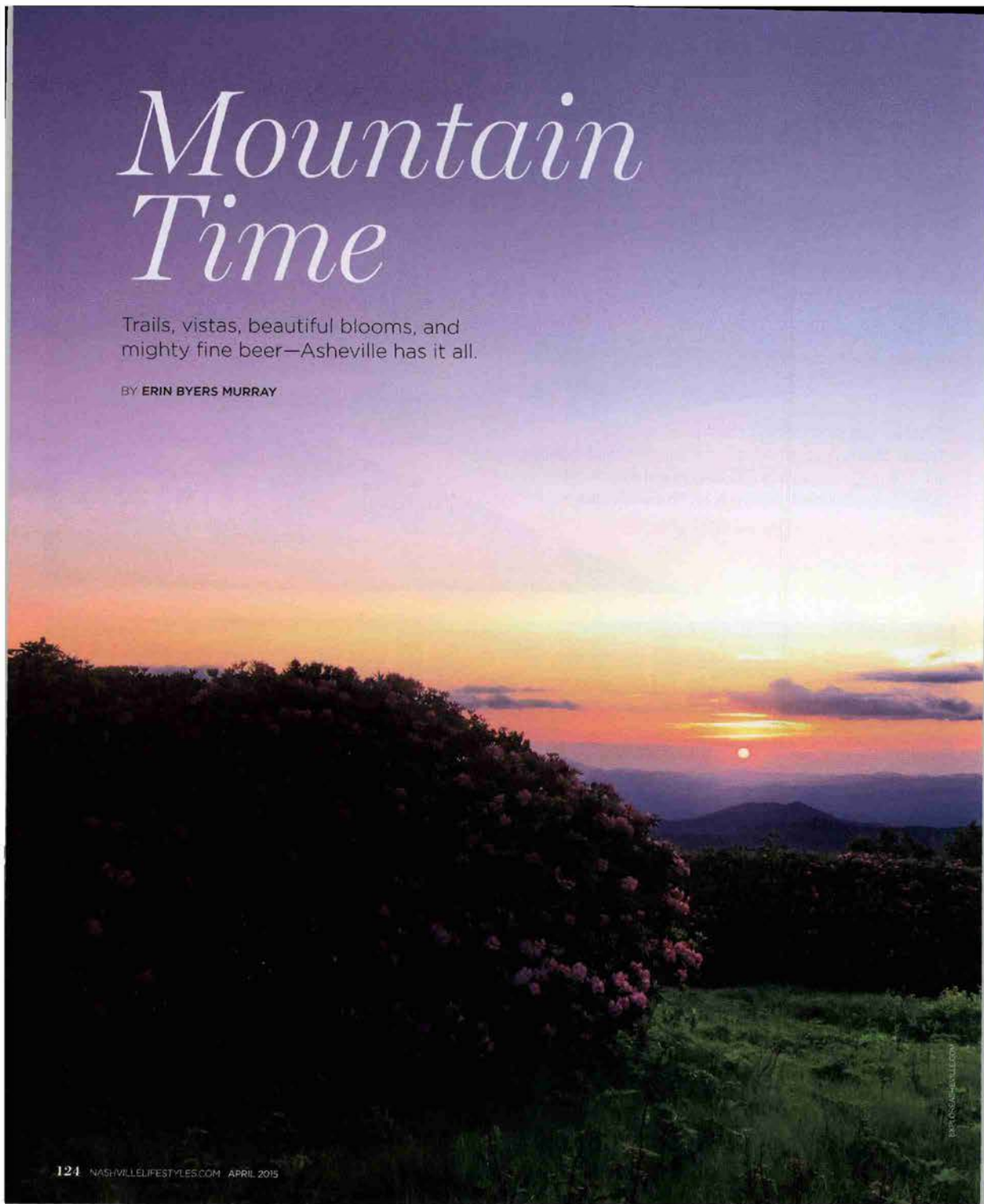


Mountain Time

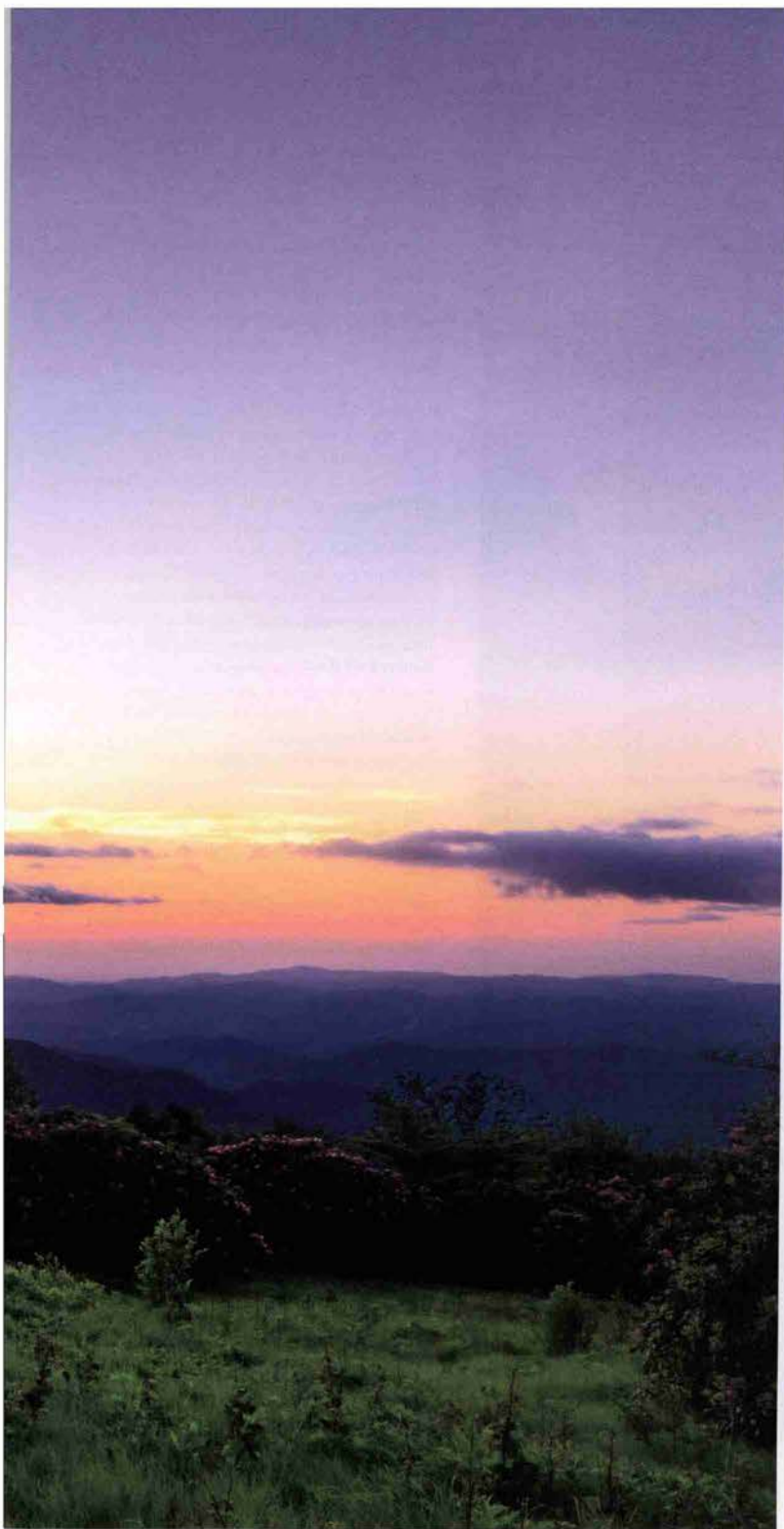
Trails, vistas, beautiful blooms, and mighty fine beer—Asheville has it all.

BY ERIN BYERS MURRAY



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The first thing you'll want to do when you arrive in Asheville? Breathe in. The air is deliciously fresh and feels crisp and invigorating, especially after a four-hour trek from Nashville.

The second thing you'll want to do is grab a beer. Asheville boasts more than 20 breweries—more per capita than any other city in the country. But beer culture is just part of the epicurean charm here; a dynamic and growing restaurant scene has sprouted up along with the beverage community, which also encompasses sake, moonshine, mead, and whiskey production. There's even wine, bottled locally at Biltmore Estate.

