

**The Restaurant LIST**

THE REGION'S TOP 25 PLACES TO DINE

A snapshot of a crowded, talented field, our list features Richmond-area restaurants that we can recommend without worry, spots that continue to make lasting impressions and keep us coming back. We revisited established eateries and sampled newer, noteworthy additions (including one pop-up that will soon put down roots), focusing mostly on places that offer dinner and that opened before July 31, 2023. From reliable service to consistently captivating meals, these restaurants represent the best places to eat right now.

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**WINE + DINE**

**IN THE FAMILY**  
 Check out the establishments of these famed chefs, many of whom are featured in our list to be their own right.

Follow the blue boxes to uncover three more must-stop eateries. While they focus on wine and present plenty of snag-worthy bottles, they also offer excellent food and easy hospitality.

**WINE + DINE**  
 Penny's Wine Shop and bottles to go.

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 Led by Richmond newcomer Emma Taylor, Metzger's kitchen serves up German-influenced game and offal as well as some of the city's most appetizing and thoughtful veg-centric dishes.

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**Adarra**  
 628 N. First St., [restaurantadarra.com](#)

Seasonal, Baroque-inspired food and a staggering collection of organic, biodynamic wines work in lockstep at Adarra, as do husband-and-wife owners Randall and Lyne Doetter. It's not a proper trip to this warm, mood-setting restaurant without pinning glasses tickled peppers stuffed with anchovies and olives paired with amontillado sherry and a plate of the delightfully messy gambas al ajillo (head-on garlic shrimp). Be sure to order from the sweeping collection of Spanish conserves, particularly the sardines in butter. Adarra moves to the former Mamma Zia's building once renovations are complete. —Stephanie Ganz

**Lehja**  
 11800 W. Broad St., Suite 290, [lehja.com](#)

Read it and weep: The menu at Lehja leaves diners benefit that they can't order six entrees each. Rousing, flavor-packed Indian fare that integrates surprising but beloved elements such as blue crab, duck confit and ghost pepper make Lehja stand out not just in Richmond but in America, and it's no wonder that chef Sunny Banerji has been a James Beard Award semifinalist. Order the coconut curry scallops, the duck salt bali and the paneer-asparagus lazzardar. Sop up every drop with homemade rnaan, and don't miss their nationally recognized wine list. —Bird Cox

**Metzger Bar & Butchery**  
 801 N. 23rd St., [metzgerbarandbutchery.com](#)

Led by Richmond newcomer Emma Taylor, Metzger's kitchen serves up German-influenced game and offal as well as some of the city's most appetizing and thoughtful veg-centric dishes. If you see cabbage on the menu, order it and be instantly transformed into a fanatic. Their Sunday brunch boasts dreamy eggs in cocotte and an exceptional bloody mary. The first in 'Top Chef' alum Britanny Anderson's restaurant empire, Metzger has two sibling concepts equally deserving of a stop: the Alpine-forward **Remme**, Pass and the adjacent good-time cocktail lounge **Black Lodge**. —SG

**Lemaire**  
 1021 W. Franklin St., [lemairerestaurant.com](#)

Upon entering the Beaux Arts architectural marvel that is the Jefferson Hotel, amble through the marble corridors and past statues celebrating alligators that once idled in the hotel fountain. Then, step into the white-tiled, vaulted Lemaire. It's a tightrope walk between anachronistic and iconic, one that the AAA Four-Diamond recipient executes with sure footing. To wit, an elder's birthday dinner gets fitted into Lemaire's Franklin Street atrium. The tables are spacious, the acoustics quiet and plates are expertly bedecked with jumbo lump crabcakes and beef tenderloin. Over at the bar, crystal clinks as groomsmen toast raucously. —Genevieve Steele

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**Penny's Wine Shop**  
 405 Brook Road, [pennysrva.com](#)

