

HOW FAR WOULD YOU *Drive To Dine?*

POINTS NORTH UNCOVERS
TWO OF THE SOUTH'S MOST
UNFORGETTABLE MEALS

[WRITTEN BY KATIE KELLY BELL]

How far would you drive for a meal? It's certainly a fair question when one considers what's on the menu around the Southeast. There are more than a few destinations within a day's drive of Atlanta that are serving up what we like to call a "DWD," a Dinner Worth the Drive. Would the lure of a five-course tasting menu with paired wines tempt you? How about pristine seafood caught moments before arriving on your plate or dishes such as wild duck with a sage jus, black bass with a kumquat truffle salad?

We hit the road in search of two drive-worthy meals with a few parameters in mind: the destination had to be reachable in five hours or less, the restaurant must have a tasting menu and nearby accommodations were a must (all the better to enjoy the wine). Enter Woodlands Inn near Charleston, S.C. and Town House in Chilhowie, Virginia.



Traditional Pampering with Refined Cuisine

Woodlands Inn has the distinction of being one of the South's only five-star destinations for both accommodations and cuisine. Add to that the 2011 *Travel and Leisure*'s award as the World's Best Hotel Value and you've got a gem of a deal. The inn is tucked into a quiet neighborhood in Summerville, just outside of Charleston. A mere 18 rooms make every visit feel like an intimate experience.

The crescent-shaped dining room boasts walls of windows overlooking the property, while plush heavenly seats and botanically themed fabrics, ironwork and crystal chandeliers set the tone for an exquisite evening. Tables are discreetly arranged and service is utterly five star — whatever you wish is yours with a smile. The menu offers a la carte offerings each night but the best bang for your buck and the true culinary artistry is enjoyed with the tasting menu. Each evening offers six courses with paired wines. Menus are altered daily to accommodate seasonality and freshness, but during our visit we swooned over the Perigord Black Truffle Tasting Menu. The black truffle is far less pungent than the white truffle and lends itself to a unique subtlety and works beautifully in the ravioli with liquid black truffle center and *mirepoix consommé* or *velouté* (a stuffed puff pastry) with artichoke and truffle. An evening highlight is the black truffle risotto with its lascivious mouthfeel; it calls to mind silk sheets.

