

Dining for the Derby

Where to win, place or show in Louisville, a hotbed of culinary choices

BY DANA MCMAHAN
 Special to Tribune Newspapers

LOUISVILLE, Ky. — Getting a seat at Louisville's best restaurants on Kentucky Derby weekend can feel as impossible as a long shot's chances of taking home the roses. It's no secret that the city's culinary scene is among the hottest in the country. Recognition continues to pour in from national publications, the James Beard Foundation and food bloggers.

Longtime institutions go neck and neck now with upstarts bent on putting out ever more innovative and flat-out delicious dishes. If you're in town just for the May 4 Derby, plotting out your dining schedule is as tricky as filling in that exacta box at the track. From the standpoint of a writer lucky enough to live and eat here year-round, here then is your guide to the best of the best.

To help you make the tough calls, we've grouped the restaurants racing-style. For the "win," as you might imagine, the odds are long that you will get in, and in most cases you will spend a pretty penny. "Place" offers friendlier odds and will take less of a hit on your wallet. Go for "show" and you'll discover some local gems favored by insiders — and you'll have plenty of dough left for the track.

Top chef

Win: Louisville's Edward Lee, a competitor on "Top Chef" and "Iron Chef," is your win for 610 Magnolia (610 W. Magnolia Ave., 502-636-0783, 610magnolia.com), where exquisitely prepared dishes reflect his Korean-by-way-of-Brooklyn roots and the Southern table where he now presides. Getting in is a long shot, though, if you don't book well in advance. Call now.

Place: Get yourself to laid-back Eiderdown (983 Goss Ave., 502-290-2390, eiderdowngermantown.com) in Germantown. Creative nose-to-tail fare from the under-the-

radar but top-notch chef Brian Morgan may be the best culinary secret in the city. Don't go home without trying the signature seasonally updated spaetzle and one of their nicely curated selection of craft beers on tap.

Show: Fans swear that the best bread in the country is at Blue Dog Bakery (2868 Frankfort Ave., 502-899-9800, bluedogbakeryandcafe.com), where they line up on weekends to pick up the baguettes they've reserved. The drool-worthy house-made bacon appearing throughout the cafe menu comes from the owners' pastured Red Wattle hogs across town.

It's a pizza town too

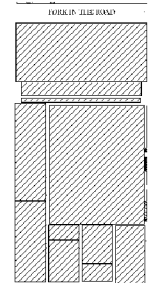
Win: Look for the restored service station with the muscle cars smashing into one another in ultra slow motion out front and you've found Garage Bar (700 E. Market St., 502-749-7100, garageonmarket.com). Thin-crust pizzas baked in a direct-from-Naples oven bear country ham shaved right here at the ham bar, earning every penny of the high price tag they command.

Place: To skip the trendy scene, head to the locals-only pizza parlor Bonnie & Clyde's (7611 Dixie Highway, 502-935-5540). Order and pay up (cash only), take a greasy, oversized playing card, and wait for your "number" to be called from your communal table. Nothing has changed here since the 1970s, including the crisp, addictive, corn-meal-scattered crust.

Show: Some of the most devout pizza fans can be found rallying behind Ppapalinos (947 Baxter Ave., 502-749-8525, ppapalinospizza.com), where enormous \$3.50 New York-style slices emerge nonstop from the wall of ovens in this hopping spot in the Highlands.

Yes, you're in the South

Win: It's not the only farm-to-table restaurant in town, but Harvest (624 E. Market St., 502-384-9090, harvestlouisville.com) means business. Dine under the smiling photo of the farmer who raised your chicken (because you owe it to yourself to have



the buttermilk fried chicken and gravy), and check out the wall map of suppliers; Harvest vows that 80 percent of ingredients come from within 100 miles. Luckily, you'll be here in time for fresh spring goodness.

Place: Across the Ohio River, Feast BBQ (116 W. Main St., New Albany, Ind., 812-920-0454, feastbbq.com) brings a classically trained approach to barbecue in a century-plus old saloon. The tantalizing result is worth the long wait at the counter and the gamble that you'll even find a seat.

Show: If it's traditional Southern comfort food you're after, Food 4 UR Soul (612 S. 5th St., 502-614-6363, food4ursoulky.com) will heap a plate with homemade grandma-style cooking made with love. Think greens, mac and cheese, cornbread, barbecue and fried catfish. This is the real deal. The warm welcome — they practically ask you back to the kitchen — is a bonus.

But wait, there's more

You can't go wrong with any of these favorites either.

Win: **Proof on Main** (702 W. Main St., 502-217-6360, proofonmain.com). Follow the celebrities for refined direct-from-the-garden fare.

Place: Hillbilly Tea (120 S. 1st St., 502-587-7350, hillbillytea.com). Stepped-up Appalachian cuisine comes with a rare range of teas.

Show: Smoketown USA (1153 Logan St., 502-409-9180, smoketownusa.com). A colorful local barbecue find with vegetarian-friendly options.

Win: Mayan Cafe (813 E. Market St., 502-

566-0651, themayancafe.com) or Seviche (1538 Bardstown Road, 502-473-8560, sevicherestaurant.com). Sophisticated south-of-the-border fare.

Place: El Mundo (2345 Frankfort Ave., 502-899-9930, 502elmundo.com). A funky favorite among vegetarians and omnivores alike.

Show: Lolita's Tacos (4222 Poplar Level Road, 502-459-4356). Cheap, fresh and tasty California-style Mexican grub.

Win: Basa (2244 Frankfort Ave., 502-896-1016, basarestaurant.net). Elegant, modern Vietnamese offerings.

Place: Vietnam Kitchen (5339 Mitscher Ave., 502-363-7535, vietnamkitchen.net). Immensely popular, authentic Vietnamese joint in a strip mall.

Show: Banh Mi Hero (2245 Bardstown Road, 502-456-2022, banhmihero.com). The popular Saigon street food in traditional and innovative forms.

Win: Jack Fry's (1007 Bardstown Road, 502-452-9244, jackfrys.com) or Lilly's (1147 Bardstown Road, 502-451-0447, lillyslapeche.com). Old-school and enduring Louisville classics.

Place: Holy Grale (1034 Bardstown Road, 502-459-9939, holygralelouisville.com). Elevated pub fare designed to accompany a heavenly craft beer selection.

Show: Louisville's food trucks (bit.ly/villetrucks). Creative, tasty, roving fare from routine to gourmet burgers that are worth tracking down.

ctc-travel@tribune.com



JAY FULLER/LEXINGTON HERALD-LEADER PHOTO

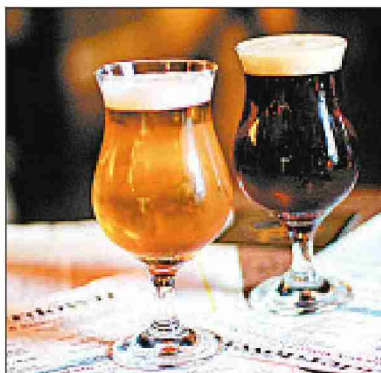
The Kentucky Derby runs May 4, when thousands will descend on Louisville. The town has developed a reputation for cuisine, so to eat at some of its hottest restaurants, book now.



At Garage Bar, thin-crust pizzas are baked in a direct-from-Naples oven.



Buttermilk fried chicken from Harvest.



Beer from Eiderdown.



Cappuccino at Blue Dog Bakery.