Penny's is the sort of undefinable, make-it-what-you-want spot Jackson Ward has been waiting for. A blend of Brooklyn hip, Lura chic and Richmond charisma, its owners Lance Lemon and Kristen Gardner-Besh have established a neighborhood den where wines reign and food is a lively accompaniment. Bonus: a cocktail menu of classics done right, a charcuterie selection accompanied by habit-forming Aleppo honey and bottles to go. The tiny kitchen, led by chef Emmanuel "Manny" Baiden and crew, cranks out signature dishes including succulent short ribs, exotic chow with fennel and braised beans, and ricotta and plum semifreddo. —Eileen Mellon

**ZZO**  
 3201 W. Moore St., [zzovrva.com](#)

Slow-cooked Texas-style barbecue enjoyed a warm reception in RVA when ZZQ debuted in 2018. The Scott's Addition smokehouse is known for its long but fast-moving lines, punctuated by bites of burnt ends and co-owner Alex Graf's smiling service. Open Wednesday through Sunday, there's always a bevy bonus in store at ZZQ, from beef-and-cheddar sandwiches on Thursdays to Pastрами Fridays and smoked prime rib on Sundays. Real fans stay glued to social media for specials such as lacquered, spice-crusting bacon ribs or pulled smoked lamb. This year, ZZQ expanded its footprint with **Eazy Burgers**, serving up black Angus burgers, hot dogs and fries unrolled in the city, all from the backyard they share with neighboring business and longtime friends **Adard Craft Ales**. —SG

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**Lost Letter**  
 2939 W. Clay St., [lostletterva.com](#)

If Longoven's closure sparked rumors that the tweeker-focused movement has ceased, the team has hushed all whispers through its rebirth restaurant, **Lost Letter**, leaning into fare from Italy's Piedmont region, the subtly romantic refuge has earned a reputation for crowd-worthy antipasti including the acciughe ai verdi (anchovies in salsa verde) or la tur ai forno and spack, a baked lobe of tomato cheese wrapped in cured Italian ham. **Lost Letter's** impeccable, intuitive service leaves guests feeling cozy and cared for, a rare feat in today's dining world. Under the direction of sommelier Graym Vickers, the wine list presents something for everyone, from easy-drinking whites to after-dinner amaro. —SG

626 China St., [lopoussum.com](#)

The world needs more dark shadows, places where the denizens of dusk, line cooks and floor staff, openly fly their fine-dining freak flags. Here, dishes are queer, so get used to it. You'll not hear praise of LQ that doesn't include the homoeroticly named **Beef Swellington**, a filet with truffled duxelles, or oysters Rockefeller misted tableside with absinthe. Both are attended by statues of David turned to a '70s hi-fi. Chef and proprietor David Shannon is Richmond's John Waters. If Waters were a chef de cuisine, Shannon takes workday favorites, such as Bunt cake and mac and cheese, and transforms them with his strangely beautiful, skillful techniques. —GS

**Midlothian Chef's Kitchen**  
 1501 Buay St., [midlothianchefskitchen.com](#)

One expects nothing less than pure finesse from David Dunlap, who has cooked in multiple Michelin-starred restaurants and studied with some of the most renowned chefs in the world (after, The Inn at Little Washington's Patrick O'Connell) — and he delivers, while defying the expectation that a dining experience of this caliber can't be accessible and affable. Let the sherry in the chestnut soup dance across your palate while chatting with your server about wines of the world. Revel in the genius of cocooni granita's ability to entice a beet salad, and spend an entire visit working your way through the appetizers; you won't regret it. —BC

**Dinamo**  
 622 W. Cary St., [dinamomichmond.com](#)

Dinamo devotees flock to the Cary Street restaurant to experience a party of South, Italian and Mediterranean cuisine grooving in sync under one roof. Squid ink pasta, chopped liver crostini and white pizza are popular standing orders, along with fleeting specialties from soft shells to ramp gnocci and tortellini en brodo. Co-owned by Ed Vassio and Mya Antai, the honey hole in the wall fits a decade in business this year and moves through the moblions with an ease diners can feel. Want a reservation? Pick up the phone. —EM