Expertly paced service and the serene knowledge

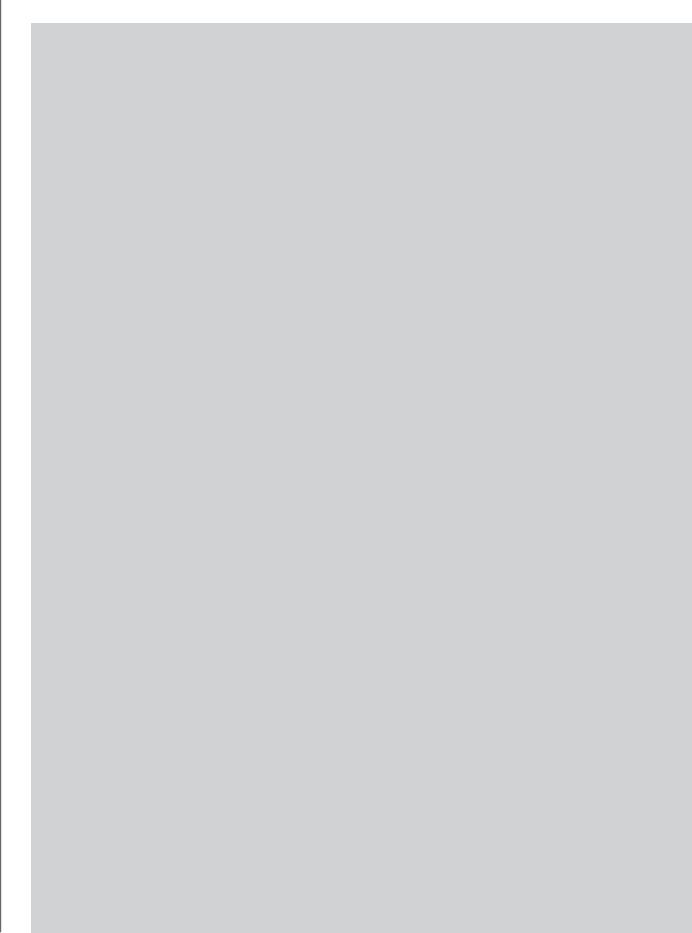
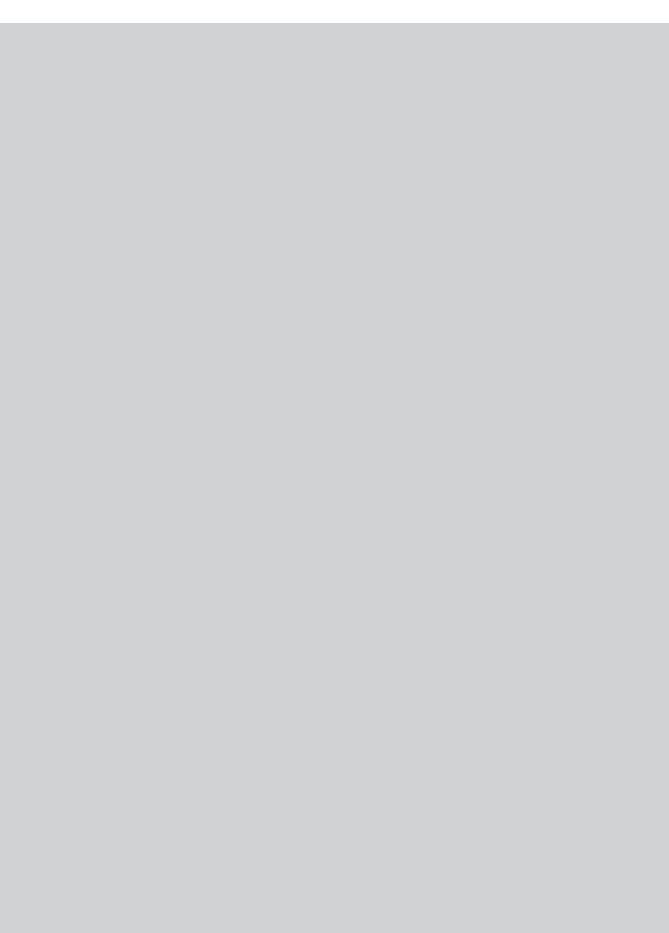


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that my fluffy downy pillows were being primped for me upstairs kept me going. From the a la carte menu, you'll find renditions of grilled octopus, lamb and beef. Especially noteworthy is a squab with roasted beets and a wagyu beef tenderloin with black truffle salad and *perigueux* sauce. The contrast of savory and rich to earthy gives this beef



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a special soulfulness. Yes, this is food to drive for. Wine pairings are equally breathtaking as sommelier Fabien Duboueix loves to get his guests exploring new wines. After witnessing a heated table debate about the ideal dessert wine, he rescued us by pouring eight small tastes of every dessert wine in the house so we could judge for ourselves.

The South's Temple to Gastronomy

The culinary experience at Town House is unparalleled in the South, period. For a meal of this caliber, the closest city with equal footing would be Chicago or New York. It might be a bold statement, but not so much when you consider who's working in the kitchen. Chef John Shields, voted a 2010 *Food & Wine* Best New Chef, and his wife Karen arrived in Chilhowie with serious pedigrees. He spent over a year head-to-head with the vaunted Grant Achatz, chef/owner of Chicago's three Michelin star, highly acclaimed Alinea. Karen was top pastry toque at Charlie Trotter's in Chicago. In seeking a quieter lifestyle, the two noticed a "chef wanted" posting for Town House.

"At first the idea of moving to rural Virginia sounded like crazy talk, but we started a conversation with the owners, Kyra and Tom Bishop, and here we are."

