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AMERICA'S NEXT GREAT FOOD CAPITAL

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Why Food Lovers Are Loving Asheville

The ingredients are local, but the chefs aren't: Newcomers from all over—Brooklyn, Spain, India—are creating a world-class food scene in this small North Carolina town.

BY GIDEON LEWIS-KRAUS



CÚRATE

Chef Katie Button
(above left)

ORIGINALLY FROM
Conway, SC

ASHEVILLE DISHES
Tapas like
shrimp with garlic
and sherry, and
goat cheese-stuffed
piquillo peppers.
11 Biltmore Ave.;
curatetapasbar.com.

ONE OF THE REASONS Asheville's outsiders give for their relocation to town is the scenery: Clouds comb out like low smoke over the mountains, the hills like tired, mossy stones. I decided that after visiting three breweries in one afternoon, it was time to get outside. Chef Katie Button admitted that, though everybody is theoretically excited about the out-

doors, none of the town's restaurateurs ever have time to leave their kitchens.

At the tapas restaurant Cúrate (Spanish for "cure yourself"), Button understands how one could visit Asheville and stay inside: In her three years in town, she admitted, she's barely left the kitchen. The raspy-voiced former neuroscientist, who's been getting "cute as a" for as long as she can recall, was born in Conway, South Carolina. She trained at El Bulli in Roses, Spain; her husband and business partner, Félix Meana, grew up in Roses, where, as an 18-year-old, he opened a bar that became a hangout for El Bulli's staff. When the couple decided to open an authentic tapas bar in the US, Button was still working in Spain while Meana was launching a restaurant for chef José Andrés in Los Angeles. Button's mom suggested Asheville. Meana moved there (having never seen the place), and a year later, Cúrate was serving what's probably the best *pluma Ibérica a las finas hierbas*—a feathered loin cut infused with rosemary and thyme—outside of Catalonia.

Meana was a little worried about being treated as an outsider in the South, but he soon found that pretty much nobody in Asheville is actually from Asheville. This isn't anything new. The town owes its monuments to visitors gone native: In 1895, George Vanderbilt used his railroad fortune to create the Biltmore, a self-sustaining high-country redoubt for an artistic soul grown weary of city distraction. Eighteen years later, E.W. Grove, chronic hiccups sufferer and medicinal-tonic magnate, established the Grove Park Inn as a mountain refuge from industrial toxins.

Gideon Lewis-Kraus wrote the 2012 memoir A Sense of Direction: Pilgrimage for the Restless and the Hopeful.



At Table, pickled okra and maple-glazed bacon top a Southern-style Bloody Mary.