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## **A Foodie Find**

You won't go hungry in Staunton, VA, with its locally sourced restaurants, markets, and nearby farm tours.

By Stephanie Citron - *March 2011*

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Staunton is an easy town for visitors to get around by foot or by a free trolley. -*Woods Pierce*

Who knew that Staunton, a tiny city in Virginia, is one of the country's best-kept foodie secrets? But that probably won't be the case for long. Locavore-loving epicureans are taking notice of this agrarian region in the Shenandoah Valley.

Just five years ago, eminent New York City chef Ian Boden became captivated with Staunton (pronounced STAN-ton) and its multi-generational green growers and breeders, who were quietly cultivating organic produce, dairy, grass-fed and free-range game, fisheries, and vineyards. He promptly relocated there and launched the town's first sophisticated farm-to-fork restaurant—Staunton Grocery (105 W. Beverley St., 540-886-6880, [stauntongrocery.com](http://www.stauntongrocery.com) (<http://www.stauntongrocery.com>))—serving up a bounty of organic provisions.

Now, practically every chef in town, from fine-dining places to pizza joints, produces menus featuring ingredients that have been grown or bred regionally, and prominently displays lists of their suppliers. "I'd put the local produce up against anything you'd find on the East Coast," says executive chef James Harris of Staunton's award-winning Zynodoa Restaurant (115 E. Beverley St., 540-885-7775, [zynodoa.com](http://www.zynodoa.com) (<http://www.zynodoa.com>)), whose menu changes daily to reflect the local harvest.

You know you are in a town that cares about food when you check into The Miller House (210 N. New St., 540-886-3186, [millerhousebandb.com](http://www.millerhousebandb.com) (<http://www.millerhousebandb.com>)), a stunningly restored Victorian B&B on a hill overlooking the town and across the street from historic Mary Baldwin College. Famous for its deluxe four-course breakfasts, afternoon teas, and culinary classes, the inn provides perfect accommodations for a foodie weekend. Its luxuriously appointed guest rooms (starting at \$155, includes breakfast) are adorned with period furnishings, private baths with stone walk-in showers, and Wi-Fi.

Before exploring the town, have lunch at Newtown Baking (960 W. Beverley St., 540-885-3799). Don't let the generic storefront dissuade you. These pastry wizards supply all-things bread to the town's top chefs and cafes. Order a sandwich, and then pick up pear Danish pastries for later. Outside, check out the mural, painted by renowned human-rights artist Claudia Bernardi, who collaborated with students at Mary Baldwin College.

Hop aboard Staunton's free trolley to tour the town; it takes about 30 minutes and riders can exit and reboard anywhere along the route. Staunton is comprised of five newly restored historical districts. Its quirky mix of at least nine periods (1790s-1920s) of Early American architecture owes its survival to the fact that the town escaped being burned during the Civil War (allegedly due to its revered collection of high-end brothels).

What also distinguishes Staunton from other history-laden Southern cities is its profusion of arts venues. Within the new Red Brick District in the center of the city are five world-class performance theaters, four museums, countless galleries, and live music locales.

What's more, Staunton's business community is fiercely dedicated to supporting its inherent sustainable and locotarian philosophy with lots of small markets that sell locally produced foodstuffs. George Bowers Grocery (614 W. Beverley St., 540-255-6811, [georgebowersgrocery.com](http://www.georgebowersgrocery.com) (<http://www.georgebowersgrocery.com>)) is a resurrected (circa 1881) "staple goods & fancy groceries" shop. The owner Brian Wiedemann has launched an Android mobile app that tracks Staunton's food, farm, and restaurant news.

Cranberry's Grocery & Eatery (7 S. New St., 540-885-4755, [gocranberrys.com](http://www.gocranberrys.com) (<http://www.gocranberrys.com>)) is a health-food market that stocks its shelves with "Made In Virginia" provisions. Pick up peanut soup by Montebello Kitchen and regionally famous Hooper's pasta sauce, whose owner, Paul Hooper, personally cooks, bottles, and labels everything he sells. There is even a selection of locally produced holistic pet food.

Nearby is Shenandoah Hops (9 N. New St., 540-213-2213, [shenandoahhops.com](http://www.shenandoahhops.com) (<http://www.shenandoahhops.com>)), owned by slow-food devotee John Huggins. Hops sells craft beers and ciders from Virginia boutique distillers. There is also a respectable supply of local artisan foods, including handmade chocolate by Staunton-based pastry chef Giancarlo Gnali.

