



The Mekong Xpress plays at The Answer on Monday nights.



# ESSENTIAL EATS

# A to Z

by  
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Genevelyn Steele

An alphabetical guide to the dishes,  
drinks, and dining experiences that  
are classically Richmond



**A** is for  
The Answer

An Bui might well be considered the godfather of craft beer in Richmond, first with a breakout beer list at his landmark restaurant, Mekong, then by shepherding the James River Homebrewers, which became an incubator for area brewers and breweries. Then came The Answer in 2014, a brewery and taproom adjacent to Mekong where you can find both the expected and the unique. —Piet E. Jones



# B

## is for Baked Spaghetti

This staple at Joe's Inn — Spaghetti A La Joe — is the epitome of comfort food: mounds of spaghetti with either a meat or marinara sauce, and bubbling baked cheese. Looking for a heaping pile of leftovers to get you through the week? This should last you a few meals. Need to carb-load before a race? There's a reason the line is out the door before the annual Monument Avenue 10K and Richmond Marathon. Pro tip: Placing an order for Spaghetti Albert will you get a less daunting portion of pasta. We wouldn't call it small, though, just slightly more manageable. —Megan Irvin

# C

## is for Cafe Con Leche

Want to inspire social media envy among your friends? Pop into Kuba Kuba just after the doors open at 9 a.m. — when everyone you know is already at their desk — and saddle up to the bar. Follow by posting a picture of this frothy, classic mix of espresso and sweetened condensed milk, presented in a diner-style mug that's emblazoned with the signature Kuba Kuba logo. Sit back and supercharge your day while the likes and comments pile up. Top the beverage with a little regular coffee at the halfway point to extend enjoyment. —PEJ



TOP: ROB HENDRICKS





# D

## is for Devil's Mess

This beloved brunch option at the Shockoe stalwart Millie's has quite a back story. While growing up in the U.K., owner Paul Keevil had three loves: pubs, pints and curry. After moving to L.A. in the '80s, the starving musician was greeted by sunshine, as well as a playground of stores selling exotic spices and ingredients. The open-faced, Indian-inspired omelet of sausage, tomatoes, cheese and curry-style spices topped with avocado first premiered at Millie's on Sunset Boulevard. Ordered by musicians Annie Lennox, Tom Waits and Jackson Browne, it was an instant hit. Now, after more than 30 years on the menu at the Richmond iteration of Millie's, the devil is still going strong. —*Eileen Mellon*

# E

## is for Everything Bagels

Rising from over a year's worth of pop-ups at various places from Roaring Pines to Alchemy Coffee, Nate's is the bagel joint Richmond had been waiting for. Owner and former architect Nate Matthews originally began hand-rolling and distributing his sourdough bagels through an unofficial Bagel Club out of his friend's kitchen. Now, on weekend mornings, you'll find a line of carb lovers spilling onto Allen Avenue from Matthews' brick-and-mortar that opened in November 2018. At Nate's, everything bagels are simply that — everything. The bottoms of the plump, fermented sourdough rings are not an afterthought, studded generously with poppy and sesame seeds, garlic and onion. A teeth check after eating one is definitely required. You've been warned. —*EM*



TOP: SARAH WALOR

# F

## is for Fish Boat

Eggleston's Fried Fish Boat is not merely a menu item at Croaker's Spot, but a calling to owner Neveerett "Sugar-Foot" Eggleston III's soul of the sea. In Blackwell, there's only one way to order the golden tower of snowy fish, and that's all the way — four pieces of expertly fried whiting, screaming with sautéed peppers and onions in a kicky tomato sauce. The name "Croaker's Spot" pays homage not to the fish, but to "Croaker," a jazz-loving musical promoter who toured the East Coast with Harlem Renaissance artists. Croaker opened his own spot in Harlem, where close friend Bill "Bojangles" Robinson was said to order "fish ... with plenty peppers and onions, Croaker Man," because it reminded them both of Richmond's Eggleston Hotel. —*Genevelyn Steele*



# G

## is for Greek Festival

Hosted by the Saints Constantine and Helen Greek Orthodox Cathedral, the Richmond Greek Festival is as much a part of the local calendar as any federal holiday. Every year on the weekend after Memorial Day, Richmonders come out in droves for their fill of spanakopita, gyros and decadent desserts like baklava and loukoumades, balls of fried dough topped with honey and cinnamon. Greek dancing and music add to the tradition, and proceeds support the cathedral and other organizations in the community. Mark your calendars for May 28-31, when the 45th annual festival returns. Opa! —MI



