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IMAGE: ANGE MOISER

SOUTHERN COMFORTS

Vast, varied and connected by miles of open road, the American South is the ideal setting for an unforgettable culinary tour. Sweeping from the mountains of Appalachia down to the swamps of Louisiana, it's the home of treasured traditions and constant innovation. It's where barbecue is ubiquitous, yet where cuts and sauces are fiercely regional. And it's where history, culture and identity intertwine with the local flavours and ingredients like nowhere else. So, from hot chicken in Nashville to the tamales of the Mississippi Delta, come and get a taste of the Southern states.

WORDS: MIKE JORDAN, TOM BURSON & ZOIEY GOTO





Café du Monde has been serving up beignets in New Orleans since 1862. From left: crawfish etouffee on a bed of rice; biscuits and gravy at Loveless Cafe



Fried catfish **Arkansas**

The rivers and streams of Arkansas wriggle with whiskered catfish, so it's no surprise this dish is a favourite with cooks across the state. A mild fish with sweet undertones, it's coated in a cornmeal batter flavoured with a generous sprinkling of cayenne pepper, paprika and garlic powder, before it's dunked into boiling oil. The result is spectacularly flavourful and best enjoyed with a heap of hushpuppies — crunchy, bite-sized cornmeal fritters.

WHERE TO FIND IT: J Lassis Inn in Little Rock was a crucial meeting place for civil rights activists in the 1950s and 1960s, and serves award-winning catfish beside a neon-lit jukebox. [518 E 27th St](#)

Crawfish etouffee **Louisiana**

This saucy seafood dish has roots in both Creole and Cajun cuisine. The Creole version adds tomatoes to a traditional French-style roux; its Cajun cousin uses an oil base and more spice. Both include onion, celery and bell pepper, and share a sweet, briny shellfish flavour. Crawfish (crayfish) is the most common variety, plus shrimp and crab.

WHERE TO FIND IT: Mother's Restaurant has been a New Orleans institution since 1938, and only uses Louisiana crawfish in its butter-rich etouffee. [mothersrestaurant.net](#)

Biscuits **Tennessee**

These savoury sides are a distant relative of the scone, rather than a biscuit, a probable import of European settlers. A popular accompaniment to meals across the South, buttermilk biscuits are often taken from the oven and swaddled in cloth-lined baskets, served from dawn to dusk — with grits, eggs and sausage gravy for breakfast, or alongside main dishes such as fried chicken at any hour of the day.

WHERE TO FIND IT: Bakers at the Loveless Café in Nashville start kneading their dough at 3am each morning, creating perfect pillows paired with slices of crumbly country ham. [lovelesscafe.com](#)

Beignets **Louisiana**

This sweet delicacy was first introduced to New Orleans by the French Acadians in the 18th century. Made by deep-frying choux

pastry or leavened dough, beignets are traditionally served under an avalanche of fine sugar, but recently they've also sneaked onto savoury menus around the city, as chefs experiment with additions such as hunks of rich crab meat, fried chicken or cheese.

WHERE TO FIND IT: Join the snaking queue at Café du Monde, a landmark coffee shop that's been serving up sugar-dusted beignets in New Orleans since 1862. [cafedumonde.com](#)

Shrimp and grits **South Carolina**

Once a hearty fisherman's breakfast, this humble dish of porridge-like boiled cornmeal topped with pan-fried shrimp is another favourite across the Southern states. The combination of creamy grits, fresh seafood and a splash of Tabasco is perfectly balanced, and in Charleston, South Carolina, it's made it onto the menus of some of the town's smartest restaurants.

WHERE TO FIND IT: Magnolias in Charleston has elevated the dish to fine-dining standards, with sautéed shrimp, scallops and lobster butter sauce served on a bed of the creamiest white grits. [magnoliascharleston.com](#) **ZG**



SEEK OUT a Southern speciality

Shrimp and grits, fried green tomatoes and banana pudding are among the region's singularly indulgent Southern comfort dishes

St Louis gooey butter cake **Missouri**

Legend has it this moist, delicious, hot mess of a cake was created in St Louis purely by chance, after a German baker went over the top with the butter while creating a coffee cake. The result is an intensely rich bake, with a sticky layer that coats the gums, topped with lots of powdered sugar.

WHERE TO FIND IT: More than 60 takes on this Missouri indulgence jostle for space on the counter at Park Avenue Coffee Roasters in St Louis, with flavours ranging from pumpkin to mango. parkavenuecoffee.com

Shrimp po'boy **Louisiana**

Elevating the humble sandwich to indulgent heights, the po'boy is a stick of French bread filled with a combination of deep-fried shrimp, sliced tomato, lettuce, vinegary pickle and a slathering of mayonnaise. Originally called the poor boy, legend says it fed the picket line during the Louisiana streetcar strikes of 1929. And it's still the food of the people, sold in local joints in New Orleans.

WHERE TO FIND IT: Johnny's Po-Boys in New Orleans has 40 sandwich combos, ranging

from the classic fried shrimp to alligator sausage. facebook.com/johnnyspoboy

Banana pudding **Tennessee**

So revered is banana pudding in Tennessee, that each October the city of Centerville dedicates a weekend-long festival to this nostalgic dessert. Most grandmothers have a family recipe, but it's generally a heady combination of velvety custard, vanilla wafer and layers of fresh bananas, topped with either whipped cream or meringue.

WHERE TO FIND IT: Don't be deterred by the exterior of Cozy Corner in Memphis, with its peeling paintwork and rusty Coca-Cola signage — the gooey banana pudding here is the stuff of local legend. cozycornerbbq.com

Burgoo stew **Kentucky**

A grandstand favourite on Kentucky Derby race day, burgoo stew is a hearty marriage of succulent chunks of meat swimming in an aromatic vegetable broth. The exact mix of meats is up for grabs, but it often features some combination of chicken, pork, mutton and beef, while the veg might include butter

beans, sweetcorn, cabbage or tomatoes. Slow cooked and requiring constant attention, this is undeniably a labour-intensive dish, but the end result is a guaranteed crowd-pleaser.

WHERE TO FIND IT: At the Moonlite Bar-B-Q Inn, a wood-panelled buffet institution in Owensboro, where the burgoo stew is rich and spicy, and served with a couple of fluffy cornbread muffins to soak it up. moonlite.com

Fried green tomatoes **Alabama**

Immortalised in the Alabama-set book and film, *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Cafe*, this is a dish now inextricably linked with the state. Slices of green tomatoes are crumbed in cornmeal and sizzled in bacon dripping for a perfectly crisp, golden coating. Alabama chefs add their spin with remoulade, marinated Gulf crab or andouille sausage.

WHERE TO FIND IT: At Johnny's in Homewood, a suburb of Birmingham, Alabama, chef Tim Hontzas has received a James Beard nomination for his new-school meat-and-three restaurant. Fried green tomatoes feature heavily on the chalkboard menu. johnnyshomewood.com