

# soulfood

Seven must-eat meals for seven waist-busting days in the American South. **Laura Goodman** scoffs the lot



## BARBECUE, TENNESSEE

Ordering meat by the pound takes some getting used to, but after a few days you'll be expertly adding 'slaw, potato salad and beans. In the South, barbecue refers to the process of cooking beef brisket, pork shoulder and spare ribs for long periods of time at a low temperature over a wood fire. The smoky, mouth-watering taste of a Tennessee barbecue is the result of an intricate process of rubbing,

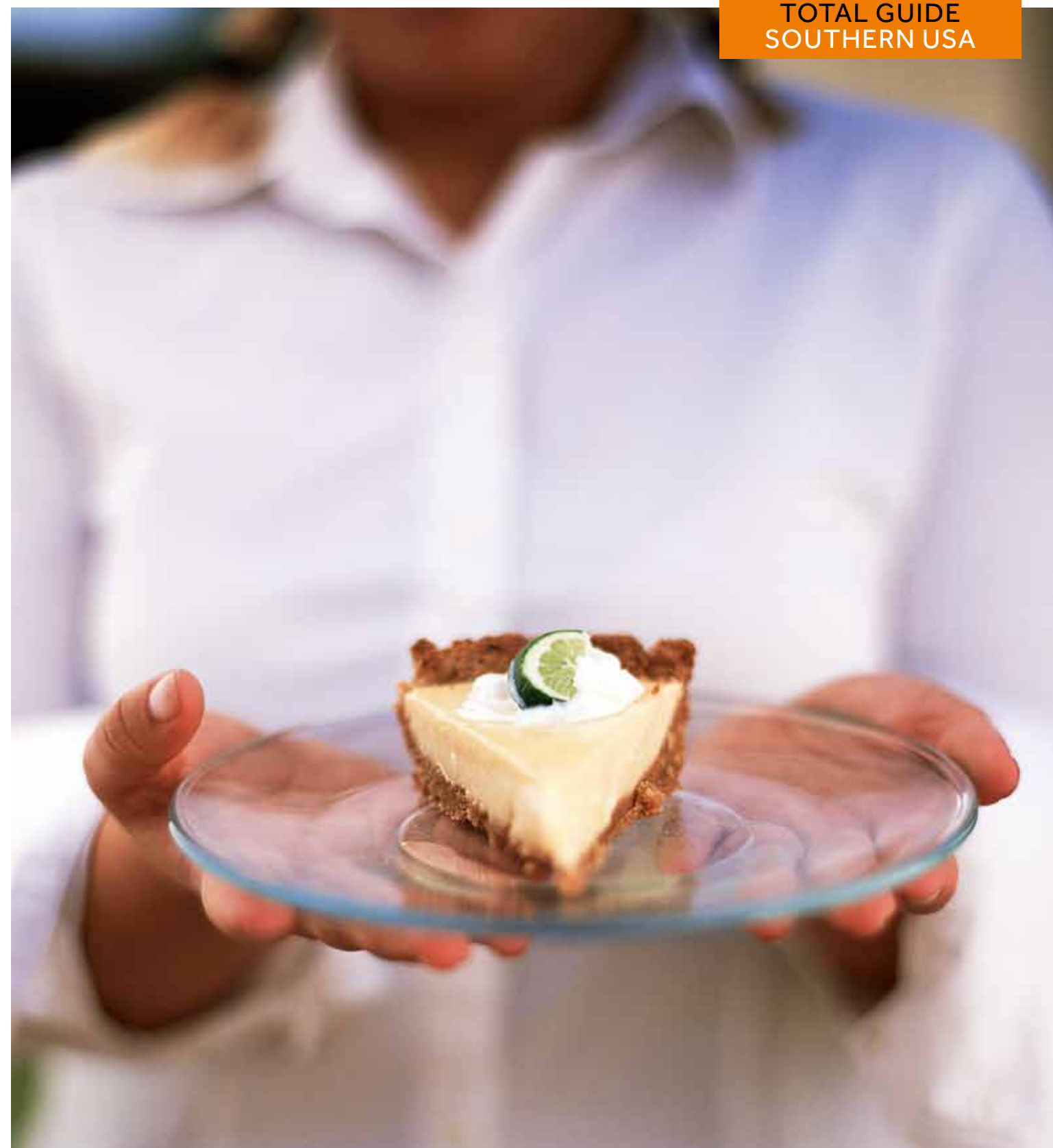
marinating and slathering – and each chef has a secret they'd never share.

**Get your fix:** Cozy Corner in Memphis sits low amid towering Coca Cola signs on north Parkway. It isn't cosy; it's simple and serious. Go for a saucy baloney sandwich (bologna ham) or a pound of rib tips with a pot of slaw (00 1 901 527 9158, [www.cozycornerbbq.com](http://www.cozycornerbbq.com); around £8 all-in). Alternatively, try handy A&R BBQ – it has five down-home locations, a cheeky pig-in-a-hat logo and a popular

'extra sauce' option (00 1 901 774 5907, [www.aandrbq.com](http://www.aandrbq.com); £12 for a slab of ribs with sides).