# H

## is for Haashrooms

Bulbous cremini, blousy oyster mushrooms and electric orange chicken of the woods spill over from Haashrooms' tables at the South of the James Farmers Market. Owned and operated by husband-and-wife team Steve and Elizabeth Haas, Haashrooms grows and forages more than 15 varieties of mushrooms from their 65 acres in Goochland. Adding to a rotating lineup of seasonal 'shrooms, Haashrooms has introduced tangy, homemade salad dressings, seasoning blends, and mushroom-infused teas and coffees. "Enjoy your mushrooms," Steve frequently calls out, as you walk away from the bustling market tent with a few bags of their fungi and the certainty that you'll do just that. —Stephanie Ganz

LEFT: COURTESY RICHMOND GREEK FESTIVAL

# I

## is for Ibérico Ham

A slow, intimate bite beckons from outside the kitchen at Restaurant Adarra. Chef and co-owner Randall Doetzer doesn't trust anyone else to shave the richly salted, Spanish-cured, Hungarian breed of pig hind from its stand in the intimate Jackson Ward dining room. He can't be blamed — the earth-moving flavors of this import that costs \$40-plus per pound are dependent on a deft hand that can trim an exacting combination of denser, drier and fatter textures from different regions of the aromatic leg. Curing is seasonal, so supply can be an issue — though I've never not seen the ham in its darkened corner, waiting to be shorn and slowly relished with a sparkling, high-acid rosé (Doetzer's pick) or a glass of sherry. —GS



# J

## is for Just Ask

Gelati Celesti, the 36-year-old ice creamery with five area locations, was ahead of the sweet-meets-salty curve when it introduced Just Ask in 1995. The decadent white chocolate ice cream chunked with hand-stirred Oreos and shards of frozen peanut butter is an Italian-style ice cream — a dense base with less air, made with cream rather than milk. Every small batch takes over an hour to prep and 45 minutes to handcraft. It's Gelati Celesti's No. 1 flavor, last year blowing through 13,600 pounds of white chocolate, 4,800 pounds of peanut butter and 156,000 Oreos. Just Ask has even spawned a rarely seen, more evil twin, "Don't Ask," a chocolate ice cream base mixed with peanut butter and golden Oreos. —GS



BELOW: JUSTIN CHESNEY; TOP RIGHT: COURTESY GELATI CELESTI



# K

## is for Kimchi

Kimchi runs like a funky current through the menu at Midlothian's 88 Garden, from the lip-smacking Kimchi Jigae, a steaming hot, brothy bowl of fermented vegetables, jiggling tofu and thinly sliced pork, to the Kimchi Jeon, a crisp yet soft, fritter-esque Korean pancake. With the Korean BBQ, chef-owner Soon Han serves a variety of housemade kimchi, including the traditional cabbage. —SG



# L

## is for Lee's Famous Recipe Chicken

Since 1991, Richmond's Lee's, the fried chicken chain's only outpost in Virginia, has been cranking out craving-worthy, honey-dipped, pressure-cooked fried chicken on a busy stretch of Broad Street. Many a social function, from birthday parties to weddings, has been improved by a platter of Lee's juicy-crispy chicken and its downy biscuits, prepared by a squad of long-tenured employees. Keep sides of their signature creamy ranch and spicy pepper sauces close for requisite dipping. Add dependable macaroni and cheese, and those thoroughly cooked green beans that have grandmas everywhere nodding approvingly, and you've got a meal as comforting as a hand-knit afghan, one so good that we almost forgive Lee's for discontinuing its spicy recipe chicken last year. Almost. —SG



# M

## is for Mama Saba's Pita Chips

These once-you-start-you-can't-stop pita chips are known to evoke envy among their fellow snackable friends. Mama Saba's Pita Chips, created by Mediterranean Bakery & Deli co-owner Saba Abed as a way to use leftover pita bread, evolved into a customer favorite. They have become such a hot commodity, Abed moved production of her famed chips to a separate facility, and now she sells them at grocers from Union Market to Ellwood Thompson's. Rarely does a chip stand so strongly on its own, while still possessing a high level of dipping potential. Tangy and herbaceous, these thin, crispy, olive oil-kissed wafers are coated with vinegar, garlic, oregano, sesame seeds, black pepper and lemon salt. —EM



