



Holiday Belle

Savannah's charms extend beyond its beautiful façade

/by M. Linda Lee

Siren Song:
Mouthwatering delights amidst a genteel urban oasis have proven irresistible for decades of Savannah visitors; (top-left) a.lure, a popular spot, offers a modern take on Southern favorites; (top-right) the Forsyth fountain is a prominent fixture of Forsyth Park

Call Savannah a steel magnolia: genteel and eccentric, set in her Southern ways yet forward-thinking. Just don't call her late for dinner, for Savannah has been a bastion of Southern cuisine for decades. Witness the lines that form on the sidewalk for the down-home buffet at Paula Deen's restaurant The Lady and Sons. Ditto for Mrs. Wilkes' Dining Room, where, despite the no-reservations and no-menu policies, folks are willing to wait for seats at communal tables to heap their plates with fried chicken, macaroni and cheese, collards, and black-eyed peas.

While The Olde Pink House and Elizabeth on 37th still rank among the city's dining dowagers, Savannah's food scene has evolved at the hands of a new group of chefs. Christopher DiNello at the New Orleans-inspired restaurant Alligator Soul skillfully layers flavors in a starter of thinly sliced smoked scallops, served cold with house-made remoulade and acorn-squash hush puppies.

Locals voted a.lure Savannah's best new restaurant, based on Chef Charles Zeran's contemporary spins on traditional dishes like Low Country Boil and chicken and waffles. Close runner-up Sage specializes in Mediterranean fare. At tiny Papillote, diners vie for the handful of indoor tables on Sunday, when a creamy mushroom and bacon crêpe and a *croque madame* number among the mouthwatering, Gallic brunch dishes.

While Savannah's food scene is a relatively modern development, this quintessential Southern city has long been hailed for its beauty. In 1733, British general James Edward Oglethorpe landed on Yamacraw Bluff above the Savannah River and deemed the strategic spot an ideal setting for the capital of the Georgia colony, named in honor of King George II. When Oglethorpe platted Savannah's grid of broad avenues, punctuated by 24 grassy squares, little did he dream that more than 275 years later, visitors to the city would still be appreciating his vision. Thanks to Oglethorpe, Savannah claims bragging rights to being the nation's first planned city.



Flash Back:

Savannah's historic architecture, oak-lined parks, and sublime waterfront offer an entertaining backdrop for sampling the city's fine cuisine; (below-left) chocolates by Adam Turoni; a sundae at old-fashioned parlor Leopold's



The 2.5-square-mile Historic District is bisected by Bull Street, which begins in front of the gold-domed City Hall and runs south to 30-acre Forsyth Park, known for its two-tiered white fountain cast out of iron in 1858. In between lies an urban oasis comprising 21 squares (three have been lost to sprawl over the years). In the middle of each square stand monuments to significant figures in the city's history (Oglethorpe presides over Chippewa Square). Benches, set on paved paths adjoining green lawns, provide places to take in the live oaks dripping with silvery-green Spanish moss.

Strolling the Historic District and ogling the graceful ironwork and the stately Federal, Georgian, Italianate, Greek Revival, and Victorian homes is *de rigueur* on any visit to Savannah. And if you can spend a few days, tour some of the notable historic homes (the 1819 Owens-Thomas House; the Mercer-Williams House, star of the 1997 film *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil*; and the Andrew Low House, birthplace of Girl Scouts' founder Juliette Gordon Low, among them) that are open to the public. Otherwise, a trolley tour of the Historic District will take you past the highlights, including the stunning Gothic Revival St. John the Baptist Catholic Cathedral and the Telfair Art Museum, where the iconic *Bird Girl* statue resides on the second floor.

Modern visitors are not the only ones to be struck by Savannah's beauty. So impressed was General William Tecumseh Sherman by the city's comely mien, that he spared it the fate that other Southern cities along the route of his March to the Sea suffered at his hands during the Civil War. On December 22, 1864, Sherman telegraphed to President Lincoln: "I beg to present you as a Christmas gift the City of Savannah, with one hundred and fifty guns and plenty of ammunition, also about twenty-five thousand bales of cotton."

Today Sherman's gift unwraps itself to visitors any time of year, but the city is especially radiant at Christmastime. Over the holidays, Savannah dresses in its sparkling finest, with strings of white lights twinkling in the trees, and red bows and swaths of greenery festooning doorways and monuments in the squares. When you sing the carol "Jingle Bells," you're honoring its author James Pierpont, Jr., who penned the tune in Savannah in 1957 while he was an organist at the Unitarian Universalist Church.