With a population of nearly 24,000, the town has long subsisted on "cultural manufacturing" by specialty craftsmen who have launched businesses producing handcrafted goods. The town established the Creative Community Fund, providing low-interest, start-up loans and business-support services to its entrepreneurs. Scattered among the restaurants and markets, you will see independent boutiques, hobby shops, and galleries filled with local art and handcrafted furniture, guitars, clocks, jewelry, and glassware. Sunspots (202 S. Lewis St., 540-885-0678, [sunspots.com](http://www.sunspots.com) (<http://www.sunspots.com>)) is a glass-blowing studio and gift shop filled with original hand-blown glass and works by local crafters. Just beyond the studio is The Wharf District, a restored train depot, housing restaurants and shops like Rachel's Quilt Patch (40 Middlebrook Ave., 540-886-7728, [rachelsquiltpatch.com](http://www.rachelsquiltpatch.com) (<http://www.rachelsquiltpatch.com>)), which inspired a local resurgence of quilting, especially among the hipsters. If you have time, check out the birthplace and presidential library of Woodrow Wilson (18 N. Coalter St., 540-885-0897, [woodrowwilson.org](http://www.woodrowwilson.org) (<http://www.woodrowwilson.org>)). Don't miss seeing the dazzling collection of 18th- and 19th-century stained-glass windows at Trinity Church (214 W. Beverley St., 540-886-9132, [trinitystaunton.org](http://www.trinitystaunton.org) (<http://www.trinitystaunton.org>)), including 12 original Tiffany windows.

Plan an early dinner at Staunton Grocery, where you'll have a clear view of the kitchen. The foie-gras burger is a crowd-pleasing entree, as is the farro fettuccine with short-rib bolognese. You must finish with the cheese plate, featuring Caromount Farm's "ash" blue.

After dinner, step around the corner to Blackfriars Playhouse, home to the American Shakespeare Center (10 S. Market St., 540-885-5588, [americanshakespearecenter.com](http://www.americanshakespearecenter.com) (<http://www.americanshakespearecenter.com>)), a recreation of Shakespeare's original indoor theater. Get a ticket for one of the 12 "Lord's Chairs" directly on stage, where the actors will likely integrate you into their dialogue. True to the original productions, performers play multiple characters—often switching gender, inciting roars of laughter from the audience and the other actors onstage.

After the show, stroll around downtown to catch some of the "buskers"—actors, musicians, and dancers—performing on the street corners on Friday evenings.

Breakfast on Saturday morning is a beautiful affair in The Miller House's candlelit dining room. Innkeeper Ray Cabbage's first course is often a puff-pastry-encrusted chocolate soup. It's easy to convince yourself of its nutritional benefits when Cabbage reveals he creates the filling from a butternut-squash base. The next courses might include fresh fruit, an egg casserole, and handmade scones. On the way out, ask for some bagged ice for your cooler. (You'll want one to safely store the items you'll be picking up during the day.)

Saturday is a great day for foraging. While many of the region's food purveyors sell solely to restaurants and markets, you can purchase their wares at the Staunton/Augusta Farmers' Market (Wharf Parking Lot, 540-448-1937, [safarmersmarket.com](http://www.safarmersmarket.com) (<http://www.safarmersmarket.com>)) from April through November. This "producers only" market requires that its vendors originate from within 50 miles. Here, you can score nibbles alongside Staunton's chefs, who come to procure the best of the pickings for their weekly menus.

Then head to Cranberry's and pick up a "Picnic in a Bag," which includes a full lunch and a picnic cloth for \$9.49 a person. After stowing it in your cooler, drive south to Wade's Mill (55 Kennedy, Raphine, 800-290-1400, [wadesmill.com](http://www.wadesmill.com) (<http://www.wadesmill.com>)). This is one of the country's few remaining mills producing flour exclusively on mill stones. The mill looks much like it did in 1882, when the Wade family purchased and operated it through four generations. Current owner and miller Jim Young will convivially take you through the grinding room in the renovated barn. After grinding, Young scoops the flour into bags set on old-fashioned scales, then seals and labels each one by hand. Before departing, check out the mill store for the signature whole-grain yellow grits, Blue Ridge pesto beer bread, and buckwheat pancakes.

Just up the road is Rockbridge Vineyards (35 Hill View Ln., Raphine, 1-888-511-WINE, [rockbridgevineyard.com](http://www.rockbridgevineyard.com) (<http://www.rockbridgevineyard.com>)). Award-winning winemaker Shep Rouse, a native Virginian with an advanced degree in oenology, planted his grapes on this hilly, 18-acre former dairy farm. The winery is in a magnificent 100-year old barn, with a tasting room attached. The winery is open to the public and doesn't charge for tastings. Try as many as you wish but make sure you buy a few bottles of the white Riesling. The vineyard is a good place to spread out your picnic cloth and nibble your sandwiches along with some of your newly purchased wine.

Five minutes away is Mountain View Farm (85 Marmac Ln., Fairfield, 540-460-4161, [mountainviewfarmproducts.com](http://www.mountainviewfarmproducts.com) (<http://www.mountainviewfarmproducts.com>)), a dairy farm that hand-produces cheeses made of raw milk. You can observe the cheese-making processes for pasteurizing, drying and cutting, molding, and waxing. There are a variety of cheeses for sale as well as tubs of freshly churned butter.

