

“
FIRST WE EAT,
THEN WE DO
EVERYTHING ELSE.”

—M.F.K. FISHER, AMERICAN FOOD WRITER



HEATHER ANN THOMAS



A

ny planner knows that what's on the menu may be just as (if not more) important to attendees as what's on the meeting agenda. And destinations are taking notice. Over the last decade, DMOs across the country have been leveraging common interest in food to drive business to a wider range of travel suppliers in the F&B sector.

A 2015 report produced by Skift and the Ontario Culinary Tourism Alliance estimated 39 million U.S. leisure travelers choose a destination based on its culinary scene, and about that same number seek out food-based activities once they decide upon a destination. And the dollars tell the same story: A study by the University of Florida reported tourism expenditures on food services in the United States in 2012 topped \$201 billion, nearly a quarter of all travel revenue.

This concept applies to your conference attendees too. Who doesn't want to get a true taste of the city they're visiting? There's no better way to experience local culture than through food. Whether you're looking for private dining spaces, the trendiest cocktail spot or a local mainstay, or simply making a list of meal options to provide to attendees, it makes sense to consider the eats around town on your next site visit. The following reports on the latest emerging foodie cities (including some you might not expect!) that are sure to whet your appetite.

**By Kate Parham Kordsmeier
and Kelsey Ogletree**

Sunday Supper at Rhubarb
Asheville, North Carolina



ASHEVILLE

Long known for its citywide focus on locally produced goods, Asheville, North Carolina, is undergoing a bit of a renaissance that's transforming its hippie-chic reputation into something more sophisticated.

Take Nightbell Restaurant & Lounge, recently opened downtown near Pack Square by Heirloom Hospitality Group's Katie Button and Felix Meana, also owners of Asheville's widely acclaimed Curate tapas bar. Whimsical decor (think electric-blue chandeliers and glossy black wingback chairs straight out of "Alice in Wonderland") complements imaginative cocktails made with local spirits and tempting desserts like the unique petits fours collection from talented pastry chef Carmen Vaquera. Items like liquid apple pie truffles and frozen sweet potato pie are served inside a vintage cigar box. Button spilled that Heirloom will soon cater for private events too—good news for planners.

Sovereign Remedies, a local watering hole that opened in late summer 2014 on Market Street, partners with local farms to source herbs like sarsaparilla, saffras, burdock and other ingredients for truly handcrafted cocktails. Owner Charlie Hodge says he thinks of it as "harnessing the energy of Asheville," revealing that the town's geographic location on the same latitude as China means many Chinese herbs grow perfectly there.

Also playing off that energy is The Omni Grove Park Inn, refreshing its historic appeal with new dining establishments alongside 55,000 square feet of meeting space. Its new Edison Craft Ales + Kitchen is the hot spot to network, watch the big game and nosh on impressive small plates, like Carolina bison meatballs, chopped kale salad and fried green tomatoes, made with 86 percent locally sourced ingredients. The chef himself admits to



Clockwise from top: Bar at Nightbell; charcuterie and edamame appetizer at Curate; scallops at Edison Craft Ales + Kitchen.



using his personal vacation time to work on local farms and find better produce for his kitchen—how's that for dedication?

Rhubarb, a crowd favorite in Pack Square, recently began offering a three-course communal Sunday supper, and its chef and owner, John Fleer, a three-time James Beard finalist for Best Chef: Southeast, revealed he's opening a private event space later this year.

Of course, we would be remiss not to mention the abundance of local beverage in Asheville, a scene that's growing by leaps and bounds. Sake, hard cider, moonshine and even mead all have new production facilities and tasting rooms around town, in addition to more than 100 local beers from 18 craft breweries.



MUST-TRY TASTES

Molten peanut praline cake with dark chocolate and mandarin sorbet at Nightbell

Bing bread at Edison Craft Ales + Kitchen at The Omni Grove Park Inn

Berber pie with butternut squash-apple mostarda and Benton's prosciutto at Rhubarb



Tidbit Food Farm and Garden



Grilled octopus at Andina

PORTLAND

As the birthplace of gastronomic legend James Beard, it's only fitting that Portland, Oregon, has a food scene chock-full of award-winning chefs like Andy Ricker and Naomi Pomeroy, as well as Vitaly Paley, whose hotel restaurant Imperial is a no-brainer for travelers seeking conveniently delicious food. Couple that with the city's close proximity to nature, 60-plus breweries (more than any city in the world) and abundance of food carts (you'll find more than 600 around town), and Portland is one destination planners should put on their list. The newest food-cart pod, Tidbit Food Farm and Garden, not only has a plethora of dining options, but also an on-site garden and produce stand, retail boutiques, a beer garden, fire pit and live music. Another crowd-pleaser is Andina, a family-run Peruvian restaurant a short walk from downtown with a large private dining space upstairs. It also has gluten-free, vegan and vegetarian menus, making it an easy option to satisfy the dietary needs of everyone in the group.

