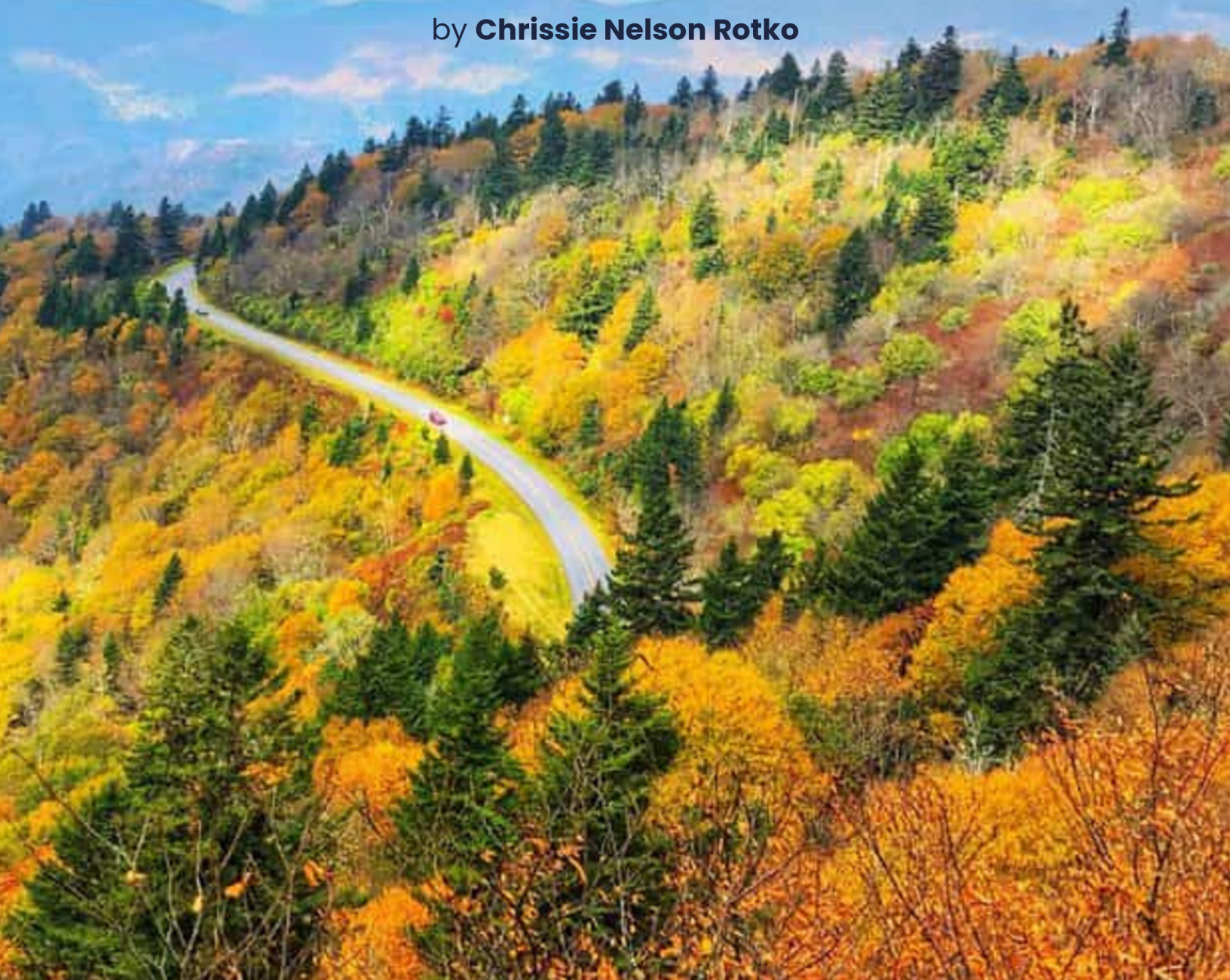


The Ultimate North Carolina Bucket List

151 Things You Must Eat, Drink, Do & See

by **Chrissie Nelson Rotko**





Welcome!

I'm so glad you're here. This North Carolina bucket list was created for curious eaters, weekend explorers and anyone who loves discovering what makes this state such a special place to eat, drink, see and experience.