Indeed, Chilhowie is where it's at and that just happens to be five-and-a-half hours from Atlanta, two hours from Knoxville and five from DC. Shields waxes poetic about the astonishing provender at his fingertips in Chilhowie, a fertile crescent of agriculture. "I can forage for some things, visit the restaurant farm and hand-pick what appeals to me most that day, and the proteins (beef, lamb, chicken) around here are amazing. Chefs ask me all the time how I can get product all the way out here ... I laugh and tell them *'this* is where the product is coming from!"

In Shields' skilled hands, the ordinary becomes extraordinary. His work at Alinea shapes the experience at Town House. Think molecular techniques (liquid nitrogen), extraordinary twists on plating (branches, sea rocks!) and creativity with turning food on its head (the kitchen has a cotton candy machine) to get a sense of what to expect for dinner.

Meals are offered as five- or 10-course pairings, but Shields is happy to customize dining to your preferences. If you bother with the drive, then make room for a finely orchestrated 10-course adventure; it will be unforgettable. Ours began with an exquisite "minestrone" of curled vegetable ribbons in a clear vegetable broth paired with a locally produced hard cider. Sommelier Charlie Berg is a pairings magician. His inspired combinations and encyclopedic



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CHEF JOHN SHIELDS

wine list (chock full of quirky descriptors such as fermented loam, pomegranate or dry hibiscus) guarantee an interesting evening of libations from sake to sherry.

Courses change nightly, but on this evening we savored Dungeness crab with kaffir lime, brown butter, shellfish cream and spring onions; the textural wonder of squid “risotto” prepared entirely without rice or dairy; and beef cheek cooked in hay horseradish and juiced grasses, wrapped in a vellum of cheese and topped with crispy beef tongue — a playful nod to the cow’s pastoral existence. A favorite was our dish of smoked beets and tender black malt glazed lamb shoulder infused with notes of licorice and olive.

Endings here are just as glamorous and dazzling as the meal especially a refreshing plate of broken marshmallow with deli

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cate geranium flower, pillows of whipped cream and the tartness of green strawberries. More decadent is Karen Shields’ liquid chocolate bar, which she confessed requires well over 25 steps to produce. Rife with various chocolate textures (crumbled, liquid, mousse, you name it) topped with a glorious crown of spun sugar, it is a masterpiece for the eye as well as the palate.

The ultimate finishing touch is a personal driver to return you to Riverstead, the restaurant’s luxurious, fully restored farmhouse where a farm-fresh breakfast has already been prepared and left for you to enjoy the next morning ... if you can manage it. **PN**

Between Meals

WOODLANDS INN

Woodlands offers myriad activities for guests, with plans for a fully renovated “Chicken Coop,” a restored (circa 1848) coop that houses a test kitchen for cooking classes and private dinners. Nestled in the ground’s new 1.5-acre gardens, the Coop promises to be an inventive foodie experience. Plans for a spa are also in the works, and Charles-ton is a mere 20 minutes away. Closer by, you’ll find many of the historic plantations that are open for tours daily.

TOWN HOUSE AND RIVERSTEAD

The farmhouse is nestled in a pristine valley at the base of Whitetop Mountain and just a few miles from the Virginia Creeper Trail and an Appalachian Trail entrance. Bring your bikes, hiking shoes and running gear, as the trails and scenery are worth exploring. Shoppers will love the antiques and boutiques in Abingdon, just a few exits down the road. Local theater, wineries and farmer’s markets round out the offerings ... boredom is near impossible.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Woodlands Inn

125 Parsons Road
Summerville, S.C.
800-774-9999
www.woodlandsinn.com

Town House

132 E. Main St.
Chilhowie, Va.
276-646-8787
www.townhouseva.com

- Rates start at \$199
- Dinner starts at \$95 for a tasting menu (5 courses), a la carte entrees start at \$34

- Riverstead Room Rates at \$425 (Tuesday-Saturday; includes dinner) and \$300 (Sunday-Monday)
- Room rates are for two guests, and include nightly accommodations, personal driver to and from dinner and a simple gourmet breakfast prepared by the chefs.
- Tasting Menu — \$58 for 4 courses, \$110 for 10 courses