MUST-TRY TASTES

Deep-fried chicken wings tossed in caramelized fish sauce at Pok Pok

Duck meatballs with prunes and orange gremolata at Imperial

Lomo saltado (wok-fried beef with oyster sauce, garlic and aji amarillo) at Andina

PALM SPRINGS

Alfresco dining is the name of the game in picturesque Palm Springs, California, where contemporary, fresh fare is offered up in supersocial settings, like supper clubs (check out Las Casuelas Terraza and The Purple Room Restaurant & Stage for live music) and happy hours (find locals sipping palomas at Trio Restaurant). Head to Birba, a 100 percent outdoor restaurant famous for its cocktail parties and full-service catering, or Copley's on Palm Canyon, where an open courtyard is anchored by a pizza oven. In keeping with the open-air vibe, not only can you walk to dozens of restaurants from the convention center (or take the new, complimentary Buzz trolley), but Thursday nights now welcome VillageFest, a free outdoor street fair with entertainment, street food and artisan booths, giving groups something fun to do without much planning. Likewise, Hacienda Cantina & Beach Club provides groups with a pool, cabanas, outdoor DJ and games like bocce ball alongside delicious Mexican food.

MUST-TRY TASTES

Calamari with house-made Thai dipping sauce at Trio Restaurant

Butcher block with Gorgonzola torta, salami, prosciutto, olives and pizza bread at Birba

Jamon Iberico (cured Spanish ham) at Tinto



Palm Springs VillageFest



Oyster roast

CHARLESTON

When dishes as iconic as shrimp and grits, she-crab soup and benne wafers all originated in one city, you know it's a place worthy of a visit. To truly experience Charleston, South Carolina's Lowcountry cuisine, a fare that has evolved over the past 300 years thanks in part to three consecutive James Beard Best Chef: Southeast award winners (Robert Stehling of Hominy Grill, Mike Lata of FIG, and Sean Brock of Husk), sign your group up for one of the amazing tours exploring the area's heirloom agriculture and sustainable seafood, like Savor the Flavors culinary tour. From shrimp to oysters to shellfish, seafood is king here, and it's never tasted better than at chef Lata's latest creation, The Ordinary. Need another reason to meet in Charleston? How about coinciding it with one of the region's famed food festivals, like Lowcountry Oyster Festival (January), BB&T Charleston Wine + Food Festival (March) or Taste of Charleston (September)?

MUST-TRY TASTES

Okonomiyaki (Japanese cabbage pancake) with fried egg and pork at Xiao Bao Biscuit

Beef tartare with crispy oysters at The Ordinary

Ricotta gnocchi and Sea Island grass-fed beef Bolognese at FIG

DENVER

“Denver’s food scene is surprisingly adventurous,” says Justin Bresler, vice president of marketing and business development at Visit Denver. “You’ll experience foods you wouldn’t think you can get here, as there’s lots of innovation by chef-owners who have chosen to move here from larger markets.”

Just look at Work & Class, a down-to-earth eatery from Mexico native Dana Rodriguez, for proof. “It’s amazing how much recognition Dana has received in such a short amount of time,” says Bresler, referring to the chef’s James Beard semifinalist status. Work & Class also offers reasonably priced buyouts for groups.

If you need more reason to come to Denver this year, look to the newly opened transportation hub Union Station, which has quickly become a focal point for the city with all its extra amenities and will soon be strengthened by the rail line from the airport. “It’s become the community’s living room and front porch,” notes Bresler. Not only does Union Station have on-site lodging—The Crawford Hotel is Denver’s newest independent luxury hotel with 20,000 square feet of meeting space—but it’s also home to 10 restaurants and bars, including James Beard Award winner Jennifer Jasinski’s Stoic & Genuine, an innovative seafood-centric restaurant.

