biltmore's Winery in Antler Hill Village.) (800) 411-3812; biltmore.com/stay

OMNI GROVE PARK INN

Best known for its breathtaking views of the Blue Ridge Mountains, this AAA Four-Diamond, circa-1913 hotel features a spa, golf, tennis, swimming and several restaurants including The Blue Ridge, which serves a legendary brunch across three buffet rooms every Sunday from noon to 2:30 p.m. (828) 252-2711; omnihotels.com

EAT

12 BONES SMOKEHOUSE

While President Obama's multiple visits to this much-loved barbecue hotspot may have garnered 12 Bones some national attention, Asheville locals have been singing its praises for years. Inside this no-frills, red-roofed quick-serve on Riverside Drive, a steady supply of slow-smoked baby back ribs, pulled pork and beef brisket is served with finger-licking sauces like Blueberry Chipotle, which is available in bottles to take home. (828) 687-1395; 12bones.com

WHITE DUCK TACO SHOP

Located in the River Arts District, this casual taco joint always has a line out the door, especially during peak lunch and dinner times Monday through Saturday. Inside, a colorful chalkboard displays the kitchen's offerings, including a dozen varieties of tacos with a nod to a plethora of international cuisines. Jerk Chicken, Bangkok Shrimp and Lamb Gyro are just a few of the options, all of which are best enjoyed alongside a serving of mint watermelon and a glass of house-made white or red sangria. There is also a second location downtown on Biltmore Avenue. (828) 258-1660; whiteducucktacoshop.com

CÚRATE

With James Beard-nominated Chef Katie Button at the culinary helm, Cúrate offers

dozens of simple, small plates with bold flavors that stand as testament not only to Button's culinary training at both El Bulli in Spain and Jean-Georges in New York, but to her staunch support of local agriculture. Snag a seat at the 22-seat marble bar, which overlooks the exhibition kitchen and unequivocally offers the best seats in the house. (828) 239-2946; curatetapasbar.com

THE ADMIRAL

You might drive by this "gastro-dive" a few times before you realize that the unassuming cinderblock building with its hole-in-the-wall veneer is actually the place you're looking for. Don't let the scruffy exterior fool you. Inside, guests nosh a selection of audacious dishes sporting haughty ingredients like imported oysters and foie gras. Still, chefs keep it real with lots of foundational indigenous fare and the unpretentious vibe Asheville is famous for. (828) 252-2541; theadmiralnc.com

DRINK

SOVEREIGN REMEDIES

Perched on the corner of Market and Walnut streets in downtown Asheville, this craft cocktail bar features seasonal and Appalachian themed drinks, but most interestingly, it offers a series of foraged cocktails made with local finds such as pickled ramp and wild onion. (828) 919-9518; sovereignremedies.com



NIGHTBELL

Created by the Cúrate family as a sort of speakeasy and tapas restaurant, Nightbell is a terrific place to enjoy inventive drinks and imaginative small, bite-sized dishes. The decor, turquoise chandeliers hung over tables, chairs and sofas in rich hues, creates a sense of mystery that begins at the inconspicuous gated entrance and staircase inside. Nightbell has no sign, and its Lexington Avenue street front looks like an antiques shop, making it easy to miss. (828) 575-0375; thenightbell.com

WICKED WEED

Doubling as a restaurant and brewery, Wicked Weed Brewing is one of the biggest craft brewers, and judging by the packed patio, it's an area favorite, too. From barrel-aged ales to hoppy American ales, this brewpub cranks out a varied selection of craft beers designed to pair well with the menu of locally sourced fare. (828) 575-9599; wickedweedbrewing.com

DO

Downtown Asheville is anchored by **PACK SQUARE PARK**, a pretty green space down College Street and an ideal starting point for downtown wanderings. During the summer, Pack Square hosts Shindig on the Green, which invites local folk and bluegrass musicians to play under the stars on Saturday nights from June through August.

ASHEVILLE ART MUSEUM sits at the corner of Biltmore Avenue and Pack Square Park.

It might not look like much from the outside, but inside more than 3,500 works are housed and more than a dozen exhibitions are presented annually for a nominal admission fee of \$8 plus tax. (828) 253-3227; ashevilleart.org

For just a \$12 parking fee, the entire family can gain access to **THE NORTH CAROLINA ARBORETUM**, a 434-acre public garden and one of the area's most picturesque places to hike. Those traveling with kids will want to borrow one of the free nature packs from the welcome center. It comes with nets, maps and flora and fauna guides plus a few other handy tools budding explorers will love. (828) 665-2492; ncarboretum.org

Take a scenic drive along the **BLUE RIDGE PARKWAY**, which has a few entry points in the Asheville area plus several places to stop at scenic overlooks, hikes and visitor centers. (828) 271-4779; nps.gov/blri/ Of course, **BILTMORE ESTATE** cannot be overlooked. Western North Carolina's beloved "castle on the hill" presides over an 8,000-acre estate, complete with manicured gardens, woodlands and an award-winning winery (the nation's most visited). Built in the late 19th century by George Washington Vanderbilt II, the chateau-inspired home is an opulent example of the wealth acquired during America's Gilded Age. The magnificent 250-room mansion ranks as the largest private residence in the country and offers self-guided tours that can easily last for hours. Set aside at least a day, maybe even two, to really peel back Biltmore's layers,

which can be enhanced by carriage rides, fly-fishing expeditions, horseback riding and Segway tours.

PROVISIONS

Let the kitschy allure of **MAST GENERAL STORE** take hold, and follow the herds of shoppers inside where a potpourri of items from camping supplies and hiking boots to canning pots and cast iron skillets awaits. (828) 232-1883; mastgeneralstore.com

A visit to the **FRENCH BROAD CHOCOLATE LOUNGE**, now with new and bigger digs adjacent to Pack Square, is a must, especially for those who will appreciate its bean-to-bar operation and endless offerings of chocolate desserts and bars. (828) 252-4181; frenchbroadchocolates.com

Home to 17 local tailgate markets, where buying direct from area farmers is an everyday occurrence, Asheville is absolutely spoiled with direct access to local provisions. Located at the Public Works Building on South Charlotte Street, the **ASHEVILLE CITY MARKET** is an ideal spot to buy everything from local cheese and artisan bread to freshly caught trout on Saturdays from 8 a.m. to 1 p.m., April 4–December 19, 2015. facebook.com/AshevilleCityMarket

If you miss a market, just head on over to the **FRENCH BROAD FOOD CO-OP**, a market filled with local honey, foraged fare, hyper local trout and meat from Hickory Nut Gap Farm and Carolina Bison. (828) 255-7650; frenchbroadfood.coop