

BY SUZANNE WRIGHT

The term “Sweet home Alabama” takes on a whole new meaning when the focus of a trip there is to discover the state’s rich culinary heritage. In fact, our neighboring state has at least 100 dishes to eat before you die, according to the Alabama Bureau of Tourism, which published a cookbook in celebration of the “Year of Food” in 2005. And Birmingham

TRAVEL

is the epicenter of many of these delicious meals. I love to see things made, so I plan two tours of local food manufacturers and visits to a winery and an old steel mill, as well as a pilgrimage to the Civil Rights district and stops at several well-respected restaurants.

Tour one starts at Bud’s Best Cookies, a family-owned business in nearby Hoover, which offers visits on Mondays and Tuesdays during the school year.

Kids will love the “Cookie-land Express,” a train that takes visitors through the production facility. It’s fascinating to watch the raw dough progress from a shapeless mass to baked and packaged cookies, all on a series of crisscrossing conveyor belts.

Since I’ve taken care of sweet, I’m off in search of salty, in the form of a tour of Golden Flake, which has been making the “crispiest chip in the South” since 1923. A regional favorite, they’re the second most popular chip sold in Florida, South and North Carolina, Alabama and Georgia. I learn that corn grits are used to make cheese puffs and that the factory converts 100 million pounds of potatoes into chips annually. Eighty-year-old Sara Hall works on the pork rind and chip packaging line; she’s been with the company for 49 years. She remembers when she used to hand-stuff chips into bags, before the process became automated. When I ask her if she ever tires of it, she just smiles. “When I came here I was skinny. I eat the product all day long!”

Just 40 minutes from downtown Birmingham, Harpersville is home to Morgan Creek Vineyards, a small family winery that produces 12 varieties of wine made with muscadine grapes. Founded in 2000, the winery sponsors an annual grape stomp (reminiscent of the famous “I Love Lucy” episode). Later, when I sample the offerings, I find that I like the dry Noble, a strawberry-scented red, the best.

Back in the city, I visit the top attraction, the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute. Twelve galleries tell the story of Birmingham’s role in the pivotal movement; Martin Luther King’s jail cell and separate

COURTESY OF THE ALABAMA BUREAU OF TOURISM



BIRMINGHAM, PLATE BY PLATE



JEFFREY GREENBURG

Eddie Kendrick Memorial Park pays tribute to the Birmingham native son and lead singer of the Temptations.

“white” and “colored” drinking fountains are poignant symbols of both oppression and heroism. Across the street is the 16th Street Baptist Church, where one of the deadliest moments in the era’s history occurred when four little girls in the basement, preparing for Sunday school, were killed by a bomb. I take a short stroll to Kelly Ingram Park—once the staging ground for civil rights rallies, demonstrations and marches—where I admire the outdoor sculptures while a self-

guided audio tour provides a peaceful but sobering walk through history with the voices of famed activists.

Soon I locate a popular gathering place for African-Americans and lovers of Southern soul food, Lavase Fine Dining. While I wait for my catfish (fried to order), a little girl smiles at me from a nearby booth. “Good, isn’t it?” I ask. She erupts into a gap-toothed grin, nodding her head vigorously. The lightly battered catfish is perfection, and the mac and cheese and spaghetti

casserole are pleasing accompaniments.

No visit to Birmingham would be complete without a stop at Sloss Furnaces, a 32-acre national historic landmark. Docents offer tours that trace the beginnings of “Iron City,” a reference to the area’s rich deposits of iron ore, limestone and coal which were used to produce steel. Toiling in 2,600-degree furnaces, Sloss’ pipes and smokestacks were the emblem of the industrial New South; its work force was integrated from its opening in 1881 to its closing in 1971.

Birmingham’s Ross Bridge Golf Resort and Spa, in the rolling hills on the edge of the city, is a great place to spend a couple of nights. Located on the Robert Trent Jones golf trail—one of the longest courses in the nation—the 261-room resort boasts cascading waterfalls feeding a sculptured pool, a stacked stone fireplace and a terrace with fire pits. The resort pays homage to the past with a design that evokes the classic railway resorts of yore.

My final culinary stop is at Highlands Bar & Grill. Chef Frank Stitt has an international reputation, and his culinary success has spawned several acclaimed restaurants in the Five Points neighborhood. Thronged nightly, his establishment is renowned for putting a twist on Southern classics. Don’t miss his signature soufflé-like stone-ground baked grits with country ham and mushrooms. I also feast on the squash blossoms with tangy tomato relish, the Apalachicola gigged flounder with hopping John pink-eyed peas, braised Mississippi rabbit with black truffle risotto and a peach crostata with vanilla ice cream.

Sweet (second) home, indeed. **SP**

IF YOU GO

General Information: For more information on Birmingham and its surrounding area, as well as the “100 dishes to eat in Alabama before you die” cookbook, visit www.800alabama.com.

What to do: The Birmingham Civil Rights Institute: www.bcri.org. 866-328-9696.

Bud’s Best Cookies: www.budsbestcookies.com. 205-987-4840.

Golden Flake: www.goldenflake.com. 205-323-6161.

Morgan Creek Vineyards: www.morgancreekwinery.com. 205-672-2053.

Sloss Furnaces: www.slossfurnaces.com. 205-324-1911.

Where to eat: Lavase Fine Dining: 205-328-9327.

Highlands Bar and Grill: www.highlandsbarandgrill.com. 205-939-1400.

Where to Stay: Ross Bridge Golf Resort and Spa: www.rossbridgeresort.com. 800-593-6419.