For private dining space, reserve a room at Elway’s at The Ritz-Carlton, Denver. Or for something a bit off the beaten path, consider Ace, an Asian-fusion restaurant-meets-gaming hall. In fact, groups can rent out the ping-pong space, using special tops on the tables for meetings that can be removed come happy hour. For the best view in town, try the rooftop at global small plates hot spot Linger, where a postcard-worthy backdrop of the Denver skyline and the Rockies flanks taco trucks and walk-up bars from converted RVs. Groups of up to 40 people can use the private dining room, while larger groups of up to 200 can rent out the main dining room.

And you can’t forget the breweries. More than 200 beers are crafted in Denver every day, and the CVB has created a free Beer Trail for self-guided tours. “You can even take a quiz online to figure out which beer is right for you, and then pick a few breweries to do a small beer crawl,” says Bresler. Guided tours are also available—don’t miss the Denver Brews Cruise and Denver Microbrew Tour.



Clockwise from top: Linger; Elway’s at The Ritz-Carlton, Denver; billi bi mussel soup at Stoic & Genuine; butterscotch pudding at Work & Class.



MUST-TRY TASTES

Chilled tofu with ginger, soy vinaigrette and wakame at Uncle I

Surf in Turf (New York strip-wrapped bigeye tuna and Rockefeller emulsion with cremini mushrooms and baby kale) at Stoic & Genuine

Kale-and-apple salad with candied almonds, Parmesan and togarashi at Acorn



WASHINGTON, D.C.

With more than 700 new restaurants in the last five years, and more than a dozen semifinalists in the 2015 James Beard Foundation Awards, Washington, D.C., is becoming a heavy hitter among foodie cities. The ethnic eats are aplenty as more than 180 embassies and consulates call the District home. Whether you opt for Peruvian chifles con salsa at chef Jose Andres' newest outpost, China Chilcano, or Indian tandoori at restaurateur Ashok Bajaj's beloved Rasika, you won't be disappointed. The Neighborhood Restaurant Group's eateries are great for crowds, as many can accommodate a buyout—like the covered patio at Mediterranean-influenced Iron Gate—and offer tours, like industrial-chic craft brewery Blue Jacket, where groups can taste their way through two dozen beers. Celebrity chef Daniel Boulud's latest brasserie, DBGB Kitchen and Bar, opens into a beautiful courtyard patio across the street from the convention center.

MUST-TRY TASTES

Tortilla Espanola with aioli and sweet hot peppers at Estadio

Palak chaat (crispy spinach with sweet yogurt, tamarind and date chutney) at Rasika

Mezze rigatoni with fennel sausage ragu at The Red Hen

NASHVILLE

Sure, Nashville boasts some of the best honky-tonks and live-music destinations in the country—but it's the city's culinary scene that's got everyone talking. While it's teeming with new restaurants, cocktail joints and coffee shops from talented young chefs (see James Beard Outstanding Chef winner Sean Brock's Husk Nashville or four-time nominee Philip Krajeck's Rolf and Daughters), Nashville hasn't forgotten its roots, as meat-and-three restaurants (try Puckett's) and fried chicken spots (Hattie B's Hot Chicken will bring tears to your eyes) continue to flourish. For some fun teambuilding, head to Pinewood Social, an open-all-day restaurant with a coffee shop, cocktail bar, six vintage bowling lanes, a karaoke lounge and two outdoor dipping pools alongside bocce ball and ping-pong tables. Or incorporate Nashville's music culture at City Winery, a 30,000-sq.-ft. warehouse with a 125-seat restaurant, on-site winemaking facility (there's more than 400 wines to choose from) and several event spaces including a rooftop patio.

MUST-TRY TASTES

Crispy hot sweetbreads at Pinewood Social

Crispy chicken skins with white barbecue sauce and thyme at Husk

Squid ink pasta with nduja (pork sausage) and shrimp at Rolf and Daughters

PLANNER PICKS

Heed the suggestions of these planners and try these dishes next time you're in town:

"Crispy imperial rolls, claypot chicken and shaking beef at The Slanted Door in San Francisco." —**Faye Fukuda, Prestige Global Meeting Source**

"The best meal I've had in years was at The Grange in Providence, Rhode Island. It blew my mind. The menu changes frequently, but if I had to pick one dish it would be the General Tso's tacos." —**Casey Erisman, Consortium for Energy Efficiency**

"The Willows Inn on Lummi Island in Washington. The chef just won the James Beard Award!" —**Carolyn Gibbons, Fairhaven Global Site Solutions**

"Stuffed pork loin at Andina in Portland, Oregon. It's to die for!" —**Christie Blake, Northwest GEM**

