

Mississippi Magic

Discover the region's literary and culinary influence during a ramble through the western half of the Magnolia State

BY DARIA SMITH

The

soul of Mississippi isn't found on the interstates. It lives along the slow, meandering back roads that carry

you through the blues-soaked juke joints of the Delta and into the oak-lined streets of Natchez. This is a road trip for those who savor detours: for travelers who value cast-iron skillet shrimp and grits over fast food, and a porch swing conversation over GPS efficiency. The journey begins in Oxford and winds southwest on Route 7 through Taylor, where the Delta begins to unfurl, rich with culture, cuisine, and history. It ends on the moss-draped Natchez Trace Parkway, where time slows and the past lingers in the air.

Venturing Out FROM OXFORD

Oxford stands as a cultural jewel of Mississippi and is a good jumping-off point. Founded in 1837, this

college town—named after its English counterpart—has long been a haven for Southern literature. Fuel up for your road trip through Mississippi at **Bottletree Bakery**, founded by chef Martha Hall Foose, where golden, flaky pastries are paired with expertly pulled espresso, showcasing European craftsmanship.

At the heart of Oxford is The Square, a vibrant space where restaurants, bars, and bookshops pulse with life. A path leads to **Rowan Oak**, the home of Nobel Prize-winning author William Faulkner, where the roots of Southern Gothic took hold. A short walk on Bailey Woods Trail leads to the **University Museum**, where art and history converge.

Oxford's literary heritage is matched only by its academic stature. The University of Mississippi stretches across magnolia-lined lawns, anchored by the Lyceum—an Ionic Greek Revival masterpiece, once a Civil War hospital.

For a place to rest before heading toward the Delta, **The Oliver Hotel** blends historic charm with modern comforts. Opened in 2023, this 40-room boutique hotel just off The Square features a



Taylor Grocery, known for its fried catfish.

C/O TAYLOR GROCERY

library with a Faulkner photography collection. Dine at **Kingswood**, then slip into **Nightbird**, the adjoining speak-easy. In Oxford, you never know who might be perched at the bar—perhaps the grandson of Phila Hach, host of the South’s first television cooking show.

A meal at **City Grocery**, Oxford’s “living room,” captures the town’s soul. James Beard Award-winning chef John Currence fuses fine dining with Southern staples. The shrimp and grits, served in a cast-iron skillet, anchor the menu. Upstairs, the bar, once frequented by literary greats, invites quiet conversation and spirited debate.

A visit to **Neilson’s Department Store**, the South’s oldest since 1839, is incomplete without seeing Faulkner’s letter refusing to settle his tab after a decades-long feud.

Since 1979, **Square Books** has been a book lover’s haven, with offshoots like Square Books Jr. and Rare Square Books offering first editions and signed copies. Vinyl fans will appreciate **End of All Music**, a sanctuary for rare pressings. **Tom Beckbe’s** outpost embodies Southern sporting tradition with waxed canvas bags, leather rifle cases, and hand-carved duck decoys.

Tarasque Cucina blends Italian heritage with Southern soul. Chef John Martin Stokes’ handmade pasta and small plates, like linguine with Gulf shrimp or “monster” meatballs, offer a seasonal, BYOB-friendly setting. At **Bar Muse** inside **The Lyric** theater, mixologist Joe Stinchcomb, after a James Beard nomination at Saint Leo, crafts cocktails that are a performance in themselves—bold, locally inspired, and served in a

setting where velvet drapes and top-shelf spirits set the stage.

As you head toward the Delta down route 7, take a minute to stop in **Taylor**, where **Lost Dog Coffee** invites patrons to sip lattes beneath twinkling lights on the double-decker porch, while **Taylor Grocery**, an institution, serves the South’s finest fried catfish in a converted dry goods store.

Destination DELTA

The Mississippi Delta, a 200-mile expanse between the Yazoo and Mississippi Rivers, is a fertile yet complex region. Shaped by centuries of flooding that deposited mineral-rich soil, this alluvial floodplain is known as the birthplace of the blues. Its towns, inhabited by Deltans or “Alluvians,” as Tennessee Williams called them, are cultural bedrocks where music, history, and people are intimately woven together. To truly grasp the Delta’s layered beauty, you have to take the long way. A road trip offers the only pace slow enough to feel the heartbeat of this storied land.