**The Roosevelt**  
 623 N. 25th St., [rooseveltva.com](#)

Over a decade into its journey, The Roosevelt still manages to charm guests. The Church Hill mainstay has experienced a renaissance through its executive chef, Chesterfield native Leah Branch, backed by Bar Manager Zach McRoy (check out his amaro program) and Wine Director Troy Hancock. The menu is a playful projection of Branch's upbringing, local produce and dishes guided by the African diaspora, with thoughtful touches from an Urfa chile pepper gloss on fried catfish to cracklings sprinkled on tobacco-smoked pork butt and served with Deb's Nana's collards. Also swigging by Laura Lee's in South Side, another neighborhood eatery operated by Roosevelt co-owner Kendra Feather. —EM

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**CELLADORA WINES**  
 111 N. Lombardy St., [celladorawines.com](#)

Patrons may pop in to Celladora for a bottle of wine and end up spending an hour soaking up the sunlight at one of its window-facing tables with a glass of whatever owner Megan Lee Hopkins is pouring at the moment. One of the shiniest hidden gems in the city is the Thursday and Friday brunch from artist, baker and chef Olivia Wilson (who painted the mural that adorns one wall of the wine shop), featuring peak-season produce from Birdhouse Farmers Market. Less hidden but no less delightful are the wine-adjacent dinner and brunch menus from chef Ben Burakoff. —SG

**Conejo**  
 5280 Patterson Ave., [conejococina.com](#)

Fresh-milled heirloom corn is the backbone of this elegant, modern Mexican haven, and its earthy goodness comes through in every painstakingly refined dish. **Costado** you're obliged to try the tatal and enchilada. Start with a gorgeous rockfish ceviche accented by apple and serrano chiles, then dive into the rich carne en su jugo, a hanger steak with canary beans and bacon (and, of course, housemade tortillas with grains milled by Sub Rosa Bakery), or melt-dippy quesabirria tacos. The herbaceous and spicy cucumber-jalapeno margarita is one of the best mixes in the city. Tight, friendly service abounds. —BC

**Full Kee**  
 6400 Horsepen Road

The clamor of dim sum carts rolling through steam clouds is part of a Sunday-afternoon tradition. Families gather around large, round tables, aiming their chopsticks across the Lazy Susan to grab bites of dumpling, Chinese broccoli, Hong Kong noodles and ribs before the next spin. Open tabletop signal for more delicate chameleon tea with rock sugar. Though Full Kee has the largest dim sum menu in the area on weekends, it's the chef's seafood and vegetable specials you don't want to skip. Try the jumbo scallops with black bean sauce and stir-fried leek flower. —GS

**Grisette**  
 3119 E. Marshall St., [grissetterva.com](#)

Know for its outrageously delicious chicken liver mousse, this French-tinged Church Hill haunt stays packed with regulars and revelry. Work your way through its deftly selected smorgastord — three meats, three cheeses and plenty of pickled fruit — and crack bread — and stick around for a best-in-class version of steak frites. The Grisette team is always plotting, so be on the lookout for notices of lobster roll pop-ups, farm dinners and wine-heavy events at sister concept **Jardin**. —SG

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**Perly's**  
 111 E. Grace St., [perlyrichmond.com](#)

In a downtown space that has served as a culinary cornerstone since 1963 (with some changing of hands and cuisines), Perly's riffs on Jewish delights and whips up traditional deli dishes you rarely find outside of New York. Where else in Richmond can you sit down for a nice knish and a smoked fish platter? Unmissable wild inventions by chef and co-owner Kevin Roberts include **Schubby Fries** — basically the inside of a Beuken over fried potatoes — and the **Chester Hot Dog**, embellished with a fried eye pickle and egg salad. The Benny Goodman, a latte-based Benedict with salmon, poached eggs and roe, is a brunch-time standout, and dessert should always include a rainbow cookie. —BC