I'm Chrissie, the voice behind Off the Eaten Path. I started this blog in 2013 after moving to Charlotte and realizing the fastest way to get to know a new city was through its food. What began as a fun side project quickly turned into a love affair with North Carolina – from the best bites and sips in Charlotte to family-friendly adventures, easy entertaining ideas and plenty of real-life stories along the way. By day, I'm a public defender. The rest of the time, I'm chasing two little kids, exploring the Carolinas and usually telling my husband, "Just one more quick picture."

I hope this guide inspires you to try something new, revisit old favorites and create a few unforgettable North Carolina memories along the way. Grab a snack, make a plan and let's get exploring.

Chrissie

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Anywhere in NC





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1

Try a North Carolina-made spirit.

Sample locally distilled bourbon, gin, rum or moonshine.

2

Visit a national park, national historic site or national seashore.

Explore the places that tell America's story with a Carolina accent.

3

Browse a farmers market.

Explore the bounty of North Carolina agriculture while meeting the farmers, bakers, and makers who grow and create it all.

4

Go to a music festival.

Catch live tunes under a Carolina blue sky, from bluegrass to indie and everything between.

5

Go camping.

Spend a night under the stars, whether in the mountains, along a river, or near the coast.

6

Try fried green tomatoes.

Bite into the crispy, tangy slices that are a Southern favorite.

7

Drink scuppernong wine.

Try North Carolina's famously sweet native wine (a true love-it-or-debate-it Southern classic).

8

Go antiquing.

Hunt for vintage treasures and stories you didn't know you needed.

9

Visit sites along the North Carolina Civil Rights Trail.

Follow powerful stories of protests, milestones, and community courage across a statewide trail honoring North Carolina's role in the fight for freedom.



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10

Go birdwatching.

Spot coastal, mountain and migratory birds along major flyways.

11

Boat on a lake.

Cruise across one of NC's many scenic lakes on a sunny afternoon.

12

Tour one of North Carolina's Historic Homes.

Step inside grand estates, governor's mansions, colonial palaces, and plantation homes that shaped the state's story.

13

Attend an Avett Brothers concert.

See Concord's own Avett Brothers live and join thousands of fans singing along to the band that went from hometown favorite to national fame.

14

Say cheers with Cheerwine.

Taste the cherry soda born in Salisbury and beloved statewide.

15

Take the train.

Skip the highway and watch North Carolina unfold the relaxed way, one small town and stretch of scenery at a time.

16

Go birdwatching.

Spot coastal, mountain and migratory birds along major flyways.

17

Drink a local beer.

Sip a craft brew that proves NC is one of the best beer states in the country.

18

Stay on a farm.

Trade city noise for fresh air with a farm stay that lets you either pitch in or simply relax.



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19

Eat fried chicken.

Crunch into perfectly golden, soul-satisfying Southern comfort.

20

Ride the Trolley Pub.

Pedal your way through a city tour that's equal parts sightseeing and social hour.

21

Shop local.

Support small businesses that give every NC town its personality.

22

Play a round of golf.

Play a round in the state that calls itself the Home of American Golf.

23

Order a craft cocktail.

Raise a glass to North Carolina distillers and creative bartenders.

24

Relax at a luxury spa.

Treat yourself to oceanfront pools, mountain views, or garden-inspired treatments at one of NC's indulgent spa retreats.

25

Attend a live sports game.

North Carolina is home to four professional sports teams: the Carolina Panthers (football), the Carolina Hurricanes (hockey), the Charlotte Hornets (basketball), and Charlotte FC (soccer). Cheer alongside passionate local fans, no matter the season.

26

Eat pimento cheese.

Spread this classic Southern staple on crackers or sandwiches.

27

Visit a university campus.

Walk a historic campus and soak in the academic traditions.



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28

Snack on cheese straws.

This classic Southern bite pairs perfectly with a porch sit.

29

Travel North Carolina's Freedom Roads.

Freedom Roads is a statewide trail system designed to highlight the the roads, rivers, and ports that played a crucial role in freedom-seeking journeys for enslaved people during slavery and the Civil War.

30

Go berry, peach or apple picking.

Fill a basket straight from the source at a local farm.



31

See a Broadway show.

