



DANIEL X. O'NEILL



Savannah

WHERE ON EARTH

SKIRTING FAME in Savannah

by CATHERINE VAN BRUNSCHOT

FIRST LESSON LEARNED FROM GEORGIA'S Savannah Taste Experience: it doesn't pay to be famous.

An explanation, possibly, for the name of this **Famous & Secret East Side Food Tour**? Or perhaps an oblique reference to that 1994 exposé of Savannah society, John Berendt's *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil*?

Neither, it seems. The anti-fame credo stems from Savannah's tendency to lose track of its historic celebrities, dedicating elegant city squares to their memory but burying them in squares named for others, and in some cases, misplacing remains altogether. "Don't ever die in Savannah," concludes our history maven, Charlotte, tongue firmly planted in cheek.

Such is the flavour of this food-tour-cum-historic walk — a perfect pairing in this town that has turned the heads of chefs and food enthusiasts, where atmosphere drips from the live oaks in a profusion equal to the Spanish moss. The Famous & Secret East Side Food Tour draws visitors to the quiet residential side of Savannah's Historic District to ferret out the locals' favourite eateries; "family businesses feeding Savannah families" is how Charlotte presents it. But in this three-hour passage through history and Southern bites, the fame-secrecy tension ever lurks.

We begin contrarily in the single tourist icon on this side of town: **The Pirates' House**, where a life-size wooden pirate leers over a shambling collection of country-homey dining rooms. But the historical cred here is indisputable. Dating to 1753 as the city's oldest remaining building, this former seafarer's inn boasts an early edition of *Treasure Island* that attests to its guest appearance in the Robert Louis Stevenson classic. The location has food cred as well, sited as it is on the former Trustee's Garden, where the peach tree may have made its Georgia debut. The fare here has firm southern roots: the signature Pecan Fried chicken arrives hot and crispy, served up by our hostess, Country, with a generous side of ribald humour delivered in a honeyed drawl.

It's a marked contrast to our next stop, **Wall's BBQ**, where tender, slow-smoked chopped pork is presented shyly on a humble white hamburger bun in a cardboard dish. You have to be in the know to even find this place, tucked as it is down a partially-paved back lane. But Savannahians have been flocking through the screen door of this family venture, now in its third generation, since 1963. True to its vintage, the decor leans heavily to faux-wood panelling and arborite. But don't overlook those plastic squeeze bottles on the tables, because the house sauce here — a spicy tomato melange cut through with the mustard that distinguishes it from its Memphis and Carolina brethren as authentic Georgia — is served on the side, Savannah-style.

Back beneath the sprawling oaks, Charlotte waxes eloquent on the Great Fire of 1820 as we wend past fine Federalist mansions and an antebellum fountain to the threshold of the **17Hundred90 Inn** — a cozy lodge and seafood restaurant restored from three separate residences constructed after said fire. We tread indiscriminately across the slate floor that dates to the year enshrined in the inn's name, to nibble salmon crostini in the brick-lined pub. A local haunt in every sense of the word, the inn is famous among ghost hunters for the fair phantom in Room 204 with a fondness for baubles and lingerie, as well as Thaddeus ("a bit more of a malevolent spirit", says Charlotte), known to throw pots in the kitchen. The very tangible bartender interrupts his chat with the locals to offer us a pour. We accept, embracing Savannah's 'go-cup' policy to sip a brew as we descend once more onto the shady streets.

We time-travel along Colonial Park Cemetery with its 150-year-old gravestone graffiti, past the Regency foundations and Art-Deco restoration of the Savannah Theatre, to the decidedly contemporary **FIRE Street Food**. Uber on-trend, with hits of tangerine and turquoise popping from its Modern decor, FIRE has students and business people jostling for position at the curvy order

Do

THE FAMOUS & SECRET EAST SIDE FOOD TOUR is created and operated by *Savannah Taste Experience*, founded in 2012 by brothers Stu and Donald Card. Also on offer is the **FIRST SQUARES FOOD TOUR**, a history-and-tasting combo through the specialty shops and eateries lining Savannah's earliest streets. www.savannahtasteexperience.com

counter, where the menu pulls from the street traditions of SE Asia and Japan. Over skewers of shrimp drizzled with sweet chili sauce, we learn this humming hotspot is but one of the projects of Lao-born Chef Sean Thongsiri and his Vietnamese wife Ele Tran, who've built a local dynasty of au courant Asian-inspired restaurants in Savannah over the past decade and are now extending their fame to a new FIRE outpost in Charlotte, South Carolina.