**Lille Pearl**  
 456 E. Grace St., [lillepearlva.com](#)

Africa, North Carolina and pure heart mingle on the plate at **Lille Pearl**, in care of chef Mike Lindsey and his wife and business partner, Kimberly Love-Lindsey. One at a time, West African mother sauce combining chiles, tomato and onion, braises lamb shank (the dish also appears at Lindsey Food Group's Jubilee, in a stunning seafood hot pot). Flaky seared striped bass swims in rich, creamy-sweet lobster bisque, while sides, including creamed chard corn with slab bacon and piquant Hoppin' John, do justice to the chef's heritage. Dessert is dedicated to banana pudding. In Manchester, find the owners' dinner-only restaurant, **Jubilee**. —BC

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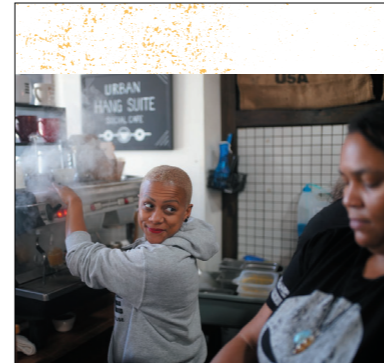


Richmond's job market has made a strong rebound from the COVID-19 pandemic, but there's work to be done if the city is to maintain its progress.

# NOW & LATER

EXPANDING THE RICHMOND LABOR MARKET OVER THE LONG RUN

By Emily McCrary-Ruiz-Esparza



Kelli Lemon, owner of downtown coffee shop Urban Hang Suite, says she needs experienced employees who can run the shop. Without them, Lemon says she'd have to reduce operating hours.

As of November 2022, the Richmond metro area has regained the jobs it had lost since February 2020. Its unemployment rate in January was 3%, half a percentage point below the national average. And there are a host of projects that promise to expand the job market: The CoStar expansion, the arrival of LEGO, a new Walgreens distribution center and growth of educational technology company EAB will, in concert, add more than 4,000 jobs to the Richmond area, not counting the construction projects required to bring the plans to fruition. Manchester and Scott's Addition continue to overflow with commercial and residential development, and the GreenCity project in Henrico County and Diamond District project in the city of Richmond are aimed at reviving long-atrophied areas.

And it's not just jobs that are drawing new residents to Richmond. Jen Keefe, who relocated here from Los Angeles last year, said the city reminded her of the Northeastern towns she grew up in, "but it felt a little smaller in a good way. It felt more relaxed. It felt more

approachable, and immediately I saw more diversity than I would see up there, and it was cool to see such lively, artsy museum and food scenes as well." Richmond's economic outlook is promising. Under the "Economy Forward Framework," which evaluates the inclusive economic growth of midsize U.S. cities, Richmond is classified as Tier 1, or "Forward Ready." This puts the city in the same strata as economic competitors Raleigh and Charlotte in North Carolina and Charleston, South Carolina.

Designed by economists and academics at Tulsa Innovation Labs, the Aspen Institute and Heartland Forward, the

framework measures cities against nine economic metrics, including the accessibility of career opportunities to underserved populations, the diversity of students enrolled in science, technology, engineering and math programs and the share of minority- and women-owned businesses.

Richmond's post-pandemic recovery has outpaced that of the state as a whole, which has returned 77% of jobs lost since 2020 and ranks 45th among the states for this benchmark. Virginia has struggled with the national labor shortage, which is caused by myriad factors. Exacerbating the labor shortage in the commonwealth are a high number of retirements and out-migration that has limited population growth, according to the Virginia Economic Development Partnership.

To maintain its upward trajectory and continue cultivating a healthy labor market, Richmond is up against formidable competition. Cities like Raleigh, Charlotte and Charleston and Nashville, Tennessee, consistently out-jockey the River City for economic development projects that create new jobs. If Richmond is to keep pace, experts say,

Richmond has a dearth of midcareer workers. Local business owners are feeling the pain of this missing demographic.

the city must become a top-of-mind business destination, accelerate its population growth and ensure its workforce is trained and qualified.