Catch touring productions at NC's performing arts venues.

32

Stop at Krispy Kreme when the "hot" sign is on.

Eat a hot-now glazed doughnut while it's fresh. The magic started in Winston-Salem.



33

Visit a world-class art museum or art festival.

Spend an afternoon with everything from classic masterpieces to bold Southern creativity. The Mint Museum in Charlotte and the NC Museum of Art in Raleigh are both superb, but far from the only options. Art festivals are held year-round, too.

34

Take a pic with a mural.

Hunt down vibrant public art in cities across the state.

35

Eat at Bojangles.

Order biscuits, chicken and sweet tea like a true Carolinian.



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36

Visit botanical gardens.

Stroll through native blooms and peaceful landscapes that show off NC's natural beauty. Check out Daniel Stowe Conservancy near Charlotte, the North Carolina Arboretum in Asheville, Airlie Gardens in Wilmington and Duke Gardens in Durham.

37

Have a slice of sweet potato pie.

Taste the state vegetable baked into a spiced, silky slice of pie.

38

Attend a Native American powwow.

Celebrate living Indigenous culture through dance, music and community.

39

Go brewery hopping.

Make a day of trying the state's endlessly creative craft beer scene.

40

Sip a Sundrop.

Try this citrusy cult favorite that screams small-town Carolina.

41

Watch the sunset and sunrise.

Catch golden light for the quintessential NC moment.

42

Eat biscuits and gravy.

Order a cathead biscuit smothered in scratch-made gravy for peak Southern comfort.

43

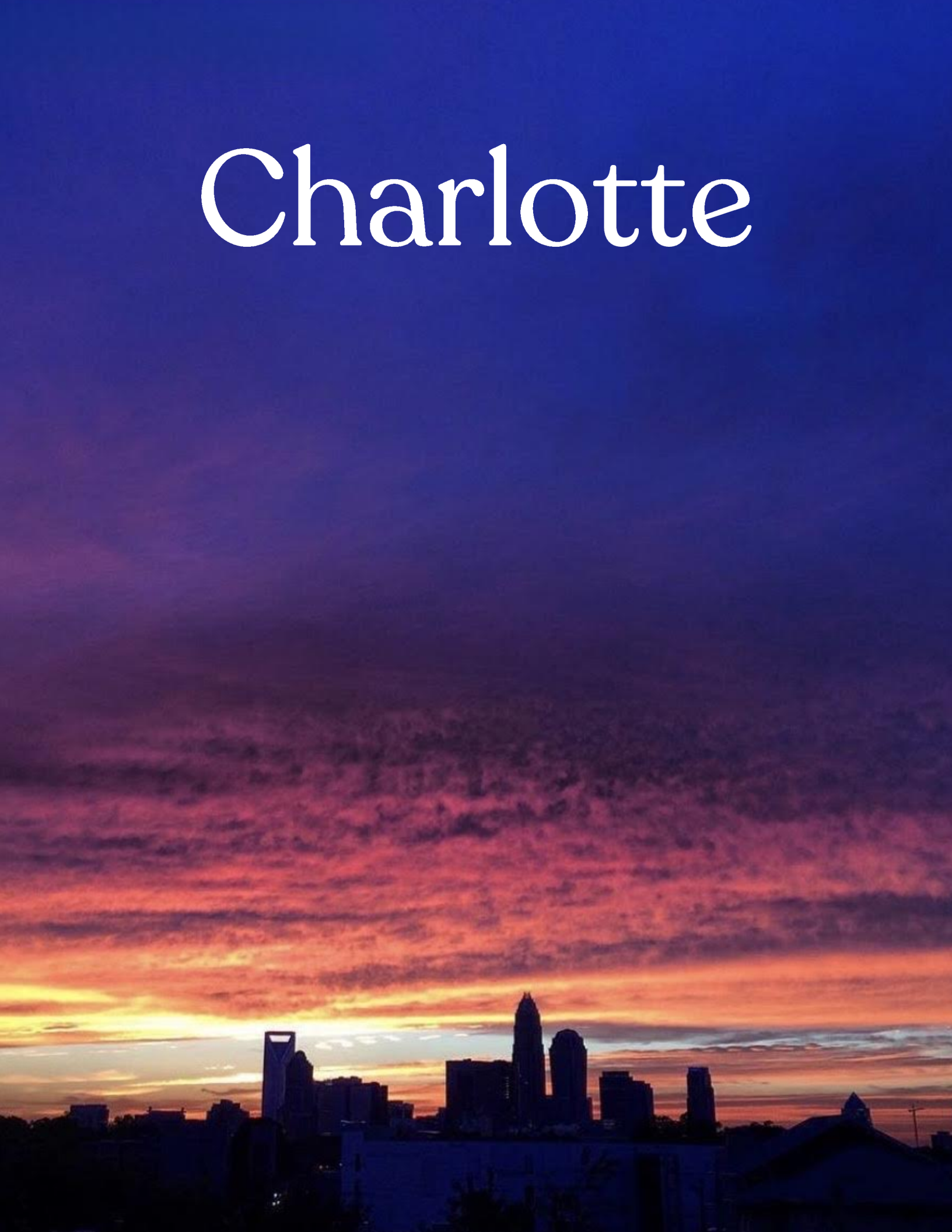
Eat at a restaurant by a James-Beard Recognized Chef.