Make your way south to the former Cotton Capital of the World, **Greenwood**, which owes much of its revival to Fred Carl Jr., the visionary behind Viking Range Corporation, who moved the company’s plant here in 1989 and restored the historic Irving Hotel. Now called **The Alluvian**, this boutique hotel celebrates Delta heritage with a 7,000-square-foot spa and prime access to Greenwood’s dining and shopping.

Tucked inside The Alluvian, **Giardina’s** exudes old-world charm, with private booths dating back to Prohibition. The menu artfully blends Delta Southern and Italian influences, with signature dishes like a rich, Creole-spiced gumbo and a perfectly seared filet, its velvety butter melting into the tender meat. Sip on a Delta Gem cocktail, kissed with citrus and crowned by a lime wedge.

The **Viking Cooking School**, set in the Delta’s first Ford dealership, offers hands-on classes themed from Parisian Dinner Parties to Southern Specialties inspired by *The Help*, including Minny’s



chocolate pie. Established by Sicilian immigrant Salvo Serio in 1943, **Serio’s Italian Steakhouse** serves a range of traditional and creative Italian dishes, from rosé Bolognese to fire-kissed salmon.

Jeems Diner serves comforting Southern fare, while James Beard Award semifinalist chef Taylor Bowen-Ricketts’ newest venture, **Fan and Johnny’s**, elevates classics like the gator po’boy. (Incidentally, Bowen-Ricketts helped chef Foose open Bottletree Bakery.) Meanwhile, **Mississippi Mo Joe Coffee Company** offers locally roasted coffee, and **Veronica’s Custom Bakery** crafts made-from-scratch desserts. Cap off your visit with a stop at the Mississippi Gift Company, a trove of locally made treasures.

From Greenwood, continue due west toward **Cleveland**, founded in 1869. This spirited Delta town has music humming beneath everyday life. The town’s first boutique hotel, **Cotton House**, rises five stories along Cotton Row. Inside, 95 rooms reflect the Delta’s musical legacy. Atop the hotel, **Bar Fontaine** merges European small plates with Delta flavors and a curated cocktail list.

With its weathered wood siding and vintage tin signs, **Airport Grocery** proudly displays its history. Originally opened as Rocconi & Sons during the Great Depression, it became a Prohibition-era lunch counter and later a Delta institution under Jonathan Vance. The menu honors Delta cuisine with hot tamales, slow-smoked pork shoulders, and hand-pattied angus

burgers. Grab a cold beer and soak in an atmosphere where legends like Morgan Freeman and Willie Nelson have dined.

Next door, **Vance’s Meat & Grocery**, housed in Seth Vance’s grandfather’s former auto shop, continues the family legacy. Inside, a black Lab named Jesse greets visitors as taxidermy mounts, vintage feed store signs, and stacks of 1930s *Field & Stream* magazines set the scene. Housemade sausages and fresh-cut steaks reflect the region’s hunting culture and old-school hospitality.

Leña Pizza + Bagels blends wood-fired pizza with the chew of a classic bagel. Chef-owner Marisol Doyle, inspired by Naples, hand-tosses 00-flour dough in a wood-fired oven, creating airy, blistered crusts.

In **Merigold**, just north of Cleveland, **McCarty’s Pottery** has drawn collectors since 1954, when Lee and Pup McCarty began shaping Delta clay into enduring art. Today, their workshop—tucked behind bamboo and overgrowth—houses wheel-thrown pottery in riverbed blues and earthy browns. Beyond the studio, **The Gallery Restaurant** serves lunch in a secret garden with a winding pond and ivy-covered fountain.

Moonstruck Antique Flea Market’s eclectic mix of antiques, art, and vinyl invites lingering. Nearby, the second of its kind after Los Angeles, **GRAMMY Museum Mississippi** celebrates the Delta’s profound influence on American music, honoring the storytellers who shaped its legacy.

Farther down South, **Greenville**, birthplace of consummate host, journalist, and author Julia Reed, boasts the most published writers per capita in the country. It’s also the Hot Tamale Capital, celebrated each October with the Delta Hot Tamale Festival. Tamales, like those at **Doe’s Eat Place**, are woven into the region’s fabric.

From top: Chef Taylor Bowen-Ricketts at Fan and Johnny’s; flash-fried oysters at Kingswood inside The Oliver Hotel. **Opposite:** Co-owner and mixologist Joe Stinchcomb at Bar Muse.

FROM TOP: C/O FAN AND JOHNNY’S; C/O KINGSWOOD. OPPOSITE: C/O BAR MUSE



Clockwise from top: Seared filet at Giardina's; margaritas at Fat Mama's Tamales; bao buns at Frankie's on Main; Amy Allen (left) and Tracy Alderson-Allen, owners of Big Muddy Inn. **Opposite:** Stanton Hall.