# N

## is for the Never Series

Did The Veil Brewing Co. name a beer “Never Never Forever Forever” so they could laugh silently when guests order the so-nice-they-named-it-twice brew? Perhaps. In fact, it’s simply a double-fruited version of the 4-year-old brewery’s passionfruit gose, Never Forever, hence the double name. The Never lineup of approachable-ABV fruited goses ranges from pucker bombs like Never Gonnagetit, made with pink guava puree, to Never Goaway, a tropical juice jammer. Look for slushy-style frozen versions of their goses during warmer months. —EM



# O

## is for Oatmeal Cream Pie

Oatmeal cream pies have been a Southern favorite since Little Debbie popularized them in the 1960s. Although the mass-produced pies ignite nostalgia, they don’t hold a candle to the sentimental beauties Shyndigz churns out. Two glorious oatmeal cookies sandwiching a satisfyingly thick cream filling, the Cary Street desserterie sells over a thousand a week. The pies are so beloved, they even inspired an equally popular oatmeal cream pie cake spinoff. The secret touch? Heath bar bits that add a hint of crunchy, chocolaty nuttiness. Each order contains three generous half-sized sandwich pieces, meaning you might even be able to save a piece for later. Might. —PEJ



# P

## is for (Not So) Pad Thai Fries

This is a classic tale of french fries meeting pad thai, falling in love and joining to create something uniquely wonderful. The crunchy, bright, piquant, fun-to-eat, incidentally vegan Not So Pad Thai Fries gained a cult following on the Go Go Vegan Go food truck before landing on the menu at Hang Space in Bon Air. A trio of hoisin, sriracha and a vegan-mayo-based Go Go Sauce mingle atop glistening fries, scattered with onions, bean sprouts, scallions, peanuts and cilantro for a dish that offers something new in each bite and plays well with a cold craft beer. —SG





**Q**  
is for Quoit  
Club Punch

This intoxicating and historical tippie of Jamaican rum, brandy, rainwater madeira, lemon and sugar was created by the celebrated 19th-century Richmond-based African American bartender and cook Jasper Crouch. The Jasper named its Carytown cocktail bar, and proudly pours the drink, in his honor. Crouch concocted his libation at the Quoit Club, a posh club that originated in 1788, where the pillars of Richmond society, including luminaries like Supreme Court Chief Justice John Marshall, would throw quoits (heavy metal rings) at posts. —PEJ

**R**  
is for Richmond  
Restaurant Week

The dining event organized by former Acacia-midtown co-owner Aline Reitzer has brought the restaurant community together to support Feed More since 2001. Diners take advantage of the biannual event, typically held in the spring and fall, to try newer dining additions like Alewife, as well as revisit old favorites like Julep's, and enjoy a three-course meal for under \$30. A portion of the meal cost goes to the local food bank. Since the tradition started nearly two decades ago, the event has raised more than \$800,000, supplying more than 3.2 million meals to neighbors in need. —MI



**S**  
is for Sailor  
Sandwich

Dubbed the "sailor sandwich" because it was the sammie choice for Navy officers who frequented the almost 100-year-old New York Deli, this classic was born right here in Richmond. The deli's menu even states, "If anyone doubts that we're the creator, I challenge them to produce an older menu with [the sailor sandwich] on it." Today, you can also order a sailor at Coppola's Deli or at Dot's Back Inn, but when craving a "sailor," I visit the basement sandwich den version of Cheers: Chiocca's. The towering pile of hot pastrami topped with stubby slices of grilled garlicky knockwurst that offer a satisfying snap is blanketed with melted Swiss and spicy mustard on rye. A pickle spear and some sliced gherkins arrive on the side. Personal choice: Dedicate pickles to one half of the sandwich so you can experience the best of both worlds. —EM