Dine at a restaurant recognized by the culinary world's most prestigious awards. The 2026 finalists include:

- Chai Pani Restaurant Group (Asheville)
- Omakase Experience by Prime Fish (Charlotte)
- The Bull and Beggar (Asheville)
- Seabird (Wilmington)
- Peregrine (Raleigh)
- Herons (Cary)
- Ajja (Raleigh)
- Montgomery Sky Farm (Leicester)



Charlotte



Charlotte

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44

Spend a day at Carowinds.

Ride roller coasters that literally straddle the North and South Carolina border.

45

Ride the light rail.

Hop on Charlotte's Lynx and glide through neighborhoods, breweries, and skyline views without ever moving your car.

46

Take a Skillpop class.

This local startup offers a range of fun classes to take by yourself or with friends around town. Topics include sourdough breadmaking, phone photography and Mah Jongg — new classes drop every week.

47

Hike or bike on a Greenway.

Look for wildlife among the network of 80+ miles of green spaces all over Mecklenburg County.

48

Wander along the Rail Trail.

Check out the public art, cafes, breweries and shops along this vibrant, 4-mile paved urban trail connecting Dilworth and South End.

49

Go to the drive-in movie theater in Belmont.

Catch a film the old-fashioned way under the stars.

50

Visit the Raptor Center.

See majestic birds of prey up close and learn about their conservation.

51

Explore Camp North End.

Visit one of Charlotte's coolest hubs for food, art, and events.



Charlotte

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52

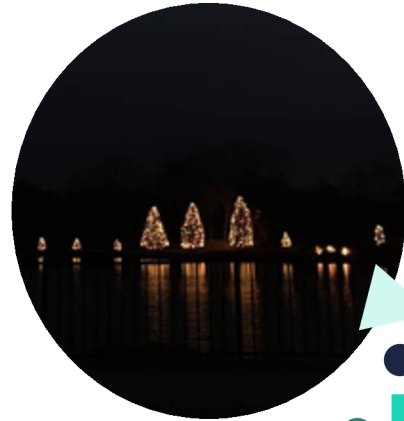
Shop Front Porch CLT.

Browse 100+ small businesses, makers, and bakers at this lively pop-up market in the FreeMoreWest neighborhood featuring live music, great local food, and beautiful community vibes.

53

See the McAdenville Christmas lights.

Walk through Christmas Town USA's glow-filled holiday magic.



54

Eat at a fish camp.

Eat fried seafood at a uniquely Carolinian, no-frills institution.

55

Visit the U.S. National Whitewater Center.

Choose your adventure: rafting, climbing, trails or live music.

56

Attend a NASCAR race.

Experience the fast-lane culture born right here in the Piedmont.

57

Explore VTG CLT.

Browse this vintage market packed with retro finds and local flavor.