Open since 1941, this James Beard America's Classics winner began as a grocery store before Doe and Mamie Signa served food in the back. The honky-tonk dining room still pulses with character: faded paint, barred windows, flickering neon. Reed's table—tucked beneath wood-paneled walls adorned with memorabilia—holds a special reverence. The menu is a masterclass in Delta simplicity: steaming hot tamales, a Delta wet salad, garlicky shrimp, and butter-basted steak.

Nearing the Finish IN NATCHEZ

Take the Natchez Trace Parkway to Natchez—a billboard-free route that meanders through towering oaks, rolling forests, and Spanish moss-draped branches. Founded by the French in 1716, Natchez is the oldest settlement on the Mississippi River. Once a booming port city, Natchez emerged from the Civil War largely untouched. Today, it's the Bed and Breakfast Capital of the South, with more than 45 historic inns and 1,000-plus buildings on the National Register of Historic Places. With moss-draped streets and a culture more akin to New Orleans, Natchez earns its nickname: the Little Easy.

And no one embodies its culinary soul quite like chef Regina Charboneau. Dubbed the "Queen of Biscuits" by *The New York Times*, the Natchez native cemented the city's status as the Biscuit Capital of the World, hosting immersive culinary weekends at her restored 1832 estate, **Twin Oaks**.

Charboneau's personal food tour of Natchez begins at **Regina's Kitchen Cooking School**, where her Biscuits and Brunch class offers a hands-on masterclass in biscuit-making. From there, the trail leads to **Biscuits & Blues**, a blues club Charboneau opened in San Francisco before her brother brought Natchez its very own version.

Next stop: **The Little Easy**, a boozy brunch spot co-owned by Tate Taylor, director of *The Help*. Known for dishes like the Stump Jumper biscuit with hot

honey and collards, it was conceived when Mick Jagger's hotel had to fetch his breakfast from a gas station. Across the street, **Smoot's Grocery Blues Lounge**, once an "unofficial" juke joint, blends blues, country, and cold drinks in a laid-back setting.

Steampunk Coffee Roasters serves custom-roasted beans and Italian-style espresso in a late-1800s brick building. For lunch, stop into **Frankie's on Main**, housed in a circa-1826 Britton & Koontz Bank, which features a globally inspired menu, including shrimp bao buns and sweet potato fry poutine.

Grab dessert at **Butter Cakery**, where heirloom recipes, cupcakes, and imported teas are served in a sunlit space. And at **Art District Studio**, you'll find artwork from local talent, embodying Natchez's creative spirit as both a gallery and an incubator for the artistic community.

To truly understand Natchez, step into its past. **Longwood**, the largest unfinished octagonal home in the US, remains a relic of the Civil War. Nearby, **Stanton Hall** is a grand example of Greek Revival architecture. During Natchez Spring Pilgrimage, more than 35 historic homes and gardens open their doors in full bloom.

Stop by Natchez Under-the-Hill, where French colonists first landed. At **Under The Hill Saloon**—the river's oldest tavern—cold beer and live music flow freely. For Delta heat, head to **Fat**

Mama's for tamales, Knock-You-Naked margaritas, and Fire and Ice pickles.

Check into the **Big Muddy Inn**, a boutique six-room hotel and blues venue steeped in river spirit. Each room honors a blues legend—the Muddy Waters suite glows in deep blues, antique furnishings, and a baroque chandelier. At night, the inn comes alive. Resident dog Whiskey rests under the grand piano while artist-in-residence and co-owner Amy Allen spins stories through song.

To glimpse Mississippi's unvarnished soul, visit **Church Hill Variety**—a backroad bar and general store where locals linger. Vintage decor, fresh produce, and Southern staples nod to a time when bars were the heart of the community. For a nightcap, descend into **The Castle Pub** beneath the 1856 Dunleith Historic Inn for a legendary smoked old fashioned by Natchez-born mixologist Ricky Woolfolk.

To traverse Mississippi backroads is to move through layers of living history, where every bend in the road carries echoes of a blues riff, a grandmother's recipe, a porch light flickering on at dusk. This isn't a journey measured in miles but in moments: a still sunrise over the Yazoo, the hush of a bookstore in Oxford, the laughter spilling from a juke joint in Natchez. Along these quiet roads and storied towns, food becomes more than sustenance. It's memory, tradition, and identity.



C/O VISIT NATCHEZ