THIS PAGE, TOP AND BOTTOM: JAY PAUL



# T

## is for Tots

Of all of Richmond's iconic dishes, Sticky Rice's bucket of tots might be both the most joked about and most loved. Arriving in a literal tin bucket, it's a favorite for parents in need of something their kids will eat while they enjoy a little sushi— though I've been known to steal a tot or two to dunk in Sticky's slightly spicy tot sauce while waiting for pieces of sashimi. It's also a go-to for budget-conscious VCU students to soak up a night of PBRs. —PEJ



# U

## is for Upside-Down Cupcakes

Sally Bell's Kitchen sells more than 300 cupcakes a day, divided among 11 signature flavors. Chocolate with yellow batter, \$1.89, claims the most register rings, but it's the custardy lemon curd cupcake that is a staff favorite. An airy, lemon chess-meets-cake tang and a dusting of powdered sugar, rather than icing, set this gem apart. All other cupcakes found in the white cardboard box lined with checkerboard tissue paper, aka Richmond Happy Meals, receive icing— on the bottom of the cake, a Sally Bell's signature. Founded in 1924, Sally Bells Kitchen was the winner of a James Beard Foundation America's Classics award in 2015. —GS





# V

## is for Vermicelli Bowl

Order a vermicelli bowl at Vietnam One, a 21-table cafe on West Broad Street facing Horsepen Road. There are a dozen varieties, like V12, grilled tofu and vegetarian spring rolls over slippery noodles, the standard Vietnamese chopped salad lining the bottom. The warm tofu stays puffed from the fryer, yet is soft inside. A drizzle of garlic, lemongrass and sweet peanut glaze is all that's needed to dress this delicate dish. You could dab from the accompanying peanut sauce, but to spoon it on would be too much of a good thing. My server, one of the restaurant's Legion of Efficient, says that in his 13 years at Vietnam One, V8 (house-grill vermicelli) has been the best-seller. It's a combo of chicken, pork and shrimp with a sliced crispy spring roll on top. You decide. —GS



# W

## is for Wings

Follow the smokestacks rising from a bright red and yellow East End Barbecue outpost and find your way to Original Ronnie's BBQ for massive, "made-with-love" wings. After leaving the biz for a short stint, Varina native and pitmaster Ronnie Logan reincarnated the eatery with his son, Darrell Logan, last April. While Ronnie's ribs have many fans, it's the smoked wings that interest me. Slathered in a house-made marinade, cooked low and slow for up to two hours and then sprinkled with a magical melange of spices referred to as "The Rub," they quickly end the "flat vs. drum" wing debate. Make room in your spice cabinet — the seasoning blend Logan uses for the wings became such a hit, he recently debuted bottles of "The Rub" for purchase. —EM





# Y

## is for Yoder's Donuts

Doughnut fads have come and gone in the area, but for nearly a decade, one has stood the test of time: Mrs. Yoder's Kitchen. These simple sourdough delights served by the Yoder family are anything but plain, not cloyingly sweet and have just a hint of tang. Only found aboard the Yoders' food truck, these fresh, sugar-dripping halos typically travel to the South of the James Market, Westbury Pharmacy and the Great Big Greenhouse (check [streetfoodfinder.com](http://streetfoodfinder.com) for schedules), and they have spawned the classic domestic doughnut debate — who is going to fight the lines to bring them home? —PEJ

# Z

## is for ZZQ



There are some places so good it's hard to remember what it was like before they were around, and the Texas barbecue from Chris Fultz and Alex Graf in Scott's Addition at ZZQ certainly fits that bill. In just two years of rising from pop-up to brick-and-mortar status, high praise has poured in from locals and national press alike, with outlets like Texas Monthly and Food Network calling this barbecue some of the best in America. The brisket shines, the potato salad is worth writing home about and the platters — complete with sliced white bread and pickled onions — are Instagram worthy. —MI

# X

## is for Xocolatl Bitters

We'll admit it: This letter was a doozy. And while the chocolaty and cinnamon-spiced Bittermens Xocolatl Mole Bitters aren't exclusive to Saison, they do grace both the restaurant's libation list and the shelves at Saison Market. Used in multiple cocktails at Saison and joined by spirits ranging from dry gin to blanco tequila, sherry and rye whiskey, they showcase the team's understanding of atypical, nuanced ingredients, as well as their bold ability to deliver a drink that leads to that a-ha moment. The bitters are also 100% on brand with the Jackson Ward eatery's Latin-tinged menu. —EM