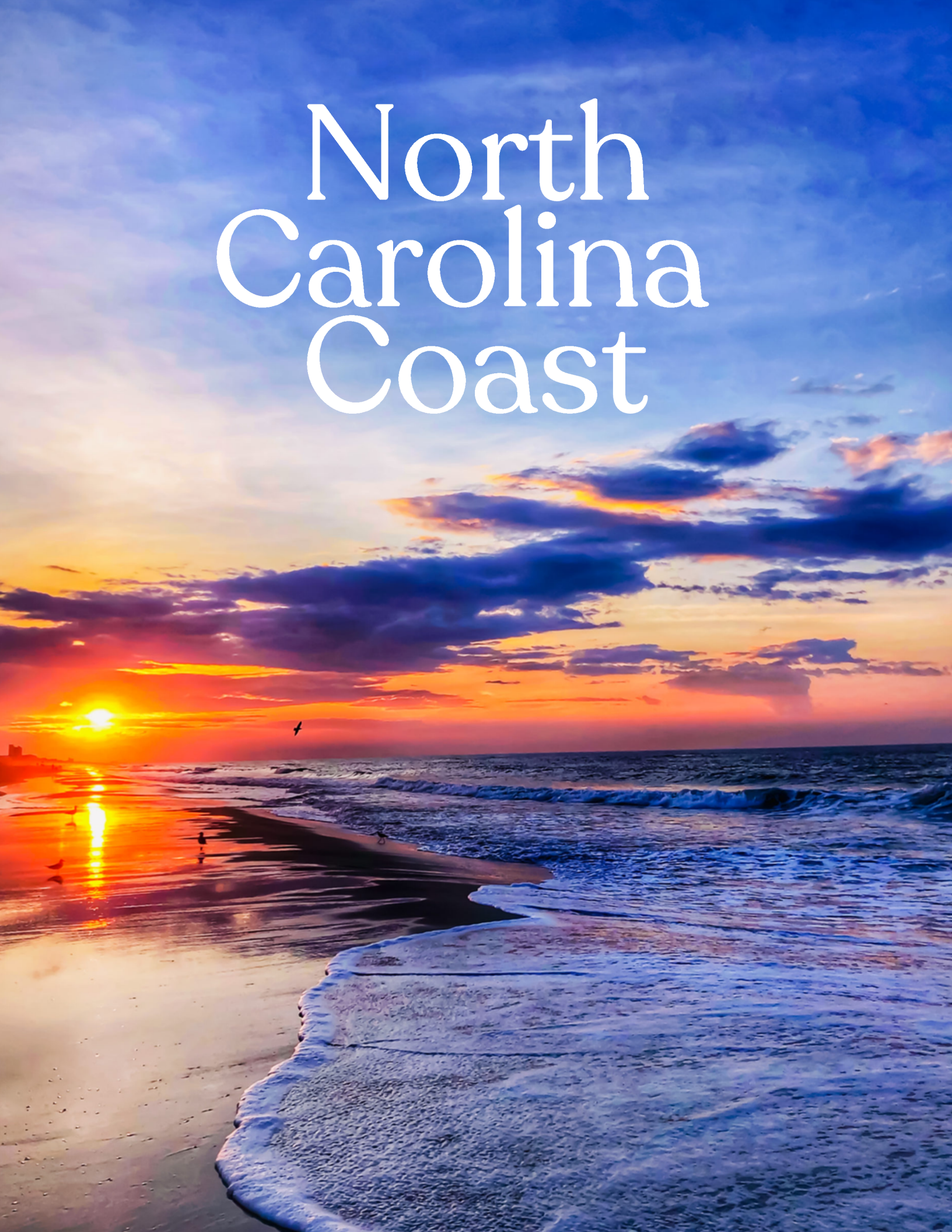
58

Grab a drink at the Thirsty Beaver Saloon.

Enjoy a beer or mixed drink at this quirky, honky tonk-inspired dive bar with a jukebox — a piece of history that withstood the scourge of gentrification.



North Carolina Coast





Coast

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59

Walk on a boardwalk.

Stroll, snack and people-watch by the ocean.

60

Try Eastern North Carolina barbecue.

Try whole-hog, vinegar-forward barbecue—the purist’s NC tradition.

61

Eat Calabash-style seafood.

Try the lightly fried style that made this fishing town famous.

62

Watch Venus Flytraps eat dinner.

Native to only one place on the planet (bogs within a 75-mile radius of Wilmington, NC), watching Venus flytraps devour their prey will give you chills.