"Thai-style fried chicken at Tuk Tuk Taproom in San Antonio. It tastes like you're in Thailand." —**Virginia Black, Acelity**

"For authentic Mexican food, no one beats El Huarachito in L.A. I have two favorite dishes: enchiladas de mole and flautas locas." —**Joel Hernandez, Tetra Tech**

"Bone-in cowboy-cut rib-eye for two at Eddie V's Prime Seafood in Orlando." —**Mark Benson, AM&H Solutions**



Chef Kelly English of Restaurant Iris

MEMPHIS

Host to the World Championship Barbecue Cooking Contest, the 'cue-centric city of Memphis, Tennessee, is more than just a leader in pulled pork. In fact, thanks to talented young chefs like Kelly English of Restaurant Iris, a charming French-Creole restaurant near historic Overton Square, and The Second Line, which dishes out New Orleans classics like po'boys, seafood plates and roasted meats, as well as famed duo Andy Ticer and Michael Hudman (their restaurants Hog & Hominy, Andrew Michael Italian Kitchen and Porcellino's have won nearly every restaurant award imaginable, including a spot on GQ's 12 Most Outstanding Restaurants list), Memphis is now firmly planted near the top of the South's tastiest towns. Planners seeking rooftop spaces can book at Madison Hotel and The Peabody Memphis, while brew enthusiasts can head to one of the city's many tap rooms, like High Cotton, Wiseacre and Memphis Made, for tours and tastings.

MUST-TRY TASTES

Lobster knuckle sandwich with tarragon and tomatoes at Restaurant Iris

Peanut butter pie at Hog & Hominy

Multicourse \$45 prix fixe menu (the last Monday of each month) at Andrew Michael Italian Kitchen



The City of Brotherly Love has all the variety and talented bigwigs that Manhattan boasts, but with all the heart you'd expect from charming small towns. "Planning meetings and events in Philly doesn't mean you have to sacrifice flavor," says Julie Coker Graham, executive vice president at Philadelphia Convention & Visitors Bureau.

An incubator for local culinary talent, Philly is home to many chefs and restaurateurs who've turned their skills into restaurant empires. Case in point: CookNSolo Restaurants, the joint venture of Steve Cook and Michael Solomonov that includes Zahav (which has two private dining rooms), Percy Street Barbecue (you can rent private dining space with delicious group menus here), Dizengoff, Abe Fisher and the legendary Federal Donuts, a fried chicken and doughnut shop. Or Jose Garces, whose Spanish tapas favorite Amada was only the start of his cache of award-winning restaurants, including Distrito, Tinto, Garces Trading Company, Village Whiskey, Rosa Blanca, JG Domestic and Volver, "just one of the places planners have recently raved

about," says Coker Graham. Meanwhile, power couple Valerie Safran and Marcie Turney worked for nearly a decade to transform the once-desolate neighborhood of 13th Street into what is now thriving, trendy Midtown Village with seven of their restaurants and shops, including a Spanish tapas bar (Barbuzzo), chocolatier (Marcie Blaine) and cozy Italian eatery (Little Nonna's).

The food culture doesn't stop with restaurants. Planners can help guests expand their own cooking repertoire by booking a private cooking class at Cook, a 16-seat demo kitchen-and-classroom concept, which also has a bookstore, pantry and cookware boutique. Caffeine addicts can flock to La Colombe's massive Fishtown location for coffee tastings, while supporters of sustainable farming can take butchery classes at Kensington Quarters.

One of the most unique and appealing aspects of Philly's culinary scene is the BYOB phenomenon, whereby more than 200 restaurants in town allow guests to bring their own wine or beer, a truly cost-effective way for groups to dine out.

Clockwise from left: Kitchen at Little Nonna's; Barbuzzo patio; pizza at Osteria.



MUST-TRY TASTES

Gruyere popover foie gras soup at Sbraga

Pannocchia (truffled corn and scallion) pizza at Osteria

Salted caramel budino with dark chocolate crust, vanilla bean caramel and sea salt at Barbuzzo

HOUSTON

Houston's dining scene is as diverse as its 2 million residents. With more than 10,000 restaurants serving food from 70-plus countries, there's no shortage of delicious tastes in town. And the good news is the average price of a meal in Houston (\$35.57) is less than the national average of \$40.53, according to Zagat, meaning it's a relatively affordable dining destination—surprising when you consider Houston claims a handful of celebrity chefs, like 2014 James Beard Award winner Chris Shepherd of Underbelly, Rebecca Masson of Fluff Bake Bar (a “Top Chef: Just Desserts” contestant), and Anita Jaisinghani of Pondicheri and Bryan Caswell of Reef and El Real Tex-Mex, both of whom are James Beard semifinalists. Explore Houston's vibrant dining culture with a stroll down trendy Westheimer Road, where farm-to-table joints like Underbelly and Uchi (an outpost of the popular Austin Japanese restaurant) line the walkable street just begging for a sustainable food tour. In fact, not only are walking culinary tours available throughout the city, but top-tier chefs like Shepherd even lead them. Masson's chocolate tour is not to be missed.