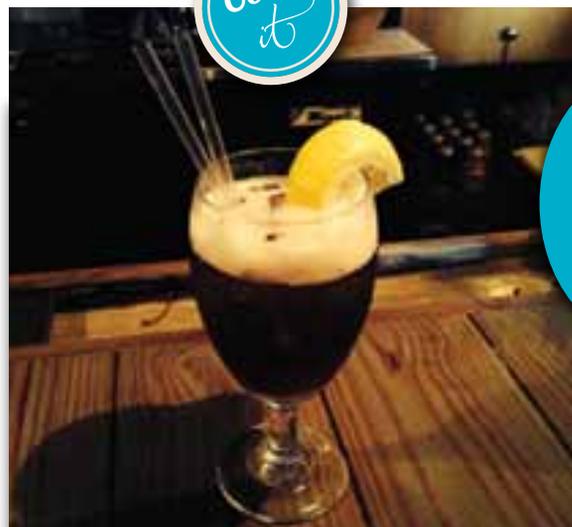
The multicultural influence continues at **Zunzi's Takeout**, where Europe meets South Africa in a variety of sandwiches and comfort foods, and 'hole-in-the-wall' assumes its purest form (i.e. staff and the service counter are wedged so tightly on the main floor that hot items must be ferried from the second floor ovens by dumb-waiter). The line-ups out the door have reportedly been here since day one, but entrenched permanently when Johnny and Gabriella's *Conquistador* sandwich earned a top-three spot on Travel Channel's *Best Sandwich in America*. Charlotte banishes us to nearby Oglethorpe Square while she squeezes past the queue for our sample of this prize-winner: a mountain of roast chicken on house-baked French bread, crowned with lettuce, tomato and — not one but two — secret sauces, which we try vainly to keep from dripping onto the grass.

Our tour concludes on River Street, the original economic heart of Savannah, now a potpourri of tourist shops and taverns converted from former cotton warehouses. We follow the taffy smells over the colossal cobblestones to stand amid barrels of penny-candy and cases of caramel apples and chocolate at **Savannah's Candy Kitchen**. Here, a staffer ladles pecan-studded puddles onto a marble countertop, allowing the shop's signature pralines to set briefly before proffering the still-warm samples to eager onlookers. Northern praline aficionados might expect a brittle confection, but this is pure South: a fudgy ode to brown sugar and butter, whose secret lies with evaporated milk and ...wait for it... marshmallow. With brisk on-line sales and a retail presence in three states, the Kitchen's owner — like the other entrepreneurs on this tour — flirts recklessly with fame.

If history holds true, they'd all best be making plans to die elsewhere. 

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Cook



SERVES 1

COUNTRY'S TEA

FROM COUNTRY, THE irrepressible bartender at The Pirates' House, comes this thirst-quencher with a kick.

Absolut Wild Tea
Vodka 1 ½ shots
Raspberry Schnapps ½ shot
Sour Mix 2 oz
Coca-Cola 2 oz

- 1 COMBINE** in a shaker with ice.
- 2 POUR** into an 8 oz glass and garnish with slice of lemon

Visit

Colonial Park Cemetery
www.savannahga.gov/index.aspx?NID=879

Savannah Theatre
www.savannahtheatre.com

Eat

The Pirates' House
www.ThePiratesHouse.com

Wall's BBQ
www.facebook.com/Wallsbbq

17Hundred90 Inn
www.17Hundred90.com

FIRE Street Food
www.FireStreetFood.com

Zunzi's Takeout
www.Zunzis.com

Savannah's Candy Kitchen
www.SavannahCandy.com