63

Visit Dawson’s Creek filming locations in Wilmington.

Channel your inner ‘90s nostalgia at filming locations.

64

Snack on boiled peanuts.

Snack on this salty roadside classic.

65

Explore the African American Music Trail.

Discover the deep roots of funk, blues, jazz, and gospel woven through Eastern North Carolina.

66

Eat a bowl of grits.

Enjoy a bowl of the South’s most comforting staple.

67

Climb Jockey’s Ridge.

Climb the tallest natural sand dune on the East Coast.





Coast

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68

Eat a slice of Atlantic Beach Pie.

Don't sleep on this lemon-lime pie with saltine crust.

69

Tour the Battleship North Carolina.

Tour a Navy ship and honor those who served in World War II.

70

Take a ferry.

Let the journey across coastal waters be part of the destination.

71

Eat local caviar.

Sample locally farmed Russian sturgeon caviar at Marshallberg Farm, the largest producer of sustainable Russian sturgeon caviar in the country.

72

Drive the Outer Banks Scenic Byway.

Take a long, lingering journey along this 138-mile National Scenic Byway that takes you across pavement and water through 21 coastal villages, sand landscapes and two ferry crossings from Cedar Island to Hatteras.

73

Slurp oysters on the half shell.

Slurp your way along the NC Oyster Trail from dock to plate.

74

Drink a Pepsi. Sip the soda first created in New Bern.

75

Visit a maritime museum.

Dive into shipwrecks, pirates, and coastal lore.

77

Visit an aquarium.

Meet sea turtles, sharks and coastal ecosystems up close.

78

Stop at a Brew Thru in the Outer Banks.

Experience the Outer Banks' most convenient drive-through tradition.



Coast

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79

Swim in the Atlantic Ocean.

Wade into the salty waves along North Carolina's coastline.

80

Climb a lighthouse.

Take the stairs for sweeping views worth every step.

81

Visit the Wright Brothers National Memorial.

Stand where aviation history literally took off. (Don't even think about claiming first in flight, Ohio).

82

See the wild horses.

Spot the legendary Corolla and Shackleford Banks horses roaming free along the shore.

83

Sit under a longleaf pine.

Pause beneath one of NC's most iconic native trees.

84

Build a sandcastle.

Get sandy on barrier-island beaches made for family fun. Collect a few seashells to take home, too.

85

Stroll the Wilmington Riverwalk.

Wander this scenic waterfront lined with shops and history.

86

Visit Bath, North Carolina's oldest town.

Wander NC's oldest town filled with colonial charm.



North Carolina Piedmont*

*Pronounced PEED-mont. Translates to "foot of the mountains."
It is the area between the mountains and the coast.



Piedmont

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87

Attend the Cheerwine Festival.

Celebrate the state's favorite soda in its hometown.

88

Play Putt Putt.

Tee off at the mini golf game invented in North Carolina, where the first Putt-Putt course opened in Fayetteville in 1954.

89

Attend the Livermush Festival in Shelby.

Embrace this uniquely Carolinian delicacy with live music and small-town fun.

90

Say hello to towering prehistoric giants.

Visit the North Carolina Museum of Natural Science's incredible dinosaur exhibits.

91

Savor the Moravian Cookie Trail.

Taste wafer-thin cookies in traditional flavors like ginger and lemon in Winston-Salem. A tube of cookies makes a great souvenir! Moravian sugar cake is a buttery, spiced and caramelized Old Salem specialty that is worth trying, too.

92

Witness history at the Halifax State Historic Site.

Visit the birthplace of the Halifax Resolves, an early call for independence.

93

Attend First Friday in Raleigh.

Experience downtown's monthly celebration of art and culture.

94

Be one with wildlife at the North Carolina Zoo.

Explore the world's largest natural habitat zoo in Asheboro.

95

Eat Howling Cow ice cream.

Enjoy NC State's campus-made ice cream straight from the source.



Piedmont

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96

Visit the Duke Lemur Center in Durham.

Visit one of the world's most important primate conservation centers.

97

Shop Seagrove pottery.

Discover handmade ceramics from one of America's pottery capitals.