### MARKETING THE CITY AS A PLACE TO DO BUSINESS

"If you look at how much money the different states and the different regions spend to market themselves to business decision-makers, ours pales in comparison," says Jennifer Wakefield, president and CEO of the Greater Richmond Partnership, which markets Richmond and Chesterfield, Hanover and Henrico counties to major businesses.

Until two or three years ago, the Richmond metropolitan area was doing little to market itself as a place to do business. Funds for marketing fell off during the Great Recession of 2008 and failed to bounce back and keep up with inflation. Currently, GRP's operating budget for the entire organization is \$2.7 million. For comparison, when Wakefield served as vice president of marketing for the Orlando Economic Partnership, which is to the Florida city what GRP is to Richmond, the annual budget for marketing alone was \$3 million.

Other cities predate Richmond in aggressive marketing. Raleigh, for example, has the advantage of North Carolina's 70-year campaign to promote its Research Triangle Park to the STEM industries. Raleigh and the surrounding areas enjoy a snowballing effect as a result of the long-term generous investment. This shows up in the job market. In 2022, North Carolina gained almost twice the number of jobs that Virginia did as a result of new economic development projects.

GRP is funded by a public-private partnership, and Wakefield says she needs more help from the private side. "We're not up to par with where others are around the country," she says. More money in the marketing budget could broaden the reach of campaigns, put Richmond on the trade show floor at

major STEM industry conferences and allow for the courting of executives that often precedes enterprise-level deals.

### ACCELERATING POPULATION GROWTH

Richmond's stunted population growth also prevents the city from winning economic growth projects, Wakefield says. Since 2011, the greater Richmond area has netted about 75,000 new residents, according to VEDP. Compare that to Raleigh, where the metropolitan population grew by almost 150,000 from 2016 to 2021 alone.

There are indications that Richmond's growth may have accelerated slightly since 2020. Recent estimates by the Weldon Cooper Center for Public Service at the University of Virginia suggest that the population has grown by 27% in that time. This could be driven by out-migration from more expensive metro areas. That Richmond ranked third on LinkedIn's list of top cities for pandemic movers in 2022 corroborates this estimate. Even so, the city's growth remains woefully behind that of its out-of-state competitors.

Richmond does lose projects due to the size of its workforce, says Wakefield. When employers want better numbers, they can simply select a more populous competitor. "What we hear from companies when they locate here in Raleigh is that they can access the talent that they need," says Kyle Touchstone, director of Raleigh Economic Development. "There's a continuous pipeline of talent, talent that wants to stay here once they graduate, and great quality of life, low cost of living, comparably with looking at other large municipalities."

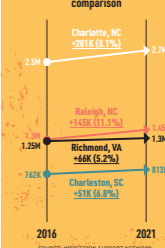
Retaining students who graduate from Richmond-area colleges and universities—and attracting graduates from schools across the state—is one way the city can grow its working population, experts say. "Keeping talent in the region is a competitive business," says Beth Weisbrod. >

### RICHMOND'S ECONOMIC COMPETITORS



### GROWING UP

Population growth comparison



SOURCE: U.S. BUREAU OF ECONOMIC ANALYSIS, THE PARTNER-CENTERED ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT BOARD IN THE U.S.

**3**  
Richmond ranked **THIRD** on LinkedIn's list of **TOP CITIES FOR PANDEMIC MOVERS** IN 2021

**3.5%**  
National average  
**UNEMPLOYMENT RATE IN JANUARY 2023**

**3%**  
Richmond metro area

**JOBS REGAINED SINCE 2020**



vice president of talent and workforce at ChamberVA. The organization's Richmond Now campaign, which is aimed at keeping students in the area after graduation, has two messages. The first is that there are jobs to be had. "All the Fortune 500s we have and the robust startup community, these are assets that are real," says Weisbrod.

The second is that the quality of life in Richmond is high, and its cost of living is significantly lower than that of New York City, Northern Virginia and Washington, D.C., places where the area's college graduates often move. Weisbrod's message to students is this: "Before you decide where to move, make sure you understand what you have right here."