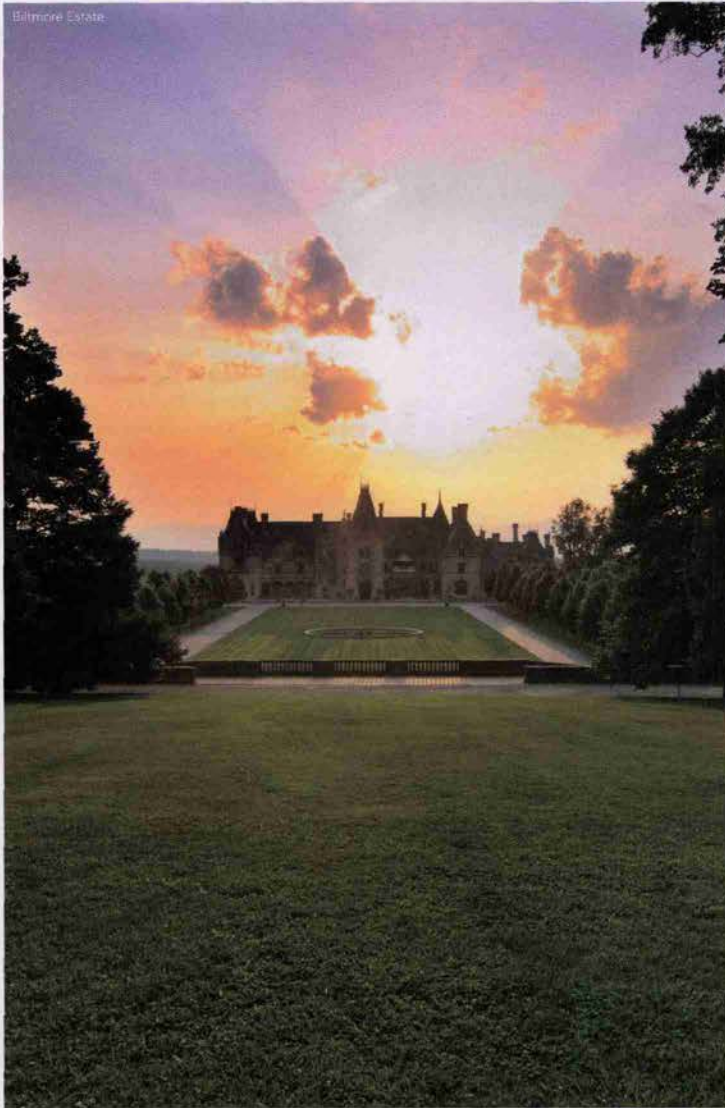
Like so many booming cities in the South, Asheville's adding new reasons to visit every day. Bars, retail stores, art galleries, and, yes, breweries are popping up all the time. There's the constant backdrop of the nearby Blue Ridge Mountains, and most transplants who've chosen Asheville for their permanent dwelling will tell you that proximity to that range is exactly what brought them to town, since it offers hiking, rafting, climbing, and striking views within 20 minutes of town.

If you're going for a weekend, we say soak it all in. There's someone to help you find just about any outdoor activity you could want—and twice as many places to fuel up before and after. Plan your trip accordingly by mapping out at least one outdoor activity a day. The rest of the time? Spend it wisely by getting to know Beer City, U.S.A.

DO

Whether or not you have dreams of tackling The Appalachian Trail, à la *A Walk in the Woods*, it's worth at least landing your boots on since an entry to the trail sits just 20 minutes from town. Rely on AT expert Jennifer Pharr Davis, who broke records when she hiked the entire 2,168-mile trail in 46 days. Through her **Blue Ridge Hiking Company**, you can set up guided half- or full-day treks through the Pisgah National Forest.