**Stay:** Weary carnivores will adore the big beds at the historic Peabody (00 1 901 529 4000, [www.peabodymemphis.com](http://www.peabodymemphis.com); doubles from £130, room only). The lobby is a far cry from those side-of-the-freeway shacks – it's all shiny marble, sculpture and carved wood. Then there are the Peabody ducks, five real-life mallards, which parade with their duck-master twice a day.

ONLY IN TEXAS... would two guys build a full replica of Stonehenge when they didn't know what to do with leftover patio slabs (in Ingram)



## KEY LIME PIE, FLORIDA

Key limes are smaller, rounder, smoother and yellower than the usual Persian ones, and their high acidity and strong aroma make them perfect for puddings. Most of them are grown in Central America, but the pie belongs to Florida Keys – the islands off southern Florida. It features a biscuit base, meringue topping, and a filling made of lime, condensed milk and egg yolks; essential accompaniments are a parasol, palm trees and a Margarita. In the

Keys, where key lime pies are ten-a-penny, beware green filling (only ever achieved with colouring) – you want pale, custardy shades. **Get your fix:** Embrace foodie evolution at La Te Da on Key West (00 1 877 528 3320, [www.lateda.com](http://www.lateda.com); pie £5; mains around £15), where the biscuit crust has a layer of chocolate ganache running through it. The restaurant is inside a kitsch little B&B on Duval Street – after dessert, catch its drag cabaret in the Crystal Room. Purists prefer the pie served in

Blue Heaven's shady courtyard, where cloud-like meringue is piled sky-high (00 1 305 296 8666, [www.blueheavenkw.com](http://www.blueheavenkw.com); £5).

**Stay:** The fantastical Curry Mansion Inn (00 1 305 294 5349, [www.currymansion.com](http://www.currymansion.com); doubles from £120, B&B) was built by the island's first millionaire in 1869. Dramatic rooms have Floridian flourishes – white shutters, wicker furniture, lace draped across four-poster beds, and roomy balconies. There are daily cocktail parties by the pool. >

ONLY IN ALABAMA... will you find the world's biggest office chair – made from 10 tonnes of steel and standing three metres tall (in Anniston)

**TAMALES, TEXAS**

Is 'Tex-Mex' an accurate label? Debate rages, but fans don't care whether this dazzling union of cheese, meat, soured cream and refried beans is more Texan than Mexican – it may as well have been beamed down by the food gods. In this southernmost state, by the Mexican border, the tamale is as prolific as the burger. It's a dish made of cornflour dough, steamed or boiled in a leaf wrapper, then stuffed with juicy, tender meat, and chillies to make your head swirl.

**Get your fix:** At Oaxacan Tamaleo in Austin, a beaming lady named Leonor Baños-Stoute wraps delicious morsels in banana leaves – just like they do in her hometown of Oaxaca, Mexico. Share a dozen tamales – there's pork with green sauce, chicken with red mole, and black bean with cheese (00 1 512 289 9262, www.tamaleo.com; £1.70 each). Rosie's Tamale House is another classic, for spicy or mild tamales, as well as breakfast tacos and sizzling fajitas (00 1 512 263 5245; £1.30 each).

**Stay:** In a trendy part of downtown Austin, Hotel Saint Cecilia (00 1 512 852 2400, www.hotelsaintcecilia.com; doubles from £182, room only) is a funky assortment of suites, studios and bungalows, named after the patron saint of music. Expect chandeliers, velvet curtains, Victorian chests, turntables, outdoor showers and pianos. The in-room breakfast includes Gruyère omelettes and fresh scones.

**CATFISH, MISSISSIPPI**

Those ray-finned, big-mouthed creatures hauled out of the Mississippi river are so-called because of their barbels – the whisker-like organs by their mouths. Most local chefs like to skin them, dredge them in cornmeal and then fry them up. The natural accompaniment: hush puppies – ball-shaped cornmeal dumplings. You also need coleslaw and ketchup (naturally). It's simple, unremarkable fish, turned into something wonderful. As Mark Twain put it: 'The catfish is aplenty good enough fish for anybody.'

**Get your fix:** At Taylor Grocery in Oxford, catfish get their own section of the menu, between 'sides' and 'desserts'. Order yours blackened, covered in barbecue rub, or whole (with hush puppies); there's also an all-you-can-eat option (00 1 662 236 1716, www.taylorgrocery.com; mains around £8). If you fall in love with the fish, the Crown, in Indianola, features Catfish Allison, a gratin of poached fillet, Parmesan, butter and green onion sauce (00 1 800 833 7731, www.thecrownrestaurant.com; £12).

**Stay:** The 512Oxford (00 1 662 234 8043, www.the512oxford.com; doubles from £70, B&B) is a suave little number; its six rooms have chocolate colour schemes, luxury bedding and modern artwork on the walls. Miss Ilene's breakfast is the Southern works: eggs, bacon, 'biscuits' (savoury scones) and loads of coffee – but her morning chatter is the best.