### FILLING EMPLOYMENT GAPS

Still, the city needs more than entry-level workers. GRP hears from employers that Richmond has a dearth of mid-career workers, or those with about 10 to 15 years of experience. "We have people graduate college, then they move away. We need to get them to boomerang back," Wakefield says.

Local business owners are feeling the pain of this missing demographic. Kelli Lemon, owner of downtown coffee shop Urban Hang Suite and co-founder of the JWC Foundation, which helps Black business owners establish and grow businesses in the area, says she desperately needs midcareer talent.

"There is no shortage of college students who want to pick up part-time work," Lemon says, but she needs experienced employees who can run the shop. Business is strong, but without qualified workers, Lemon says she's had to reduce operating hours.

"I need another manager. And catering is starting to pick up, so I need a

catering squad along with a team that can make sure that the restaurant is operational on a day-to-day basis," says Lemon. "I want to open back up on the weekends, but I can't because I can't find anybody to work on the weekends."

The lack of applicants is the result of more than a small labor force. Many hospitality workers left the industry during the pandemic and have not returned, and experienced workers are often parents who need access to affordable child care and a living wage. Lemon does her best to offer all of the above, allowing employees bring their children to the shop, for example.

Perhaps Richmond's most valuable asset for attracting midcareer workers to the area is its competitive cost of living compared to Northern Virginia.

Over the last three years, Richmond and her husband, Corey Beasley, first and GRP have formed a close-knit coalition to boost the city's reputation nationwide. Jack Berry, president and CEO of the Richmond Region Tourism, says the goal is a "bait effect campaign" that makes the region attractive to leisure and sports tourists and, of course, business travelers.

The tourism industry may be up to the task of capturing boomeraging residents and attracting first-time arrivals to the city. Today's tourists can be tomorrow's residents, and as area tourism continues to spring back from the COVID-19 crash, the influx of potential Richmonders can rebound as well.

Keefe, the Los Angeles transplant, and her husband, Corey Beasley, first arrived in the city as tourists in 2017 while visiting family in the Lynchburg area. Right away, they liked Richmond's feel. "We had always said that once we get exhausted from hemorrhaging all our resources to live in the biggest, most

expensive cities in America, Richmond would be a good option," says Keefe.

They planned for a year and, once Beasley got a job offer to teach high school English in Chesterfield County, the couple relocated to Richmond in July 2022. Keefe continued her work as an author and freelance writer. "We wanted to live somewhere where we could have more space and more breathing room but not sacrifice some of those lifestyle elements that we had enjoyed in the bigger cities," she says.

In Richmond, Keefe says, homeownership no longer feels like a pipe dream. "It's something we could actually achieve. We're going to start looking for a house, and we're very much trying to make roots here."

**EQUIPPING RICHMOND'S WORKFORCE** Before breaking ground, employers need to know that they will find plentiful high-quality workers now and in the future. Local organizations including the Community College Workforce Alliance are making sure Richmonders have the skills the area's new employers need.

CCWA works with incoming employers to design training programs for new hires. For example, the organization partnered with recent arrivals Civicus Rx and AMPAC, both pharmaceutical companies, to train technicians and operators, and they're already working with VEDP on programs to train workers for the new LEGO manufacturing plant.

CCWA has trained about 2,500 students each year for the last three years, but the program still can't crank out workers fast enough. "We could increase capacity in every sector we're working on," she says. "We had always said that once we get exhausted from hemorrhaging all our resources to live in the biggest, most



When the Greater Richmond Transit Company found itself facing a workforce skills gap recently, the company brought the skills to the workers.

Today's tourists can be tomorrow's residents.

advantages. Creamer at the CCWA says the Richmond area's workforce partnerships are appealing to employers scouting out the city for new development projects. They like the strength of the collaboration that has started to develop between economic development, community colleges and universities in initiatives such as pharmaceutical manufacturing and advanced manufacturing, she says. "We're showing that we can partner together very well to get it done." >