

FOODIE FIND



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Enjoying a *Bellyful* in the Bluegrass State

**Kentucky serves up
Southern cuisine
at its finest—with a
distinctive
regional twist.**

By Rich Warren



*Rich's second road song:
"Freeway of Love"
by Aretha Franklin*



Left: Spoonbread is such a favored Kentucky food that the town of Berea holds an annual festival to celebrate it.

Bottom: Burgoo is Kentucky's quintessential stew. It is always served at the Kentucky Derby.



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PHOTO BY BRENT HOFACKER

Derby-Pie is a registered trademark of Kern's Kitchen in Louisville, but variations of the custardy chocolate-walnut dessert are served up throughout Kentucky.

Some people say that Kentucky's cuisine is just another form of Southern cooking. And, yes, you'll find collard greens, country ham, grits and black-eyed peas on many a menu in the Bluegrass State, but you'll also find Kentucky chefs putting their unique spin on traditional Southern dishes, raising them to an art form. Take a simple pork chop, for example. Many Kentucky chefs brine the chops in bourbon, brown sugar and spices and then sear them on both sides before baking them at a low temperature, transforming the chops into a veritable flavor explosion. And, of course, a certain colonel from Corbin with a goatee and hair as white as his suit coat exported Kentucky's fried chicken to the entire world.

Nevertheless, a number of dishes unique to Kentucky give the state a cuisine of its own. Perhaps the quintessential example is the Hot Brown, an open-faced turkey sandwich piled high on Texas toast, then topped with bacon, tomatoes and a deliciously cheesy Mornay sauce, all baked until it's bubbly. Now found in every corner of the state, the sandwich had its beginnings at Louisville's Brown Hotel, where in 1926 a chef weary of the

same-old, same-old threw together ingredients he had on hand to create the now famous concoction and serve it to late-night dancers clamoring for a quick bite. Today, many variations of the Hot Brown exist—there's even a Hot Brown pizza—but the Brown Hotel remains the place to enjoy the comfort food in its pristine form.

Then there's burgoo, a spicy stew that's rarely made the same way twice. A rule of thumb is that burgoo must contain at least three kinds of meat along with assorted vegetables. In the old days, the meats might have been squirrel, possum and raccoon, but nowadays, they're more typically chicken, pork and beef. The veggies can include any combination of cabbage, potatoes, corn, carrots, okra, celery and tomatoes. All this deliciousness is slow cooked in huge batches. No matter what's thrown in the pot, the best burgoo is thick enough that a spoon will stick straight up in it.

The state also boasts distinctive side dishes. Kentucky's spoonbread, for example, is a moist corn soufflé that might be considered cornbread's fancy cousin. The town of Berea holds a Spoonbread Festival each September, but the bread is available all year long

at the town's Boone Tavern. When you order benedictine from a Kentucky menu, you'll be served a cucumber and cream cheese dish, which can be served in variations such as a sandwich, dip or salad dressing.

The classic Derby-Pie dessert is a registered trademark of Kern's Kitchen in Louisville, but imitations of the custardy chocolate-walnut pie, including those made with pecans, can be found marketed under different names in many restaurants throughout the state.

The Spirit of Kentucky

With 95 percent of the world's bourbon production taking place in Kentucky, it's not surprising that the ubiquitous spirit makes its way into many food items as well as beverages. With its caramel and vanilla tones, bourbon works especially well in desserts. Bourbon balls—bourbon-soaked fondant centers dipped in fine chocolate and topped with a pecan or walnut—are one particularly delicious delicacy, but bourbon pecan pie and bread pudding with bourbon sauce are also delectable.

Bourbon also works well in sauces, marinades and glazes for savory dishes and meats, yielding favorites

such as pork tenderloin in bourbon and bourbon-glazed salmon. Chef Ouita Michel owns eight restaurants in central Kentucky, ranging from the fine-dining Holly Hill Inn in Midway to Wallace Station near Versailles, a restaurant in a former country store famed for its comfort food creations. She advises chefs not to skimp on the bourbon. "If you can't taste the bourbon in your dish, you didn't use enough. Add more!" she says.

Although tradition rules in the kitchens of many Kentucky chefs, others like to put innovative twists on old recipes. The "Not Brown" at Bottle and Bond Kitchen and Bar, the in-house restaurant at Bardstown Bourbon Company, is one such example. Chef John Castro has kept the traditional Hot Brown's bacon and Mornay sauce but substitutes fried green tomatoes for Texas toast, and seafood for turkey.

"I think people like playful experiments on the classics," he says. "But at the end of the day, they want their food to be delicious, beautiful and simple."

Deliciousness lies at the heart of Kentucky cuisine, whether it's a Southern staple or a lip-smacking local delicacy.

Hot Brown

Serves two



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Ingredients

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| 2 oz. whole butter | 14 oz. sliced roasted turkey breast, sliced thick |
| 2 oz. all-purpose flour | 4 slices of Texas toast (with the crust trimmed) |
| 8 oz. heavy cream | 4 slices of crispy bacon |
| 8 oz. whole milk | 2 Roma tomatoes, halved |
| ½ cup of Pecorino Romano cheese (plus 1 tbsp. for garnish) | Paprika |
| Pinch of ground nutmeg | Parsley |
| Salt and pepper to taste | |

Preparation

In a two-quart saucepan, melt butter, and slowly whisk in flour until combined and forms a thick paste (roux). Continue to cook roux for two minutes over medium-low heat, stirring frequently. Whisk heavy cream and whole milk into the roux, and cook over medium heat until the cream begins to simmer, about two to three minutes. Remove sauce from heat, and slowly whisk in Pecorino Romano cheese until the Mornay sauce is smooth. Add nutmeg, salt and pepper to taste.

For each Hot Brown, place two slices of toast with the crusts cut off in an oven-safe dish; one slice is cut in half, corner to corner, to make two triangles, and the other slice is left in a square shape. Then cover with seven ounces of turkey. Take the two halves of Roma tomato and two toast points, and set them alongside the base of the turkey and toast. Next, pour one-half of the Mornay sauce to completely cover the dish. Sprinkle with additional Pecorino Romano cheese.

Place the entire dish in the oven. Suggested bake time is 20 minutes at 350 degrees. When the cheese begins to brown and bubble, remove the dish from the oven, cross two pieces of crispy bacon on top, sprinkle with paprika and parsley, and serve immediately.

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