98

Snap a pic with the World's Largest Chest of Drawers in High Point.

The iconic oversized dresser that celebrates the city's furniture legacy.

99

Try sonker.

A deep-dish Surry County dessert topped with sweet cream "dip."

100

Visit Old Salem.

Step into Moravian life in this beautifully preserved historic town.

101

Go furniture shopping.

High Point, North Carolina is the "Home Furnishings Capital of the World." World-class furniture showrooms in both High Point and Hickory and design heritage make these cities synonymous with style.

102

See the Big Chair in Thomasville.

Snap a photo with this delightfully quirky roadside icon in the furniture capital of the world.

103

Go to the North Carolina State Fair.

Embrace deep-fried everything and classic fair nostalgia.

104

Make a scientific discovery.

Push the realms of science at Charlotte's Discovery Place or Raleigh's Marbles Kids' Museum.

105

Experience the heated rivalry of a Duke vs. Carolina game.

Witness one of college basketball's fiercest rivalries live in either Durham or Chapel Hill.



Piedmont

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106

Drink from the Old Well at UNC–Chapel Hill.

Take a sip — this is a UNC tradition said to bring good luck.

107

Visit the Sculpture Garden in Raleigh.

Wander artfully curated outdoor installations.

108

Climb aboard trains at the NC Transportation Museum in Spencer.

Learn how transportation helped shape North Carolina.

109

Jazz dance at the John Coltrane Festival in High Point.

Honor legend John Coltrane in his hometown on Labor Day weekend.

110

Tour the North Carolina State Capitol in Raleigh.

Walk the halls of North Carolina's historic government seat.

111

Run the Krispy Kreme Challenge.

Run, eat a dozen doughnuts, question your decisions, repeat.

112

Visit the Whirligig Park in Wilson.

See artist Vollis Simpson's unique, whimsical kinetic sculptures .

113

Taste Texas Pete.

Taste the iconic hot sauce born in Winston–Salem (not its namesake, Texas) that's been adding Carolina heat since 1929.

114

Visit the International Civil Rights Center and Museum.

Stand where history changed at the Woolworth sit-ins in Greensboro.

115

Watch hot air balloons at Carolina BalloonFest in Statesville.

See dozens of colorful balloons rise over the fall landscape.

116

Make a reservation at a Michelin-recognized restaurant.

Treat yourself to a nationally celebrated dining experience.



North Carolina Mountains



Mountains

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117

Spot a white squirrel.

The legend goes that a carnival truck in Florida overturned in the 1940s, freeing a pair of white squirrels, which were eventually "gifted" to a man in Brevard. Whatever the true origin, the white squirrels multiplied and took up permanent residence in the area.

118

Visit the Biltmore Estate.

Tour America's largest home and its stunning grounds.

119

Celebrate feline history at the American Museum of the House Cat.

Featuring feline history and quirky cat art, this one-of-a-kind museum in Sylva supports a no-kill shelter.

120

Visit Tryon, Nina Simone's hometown.

Visit the hometown of the legendary musician and activist whose voice transcended genres and generations.

121

Take a class at the John C. Campbell Folk School.

Learn a hands-on craft like blacksmithing, woodworking, or chocolate making in a creative mountain setting.

122

Experience a waterfall.

Chase one of the hundreds hidden across the state.

123

Explore a gem mine or Reed Gold Mine.

Try your luck where America's first gold rush began.

124

Experience the Blue Ridge Music Hall of Fame.

Explore the sounds of the region and pay tribute to legendary mountain musicians.

125

Visit Chimney Rock.

Climb to one of NC's most iconic viewpoints.



Mountains

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126

Attend the Loch Norman Highland Games.

Celebrate Scottish heritage with kilts, music, and strength competitions.

127

Attend the Woolly Worm Festival.

Join the quirky mountain tradition where a striped caterpillar becomes the state's most unexpected weather forecaster.

128

Have a scoop on the Hendersonville Ice Cream Trail.

Follow this sweet mountain trail of sundaes and frozen treats.

129

Hit the slopes.

Go skiing or snowboarding on peaks with stunning views.

130

Try Western North Carolina barbecue.

Taste smoky, shoulder-based barbecue with its signature red slaw in Lexington—proudly known as the Barbecue Capital of the World.