Other holiday traditions include the Annual Boat Parade of Lights along the river and the Gingerbread Village, displayed at the Westin Savannah Harbor Golf Resort & Spa. Making its debut this year, the Savannah Harbor Festival of Lights will transform the Grand Prize Track on nearby Hutchinson Island into a glittering wonderland of themed light displays.

Over the holidays, venerable Leopold's ice-cream shop (212 E Broughton St) whips up seasonal flavors such as luscious pumpkin spice, fragrant cinnamon, and Sugar Plum Fairy, a crystalline-sprinkle-laced confection that echoes the performance of *The Nutcracker* at the theater next door. This shop, which opened in 1919, recalls a 1930s-era soda fountain, replete with its original black-marble bar and wooden telephone booth. Employees dress as latter-day soda jerks, in short-sleeved white shirts, aprons, and little white paper hats.

Places to shop abound in the Historic District, notably along Barnard and Broughton streets, and in the Downtown Design District on Whitaker Street. Who wouldn't love to receive a box of buttercream-filled French *macarons* from Papillote, or a bottle of artisanal Georgia Tupelo honey from the Savannah Bee Co.? Paris Market & Brocante offers vintage flea-market finds from France, while ShopSCAD, the gift shop of Savannah College of Art & Design, stocks cool jewelry, textiles, artwork, and photographs.

In City Market, do a taste test at Byrd's Cookies. Scottish oatmeal, their first flavor from 1924, and Key Lime Coolers both win raves. Souvenir seekers purchase saltwater taffy and pralines on River Street at Savannah Sweets, while serious chocoholics head for the new shop of chocolatier Adam Turoni (323 Broughton St).

Savannah is a delicious destination, to be sure, but whether you come to savor Southern cuisine, admire the architecture, or celebrate the holidays in the Historic District, the Hostess City always lays out a warm welcome. 



Photographs (homes) courtesy of Savannah CVB; (boats) courtesy of Parade of Lights; (chocolate) courtesy of Adam Turoni; (sundae) courtesy of Leopold's

EAT

Alligator Soul

Service is as good as the contemporary Southern cuisine at this underground spot. **114 Barnard St. (912) 232-7899, alligatorsoul.com**

a.lure

Fresh, local seafood and farm-fresh ingredients net attention here. **309 W Congress St. (912) 233-2111, aluresavannah.com**

B. Matthews

A veggie scramble and a homemade biscuit make a great way to start the day in a 1789 tavern. **325 E Bay St. (912) 233-1319, bmatthewseatery.com**

Papillote

French fare for breakfast and lunch, plus magnifique *macarons* in flavors like lemon pistachio and chocolate orange peel. **218 W Broughton St. (912) 232-1881, papillote-savannah.com**

STAY

Andaz

Hyatt's boutique hotel sports a sleek, contemporary design and a fabulous location convenient to River Street, the City Market, and all of the attractions of the Historic District. **14 Barnard St. (912) 233-2116, savannah.andaz.hyatt.com**

The Gastonian

Among Savannah's many historic B&Bs, The Gastonian ranks high on the luxury scale. **220 E Gaston St. (912) 232-2869, gastonian.com**

SHOP

Paris Market & Brocante

Features an eclectic mix of home accessories from French wine jars to furniture. **36 W Broughton St. (912) 232-1500, theparismarket.com**

Savannah Bee Co.

Artisanal honeys, soaps, beeswax candles, and honey-filled chocolates fill the rustic shop. **104 W Broughton St. (912) 233-7873, savannahbee.com**

ShopSCAD

Savannah College of Art & Design runs this artsy gallery, where most of the one-of-a-kind items for sale are crafted by the school's students. **340 Bull St. (912) 525-5180, shopscad.com**

PLAY

Gingerbread Village

This annual gingerbread competition is open to all. *Thru Jan 2.* **Westin Savannah Harbor Golf Resort & Spa, 1 Resort Dr. (912) 201-1000, westinsavannah.com/events**

Old Town Trolley Tour

On-and-off privileges allow you to stop and visit sights during the narrated 1.5-hour tour of the Historic District. **Tours leave from corner of Bryan & Barnard sts. (888) 910-8687, trolleytours.com/savannah**

Savannah Harbor Festival of Lights

More than 50 dazzling displays. *Thru Jan 1.* **Grand Prize of America Track, Hutchinson Island. savannahharborfestivaloflights.com**



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