

Culinary Carolina

Whether traveling to the mountains to get some fresh air, exercise or just see the sites, there is no better mountain city in America to partake of culinary delights than Asheville. It's called Foodtopia for a reason. There is simply no better destination to eat your feelings than Asheville, if life has been serving up more lemons than lemonade. And it's a party town that celebrates all flavors.

Even the most famous and feared celebrity chefs love Asheville, along with James Beard winners and *Top Chef* contenders. They seem to blend right in with the locals — all frequenting the hundreds of places to taste classic Western North Carolina chow.

Superstar chef Gordon Ramsay has spent copious time in these mountains, and now he has a new reason to return to the land of fare and fauna. In the fast casual dining space (the hottest food trend growing in recent years), the king of cooking shows is launching his first Gordon Ramsay Food Market in these United States, right outside of Asheville at Harrah's Cherokee Casino. The food market-style restaurant is slated to open its doors just in time for the onslaught of sightseers as millions flock to witness peak colors and the falling of the leaves.

Declaring his affection for the region, the multi-Michelin starred British restaurateur and richest chef in the world said, "I'm in love with the Cherokee and Asheville area, and I couldn't be more excited to open my very first Gordon Ramsay Food Market in the heart of the Great Smoky Mountains." High praise indeed, given he could open anything, anywhere, any time.

Ramsay notes that the market will feature a wellspring of favorites from his other restaurant projects such as Street Burger and Street Pizza to Fish & Chips, GR Sushi and more. "We'll highlight the very best local ingredients sourced from the region's incredible farmers and artisans," he noted. And along with his venture's grand opening, fans hope it will give him a



Gordon Ramsay with Asheville chef William Dissen serve guests including Alan Muskat during a final cook-off in the Great Smoky Mountains of North Carolina. Photo courtesy of National Geographic, by photographer Justin Mandel.

reason to fellowship with locals more often.

Ramsay filmed an episode of his National Geographic Channel show *Uncharted* in the area, repelling down a waterfall, kayaking, and most memorably, foraging with Asheville's own Alan Muskat, a self-described "philosoforager," who likes to say he's been "taking people out to eat" for more than two decades through his No Taste Like Home foraging education company. The Princeton grad has become the human embodiment of a walking, talking mushroom encyclopedia, and as his guests like to say, he is the reigning "champion of putting the 'fun' in fungi."

Muskat lures visitors, like Ramsay, to the solace and grandeur of the woods where he and his guides search for a treasure trove of acorn, chestnut, dogwood, maitake and all manner of mushroom deliciousness. Muskat then encourages his apprentices to haul their bounty to one of his forage-friendly restaurant partners for supper. Thus, Ramsay dedicated a significant segment of an *Uncharted* episode last year to his excursion with Asheville's forage-to-table fanatic, inadvertently spotlighting the array of wild foods available in this bioregion — more than anywhere else in the temperate Western Hemisphere.



Asheville Proper, a local steakhouse, is known for its succulent steak, woodfire cooking and exceptional service. Photo courtesy of Asheville Proper.

While in town, Ramsay also battled local “cheflebrity,” William Dissen, in a country cook-off. Dissen, who blazed his own trail through Asheville at The Market Place Restaurant, competed by preparing pan-roasted mountain trout stuffed with thyme and lemon, served over a candy-roasted squash puree, with hen-of-the-woods mushrooms, shallots, garlic and bourbon, finishing with truffles and cream. Ramsay prepared crawfish with apple moonshine, wild mushrooms, livermush, and hominy with Andouille. In the end, a panel of guest judges named Dissen as the winner of the forage-to-fork competition.

As everyone knows (unless having been held captive in a cave or hidden under a rock), the James Beard Foundation is to the culinary world what the Oscars are to movies, and Asheville is no doubt James Beard territory, showcasing an array of top-notch foodie talent.

Ashleigh Shanti of Asheville’s Good Hot Fish was a National Rising Chef Star of the Year nominee in 2020 before becoming a fan favorite on Bravo’s *Top Chef: Houston* where she filleted the competition on the long-running cooking show. Katie Button was nominated for Best Chef of the Southeast for her Spanish cuisine at Cúrate Bar de Tapas and took home the James Beard award for Outstanding Hospitality in 2022. At Cúrate, guests gorge on appetizers like house-cured chorizo and sobrasada (sausage) paired with succulent duck terrine with a mushroom mousse center, and salteado a la catalana (seasonal sautéed greens with

apples, raisins, and toasted pine nuts). For entrees, order rossejat, which is like paella but with squid ink noodles and shellfish stock, allioli and salsa verde.

Chai Pani (recipient of the prestigious James Beard award for Outstanding Restaurant) is nearby, and another famous face on the downtown Asheville food front. (Note: *Living Luxe* covered Chai Pani years ago, long before it became a food award darling.) This Indian street food hotspot is now in such high demand, the line of hungry eaters wraps around the block like a scene from *The Walking Dead*, except instead of the zombie apocalypse, guests crave roasted sweet potato chaat and garam masala. Despite the wait, it’s deliciously worth it.

Also, downtown in the historic Grove Arcade building, Asheville Proper is Asheville’s answer to a fine steakhouse. Passionate owners Chef Owen McGlynn and wife Mindi opened this restaurant out of their love of live-fire cooking. The couple’s seasonal menu is home to scrumptious steaks, of course, but also local ingredients cooked over the hardwood-fueled grill. The classic cocktail menu follows suit with smoke-infusions and barrel aging. Dishes to try at Asheville Proper include the Snake River Farms wagyu, embered okra, and beef tartare.



Foraging impresario Alan Muskat of No Taste Like Home pauses during filming of *Uncharted* with celebrity chef Gordon Ramsay to share in the bounty of the woods. Photo courtesy of National Geographic, by photographer Justin Mandel.