131

Cut down a Christmas tree.

Start a holiday tradition at a mountain tree farm.

132

Paddle through crisp mountain rapids.

Go whitewater rafting on the Nantahala River.

133

Watch fireflies in the Smokies.

Witness the magical synchronized light show each summer.

134

Bathe in hot springs.

Relax in natural mineral waters tucked beside the French Broad River in the mountains.

135

Visit the Land of Oz.

Follow the yellow brick road at this once-a-year magical event.





Mountains

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- 136 Traverse the River Arts District.**
Spend a day gallery-hopping, brewery-stopping, and soaking in public art across Asheville's vibrant arts hub.
- 137 Drive the Blue Ridge Parkway.**
Cruise all or part of America's most visited national park, a 469-mile stretch from Great Smoky Mountains National Park in North Carolina to Shenandoah National Park in Virginia, known as "America's Favorite Drive" for its sweeping mountain views, overlooks, and endless opportunities to stop and explore.
- 138 Visit Mount Airy and explore Mayberry.**
Step into the real-life inspiration for The Andy Griffith Show.
- 139 Cross the Mile High Swinging Bridge at Grandfather Mountain.**
Cross a mile-high bridge with unforgettable views.
- 140 Score big in pinball.**
Asheville's Pinball Museum features 75+ playable pinball machines.
- 141 Eat samples on the Western NC Cheese Trail.**
Meet cheese makers and sample artisan goods on mountain farms.
- 142 Stay at the Grove Park Inn.**
Sip a drink with one of the best mountain views around, enjoy the spa and stay a while.
- 143 Go spelunking in the Linville Caverns.**
Explore underground geology.
- 144 Ride the Polar Express.**
Near Bryson City, the Great Smoky Mountain Railroad offers a variety of scenic adventures through the wilderness. In winter, it transforms into the magical Polar Express for an hour-and-a-half journey to visit Santa at the North Pole.



Mountains

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145

Ride the Tweetsie Railroad.

Ride a Wild West train adventure perfect for families.

146

Visit the Oconaluftee Indian Village.

Experience 1760s Cherokee life through living history, cultural demonstrations, and nearby visits to the Museum of the Cherokee People.

147

Watch for the Quilt Trails.

Follow colorful quilt squares displayed on barns and buildings throughout mountain towns.

148

Try a sip of moonshine.

North Carolina has a deep, historic connection to moonshine, often cited as its birthplace of production due to its Appalachian, mountain, and swamp terrain. Today, this tradition thrives through legal, award-winning distilleries.

149

Dance at Merlefest.

Celebrate Appalachian “traditional plus” music at one of the country’s most beloved roots festivals in Wilkesboro.

150

Try your luck at gambling.

North Carolina has just three casinos run by two Native American tribes: Harrah’s Cherokee Casino Resort in Cherokee, Harrah’s Cherokee Valley River Casino & Hotel in Murphy and Catawba Two Kings Casino in Kings Mountain.

151

Taste North Carolina wine.

Taste your way through the Yadkin Valley and beyond.





Meet Chrissie

Chrissie Nelson Rotko is the writer and photographer behind Off the Eaten Path, a popular food, travel, and entertaining blog she founded in 2013 as a creative outlet to combine her love of food, storytelling, and exploring new places.

What started as a way to document Charlotte's restaurant scene has grown into a resource for recipes, family travel inspiration, and easy entertaining ideas that help readers create meaningful moments around food and adventure.

Chrissie is also the author of the cookbook *Stunning Spreads*, which celebrates simple, beautiful ways to gather people around the table. Her work has been featured in both national and regional publications, including *Oprah Daily*, *Zagat* and *Axios*, and she has appeared on local television and taught classes on blogging and social media.

In addition to running Off the Eaten Path, Chrissie works full-time as an Assistant Public Defender in Charlotte, North Carolina. She graduated from Lawrence University and the University of Wisconsin Law School before moving to the Queen City, where she now lives with her husband AJ, their two kids, and a lively crew of rescue pets.

When she's not writing, cooking, or photographing recipes, Chrissie can usually be found exploring North Carolina, trying new restaurants, planning the next family road trip, or dreaming about her next beach getaway