Enjoy a 40-minute ride that includes twists and turns dotted with giant red barns and rolling pastures to the gravelly Shuey Road, just a mile from the entrance of Polyface farm (Pure Meadows Ln., Swoope, 540-885-3590, [polyfacefarms.com](http://www.polyfacefarms.com) (<http://www.polyfacefarms.com>)). Polyface is considered a benchmark for sustainable farming among organic farmers in the U.S.

The farm offers "lunatic" guided tours via hayride (\$15 a person, ages 13 and older; children 12 and younger, free, must be accompanied by an adult) by owner Joel Salatin (of Omnivore's Dilemma fame) or his son Daniel that showcase the family's commitment to Earth and animal friendly practices. Learn about rotational grass grazing, the humane handling of animals, and local-minded processing. After the tour, you can buy grass-fed steaks, broilers (chicken), eggs, sausages, and pork from the farm's market.

Back in downtown Staunton, consider Zynodoa for dinner. Chef Harris was lured away from the five-star Inn at Little Washington to work here. He admits he was attracted to "the availability of myriad freshly procured resources." The inventive menu at this swanky, creative Southern-fare bistro changes often. But one constant is the house-made chive biscuits with fresh honey butter. Look for seared trout salad or cornmeal-encrusted fried oysters on the menu, and order a side of chef's garden risotto. And don't miss anything made with Polyface chicken—like the delicious cassoulet.

After dinner, wander down the block to Mockingbird Roots Music Hall (123 W. Beverley St., 540-213-8777, [mockingbird123.com](http://www.mockingbird123.com) (<http://www.mockingbird123.com>)) to experience another outstanding facet of Staunton—its growing live music scene. This intimate "listening room" charges modest prices for tickets to an eclectic mélange of gifted "roots" musicians from around the region and the nation, performing original vintage folk, blues, and Appalachian mountain music.

Staunton's music community—which spawned the legendary Statler Brothers—has grown so much that town officials launched the Staunton Music Guild as a resource for artists and venues. Most nights, downtown cafes and restaurants transform into after-hours live music clubs. In August, the Staunton Music Festival, a weeklong international event, features performances by world-renowned classical musicians. In September, country music superstars Jimmy Fortune and Robin and Linda Williams host the Fortune Williams Music Festival. And during the summer months, free concerts are held nearly every night in Gypsy Hill Park.

On Sunday morning, consider skipping breakfast at the inn for the farmers brunch at Mockingbird (123 W. Beverley St., 540-213-8777, [mockingbird123.com](http://www.mockingbird123.com) (<http://www.mockingbird123.com>)). Restaurateur Wade Luhn, who also owns Roots Music Hall, offers "comfort cooking" fare with ingredients from local producers. Dishes can include an oyster-and-mushroom omelet, Edward's country ham, and Mountain View Swiss cheese. The restaurant features the handicraft of local artisans, incorporating reclaimed regional woods, soapstone, copper, and hand-blown glass by Sunspots.

On your way out of town, stop by the Frontier Culture Museum (1290 Richmond Ave., 540-332-7850, [frontiermuseum.org](http://www.frontiermuseum.org) (<http://www.frontiermuseum.org>)), which recreates the settlement colonies of America's first immigrants. Visitors explore English, German, Irish, and West African "villages," observing participants preparing meals, shearing sheep, and forging metal in period attire.

And before leaving the area, visit the circa-1950s Wright's Dairy-Rite (346 Greenville Ave., 540-886-0435, [dairy-rite.com](http://www.dairy-rite.com) (<http://www.dairy-rite.com>)), a drive-in diner where the Statler Brothers used to hang out. Order one of the famous malted milkshakes from the comfort of your car. Then, savor it all the way home.

***Getting There:*** Staunton is about a 3 1/2 hour drive from Baltimore. Take exit 222 west off Interstate 81 and follow the signs to downtown. For more information, go to [lovethecalvibe.com](http://www.lovethecalvibe.com) (<http://www.lovethecalvibe.com>).

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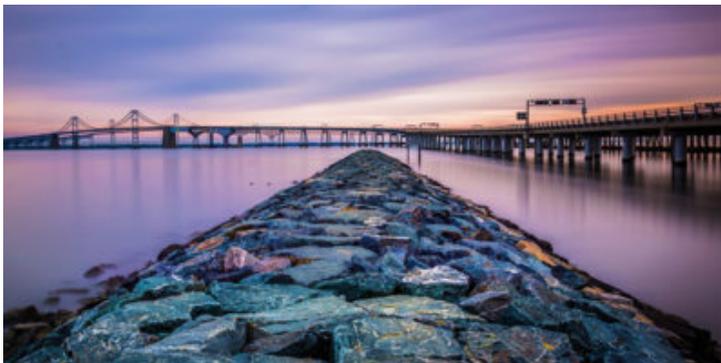
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