During his foraging tours in the woods, guide Alan Muskat of **No Taste Like Home** helps visitors get to know the unique bounty that's available underfoot—as well as what to do with it. Muskat arms you with a basket and knife then sends you off to hunt for edible treasures. This time of year, that might mean wild ginger and black morel mushrooms. Afterward, Muskat can either teach you how to prepare the goods or direct you to one of four restaurants or bars, like **King James Public House** or **Sovereign Remedies**, where the staff will whip up an appetizer or cocktail, gratis, with your wild loot. >>>



No visit to **Asheville** is complete without a stop at **Biltmore**, the Vanderbilt estate. This spring, a special exhibit of costumes from the PBS Masterpiece series *Downton Abbey* are displayed throughout the home. *Dressing Downton: Changing Fashion for Changing Times* walks guests through the building of the house while an audio tour explains the activities of several generations of the Vanderbilt family. After your stroll indoors, take advantage of your pass to the expansive grounds and scope out the gardens, which are just starting to burst with color this month thanks to the annual Biltmore Blooms event. From there, saunter on down to the river through the deer park, where you can stop for a picnic lunch, or head to **Antler Hill Village** on the estate for a free wine tasting at the area's largest winery and tasting room. The list of wines to sample is lengthy and even features a few North Carolina-grown varietals.

If your idea of getting to know the outdoors involves urban exploration, hang out in downtown Asheville, where you can browse shops like the **Battery Park Book Exchange**, which offers sips of Champagne alongside its selection, or the art gallery and gift shop **Horse + Hero**, where you'll find handmade masks, paper goods, and block prints. Just west of downtown, the **River Arts District** is a series of factories that have been transformed into artists' studios, showrooms, and galleries. On weekend afternoons, you'll likely find painting demos, sales, and plenty of exhibits to explore.

EAT

There is no better start to any day in Asheville than a stop at **Vortex Doughnuts**. Using local products, like North Carolina flour and eggs, this from-scratch confectionary landed in a permanent home last October: an airy, renovated warehouse in South Slope (near all those breweries). Perk up with a cup of 1000 Faces coffee and a few of the fresh-baked house specialties, like the Nutella-and-hazelnut combo or a simple yet divine old-fashioned cake doughnut.

For brunch, it's best to throw in some music, which you can do at the Sunday Bluegrass Brunch at **Asheville Music Hall**. Set inside a small deli and music venue on the backside of the hall, brunch includes a lively bluegrass band, dishes like huevos rancheros and a "redneck" Benedict, plus a do-it-yourself Bloody Mary bar.

French Broad Chocolates are a well-established treat around town—there's a small café and now a larger chocolate lounge that sits on the downtown square, featuring cakes, treats, and even a chocolate bar library. You can also take a

EXPLOREASHEVILLE.COM, DOWNTON, ABBEY IMAGES COURTESY OF THE BILTMORE

self-guided tour through their chocolate factory, further away on South Slope, where the individual sweets are crafted, dipped, and packaged. (Don't forget to sample the goods in the gift shop up front.)

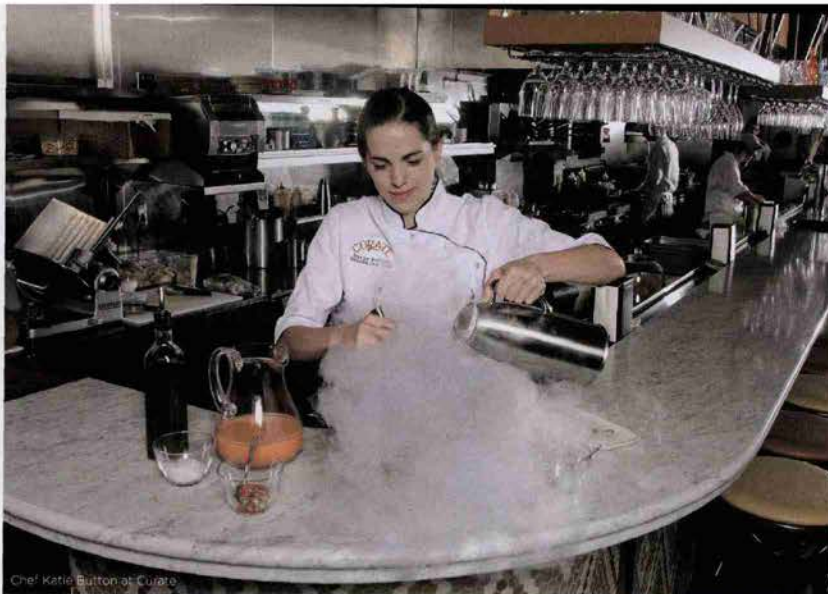
The main draw at **Wicked Weed Brewing** might be the tasty beer, but there's more to this brewpub than the pints. A restaurant with an industrial vibe and wide patio at street level boasts a menu that melds creative ingredients with approachable pub fare, meaning you'll find beef tartare dolloped on toast, a fried chicken sandwich topped with kimchi and miso mayonnaise, and Carolina bison meatloaf served with sausage and mushroom gravy. Downstairs, the tasting room offers all of their beers on tap as well as a spacious beer garden.