**SOUTHERN FRIED CHICKEN, ALABAMA**

Crisp-cooked poultry is the guilty pleasure of even the fussiest foodies – it feeds the Southern soul. The proper stuff consists of chunks of chicken, encased in a crunchy shell made of buttermilk and flour. The best chefs use small, uneven pieces of meat so you get more crust for your buck, and quality birds, so there's no disappointment when you get close to the bone. Fried chicken isn't 'fast food' – it requires time (to soak in the buttermilk). It's best eaten with stodgy waffles or savoury scones.

**Get your fix:** At Max's deli in Birmingham, the juiciest fried chicken is served from 4pm until it's all gone. The crust is airy-light, with an

authentic just-made crispness. Owner Steve Dubrinsky's mission is to serve only 'your favourites', so be sure and let him know what you like (00 1 205 968 7600, www.maxsdeli online.com; £10.75 for a whole chicken and two side dishes). Or try one of the city's four Green Acres Cafes for portions of perfect fried wings (00 1 205 251 3875, www.greenacres-cafe.com; £1.20 for two; £15 for 30). **Stay:** The Tutwiler (00 1 205 325 1183, www.thetutwilerhotel.com; doubles from £90, room only) is pleasingly named and well-located. In its businessy but bling rooms, French doors lead to balconies overlooking downtown, and there's plenty of historical ambience, including rumours of a ghostly Colonel Tutwiler, said to patrol the kitchen. >

**SHRIMP AND GRITS,  
SOUTH CAROLINA**

The traditional breakfast of the Low Country fisherman puts our porridge to shame. The base component – grits – is a southeastern staple, which consists of coarsely ground corn, cooked up with milk or water and flavoured to taste. The original dish was then topped with shrimp, fried in tasty bacon grease and served in a cup. However, over the past 20 years or so, the good people of South Carolina noticed that folk 'from off' (outsiders) had a hankering for their beloved breakfast shrimp, and restaurants started serving it for brunch, lunch and dinner.

**Get your fix:** South Carolina locals aren't the type to throw tourists off the scent – they're too hospitable. Follow them to Anson in

Charleston for fresh 'dayboat seafood' in a homely dining room, where the chefs grind their own creamy grits (00 1 843 577 0551, [www.ansonrestaurant.com](http://www.ansonrestaurant.com); £6.90). Or, try Hominy Grill (pictured) – its version comes with sautéed shrimp, mushrooms, spring onions and bacon served over cheese grits (00 1 843 937 0930, [www.hominygrill.com](http://www.hominygrill.com); £11).

**Stay:** Set in oak-tree-lined gardens, Battery Carriage House (00 1 843 727 3100, [www.batterycarriagehouse.com](http://www.batterycarriagehouse.com); doubles from £140, B&B) has Southern style in abundance behind its wrought-iron gates. Rooms are simple and graceful, with pretty antique furniture and tatty old maps on the walls. Afternoon tea is served beside the rose-entwined arch. ■



PHOTOGRAPHS: GETTY, EYEVINE, PHOTOLIBRARY

ONLY IN MISSISSIPPI... will you find Graceland 'Too', one man's pink mansion devoted to all things Elvis, open 24 hours a day (00 1 662 252 7954)



**PO'BOYS, LOUISIANA**

The etymology is unknown – perhaps it came from 'poor boys', the people who ate them; or maybe it was 'pour boire', a French expression meaning 'tip', the cash with which the bartender would buy his sandwich. But the po'boy is the unlikely hero of Louisiana cuisine – a baked mini-French baguette, sliced open and filled with batter-fried shrimp or oysters, plus gravy and greedy extras. More modern stuffings include soft-shell crab, fried green tomatoes and roast beef with Swiss cheese.

**Get your fix:** Mahony's in New Orleans doles out classic oyster po'boys at market price, but also has new-fangled ones containing fried chicken livers and meatballs. The simple little sandwich spot is only four years old, but chef-owner Ben Wicks's grandma provides service with an old-fashioned smile (00 1 504 899 3374, [www.mahonyspoboy.com](http://www.mahonyspoboy.com); 15cm po'boy around £9). The slightly swankier GW Fins wowed the 2010 Po-Boy Preservation Festival with its battered, buttery lobster version (00 1 504 581 3467, [www.gwfins.com](http://www.gwfins.com)).

**Stay:** New Orleans is saturated with chain hotels, but Chimes (00 1 504 899 2621, [www.chimesneworleans.com](http://www.chimesneworleans.com); doubles from £60), is a good old-fashioned B&B. It's a doll's house of a building, in white, pale green and yellow, with pretty mahogany four-posters and big sunny French windows. Breakfast is local bread, pastry and coffee.

ONLY IN GEORGIA... can you ogle the 'world's biggest peanut' (in Ashburn – and there's plenty of stiff competition from other states, worryingly)