MUST-TRY TASTES

Pork thit kho with Thai-style rice at Underbelly

Beef brisket at Killen's Barbecue

Whole Texas-style barbecue baby crabs at Uchi

SEATTLE

Whether you're craving just-plucked-from-the-water seafood, farm-to-table vegetables, artisanal cheese, freshly roasted coffee or craft beer, Seattle truly walks the walk of fresh, local and seasonal. And they've got the James Beard-nominated chefs to prove it—see Tom Douglas' arsenal of 11 restaurants (groups can even take cooking classes at his Hot Stove Society), Ethan Stowell's handful of establishments (How to Cook a Wolf is a favorite for rustic Italian small plates), and Renee Erickson's The Walrus and the Carpenter, where oysters, locally harvested clams and mussels, and smoked fish reign supreme. Pike Place Market, the oldest continuously operated public farmers market in the country, has it all, and does private tours for groups. Winery tours and private events can also be held at nearby Chateau Ste. Michelle.

MUST-TRY TASTES

Beet salad with lemon yogurt, Gorgonzola and hazelnut at How to Cook a Wolf

Fried oysters with cilantro aioli at The Walrus and the Carpenter

Fried chicken biscuit at Serious Pie & Biscuit

“Good old deep-fried cheese curds at The Old Fashioned in Madison, Wisconsin, are the best in the Midwest.”

—**Kay Johnson-Frutiger, Covance**

“Smoked salmon on crispy potato pancake at Bistro Aix on Steiner Street in San Francisco.” —**Julie Chenard, AssetMark Inc.**

“Chorizo-stuffed dates at Chicago's Avec—the best!” —**Kate Campbell, HelmsBriscoe**

“Huevos motulenos at Cafe Pasqual's in Santa Fe, New Mexico.”

—**Giovanna Brandi, Gioworks International**

“My favorite local spot in New Orleans is Baru Bistro & Tapas, which is on Magazine Street in Uptown. It's Spanish and BYOB. Irene's Cuisine is my fave in the French Quarter—try the soft-shell crabs and osso buco.”

—**Jill DiMarco, Access Destination Services**

“The cornbread at Founding Farmers in Tysons, Virginia.”

—**Laura Colomb, Booz Allen Hamilton**

“Lamb kabobs at Ananda in Fulton, Maryland, between Baltimore and D.C.” —**Rob Cohen, AllianceBenefits**

“Shrimp and grits at M. Restaurant and Bar in Nashville. This restaurant worked with me for a private dinner for my group of 100 people with such finesse.”

—**Carolyn Davis, Strategic Meeting Partners**

Confit duck leg with buttermilk-onion soubise at Miller Union



ATLANTA

It used to be the case that if you wanted a good meal in Atlanta, you had to go to Buckhead. Today, you'll find some of the city's best restaurants in neighborhoods like Inman Park, Decatur and the Westside—with many setting up shop in unsuspecting strip malls, on random street corners or in converted gas stations—and the city has managed to garner more than a dozen semifinalist nods in the 2015 James Beard Foundation Awards. It's no surprise considering the diverse group of chefs like Bruce Logue, who makes pasta a transcendental experience at BoccaLupo; Steven Satterfield, who lets in-season veggies call the shots at Miller Union; and immigrants like Meherwan Irani who brought cuisine from his exotic homeland of India to Atlanta with Chai Pani. For food that rivals its surroundings, reserve a private spot at Canoe's river garden venue, where manicured gardens and riverfront views set the stage for events of up to 150 people. For something a bit edgier, try Two Urban Licks, where innovative cuisine is served up alongside live blues, bocce ball and skyline views in any of the restaurant's multiple event spaces, like the patio, ballroom or courtyard.

MUST-TRY TASTES

Deconstructed shrimp and grits at Miller Union

Matchstick okra fries with lime juice and salt at Chai Pani

Roman fried cauliflower with capers, mint and Meyer lemon at BoccaLupo