There's lots of talk in **Asheville** about the variety of ethnic eats; it starts with chef Katie Button's **Cúrate**, a lovely Spanish tapas joint with a menu that resembles one you might find in Barcelona with its jamón serrano, tortilla española, and gambas al ajillo. (Her new cocktail lounge and restaurant, **Nightbell**, is also worth a visit, especially for desserts like the molten peanut butter cake.) Button has paved the way for spots like **White Duck Taco Shop**, with its inventive Mexican street food (think tacos made with Thai chicken peanut and roasted mole duck) or, on the outskirts of downtown, **Gan Shan Station**, which recently opened in a renovated gas station and serves up pan-Asian cuisine.

Meanwhile, signs of a communal chef culture can be found all over town through popular pop-up concepts like **The Thunderbird**, which puts chef Elliott Moss (whose forthcoming wood-fired barbecue joint, Buxton Hall, opens later this year) in the kitchen at the cocktail bar **MG Road and Lounge**. Many Ashevilleans also swing by **Rhubarb**, a year-old restaurant from chef John Fleer (formerly of Blackberry Farm) for his weekly Sunday Suppers. These casual community dinners include three family-style courses served throughout the night, featuring Fleer's outstanding locally sourced, inspired Southern cuisine. Keep an eye out for items like rhu-barbecued chicken wings, roasted pumpkin hummus, and short rib and purple sweet potato hash.

DRINK

Thirsty yet? Brewery-hopping through Asheville can be an all-day event, but thankfully, most of the tasting rooms are concentrated along the South Slope, a once-rugged part of town that's now crawling with beer fans and adventurous foodies.



Chef Katie Button at Cúrate



White Duck Taco Shop



Ben's Tune-Up



Sovereign Remedies

WILD ASHEVILLE

WHERE TO STAY

The three-year-old **Aloft Hotel** in downtown **Asheville** (from \$209 per night; aloftdowntownasheville.com) puts you right in the center of the action on Biltmore Avenue. For something more pastoral, try the **Inn on Biltmore Estate** (from \$249 per night; biltmore.com), which is set upon the Biltmore grounds and offers picturesque views of the acres of land once owned by George Vanderbilt himself.

If you're starting there, you can hit favorites like **Green Man Brewing**, where on nice days they throw open the doors and drinkers can camp out at patio tables. At **Burial Ground**, there's a guy selling poetry for cash as well as string lights and a game of cornhole set up in the dusty lot out back. **Funkatorium**, which started as the barrel-aging storage facility for Wicked Weed, now has a bar up front, and **Twin Leaf Brewery** opened in March around the corner. All of them offer their own unique brews as well as samples, so you can taste and choose as you go. Another option is to let the locals show you how they do by hopping on one of the three-and-a-half-hour-long **Asheville Brewery Tours**, which happen just about every day. (Also notable: April is North Carolina Beer Month; ncbeermonth.com.)

In that same district, you'll find traces of Asheville's broader beverage offerings at **Ben's Tune-Up**, which distills its own sake—it's one of two places in town that do it. **Blue Kudzu Sake Company** has a tasting room near the River Arts District where you can sample the small-batch spirit as well as a handful of small plates. Created by a foursome of friends, Blue Kudzu uses traditional Japanese methods, California rice, and North Carolina water to craft a soft and clean-tasting product.

And lest you think it's all about the breweries, there are plenty of proper cocktail bars, too. Stop into **Sovereign Remedies**, where proprietor Charlie Hodge keeps the focus on classic recipes, or **The Imperial Life**, an upstairs bar over the restaurant Table, which likes to celebrate one specific spirit in its selection of "employee of the month" cocktails. No matter where you end up, you'll have no shortage of Asheville liquid to fill your glass.