

FORK IN THE ROAD

BY HOPE SCAMEHORN PHILBRICK

DAHLONEGA: GEORGIA'S GOLDEN CITY

As leaves begin to transform from green to shades of gold, I feel drawn to the mountains. To satisfy my wanderlust, I recently made a weekend getaway to Dahlonega, home to the largest gold deposits east of the Mississippi River and the site of the nation's first gold rush, in 1828. Today it is possible to pan for that precious metal in restored mines, but I was hunting treasure that yielded tasty results, and so I headed to Lumpkin County's farmland to reap in the bounty of harvest season.

LUMPKIN COUNTY WINERIES

The Dahlonega area boasts the state's highest concentration of vineyards and is home to some of Georgia's wine industry pioneers as well as some of its newest wineries—with several more under construction. The proximity of wineries makes it convenient to visit several in one day. David Harris of Blackstock Vineyards & Winery explains the area's abundance of viticulture: "The growing conditions here are distinctive and set this region apart. One of the magical things about our area is the red clay, which is like the terra rossa in Italy's Piedmont region. At this elevation there's great airflow, less humidity. Steep slopes help turn over cooler air. We get high-intensity rain in short duration; runoff helps the vines dry. Dahlonega definitely has something special; it shows in the fruit."

While most wineries welcome visitors throughout the year, harvest season can be the most fun; there's a festive spirit in the air as grapes are hauled from the vines to the crushpad. As anticipation of future vintages seeps in, take time to sample those already for sale. Most folks who taste Georgia wine for the first time "come to recognize that they can drink local product and not give up or compromise quality," says Harris. "Variety is the spice of life and Georgia wines ought to celebrate Georgia character; they shouldn't taste like French or California wine."

Comparative wine tasting in Dahlonega rewards the curious with a delightful variety of experience. Not only does each winery cultivate a unique multiplicity of grape types (which can include Cabernet Sauvignon, Chardonnay, Viognier, Mourvedre, Tannat, Petite Verdot, and Touriga Nacional, among others), but each vintner has adopted a different winemaking style and employs various trellis systems, barrel types, and bottling techniques. So at Wolf Mountain Vineyards & Winery you can sip on what owner and winemaker Karl Boegner describes as "dry blends; a unique style of wine," then head to Three Sisters Vineyards & Winery, Frogtown Cellars, and Blackstock Vineyards & Winery



to explore differences. Decide for yourself which wines most appeal to your individual palate—if you're like me, you'll find wines to love at each winery. When Montaluce Winery & Estates opens in October and Cavender Creek Winery opens within the next three years, even more discoveries will await wine lovers.

FARMS & ORCHARDS

More than grapes grow on the hills and in the valleys surrounding Dahlonega. At Burt's Farm the crop includes Indian corn, popcorn, gourds, and thousands of pumpkins, all for sale from September 1 through November 15 alongside assorted jams, jellies, relishes, fresh-baked pumpkin breads and pies, and hot boiled peanuts. Not all the joys of fall are edible: A two-mile hayride down a winding road through Burt's is a relaxing way to take in the scenic fields and breathtaking Appalachian Mountain backdrop.

Hillcrest Orchards, in any typical year, grows over 20 varieties of apples on its 80 acres. Unfortunately, 2007 is not a typical year: "We lost 90 percent of our crop in the freeze around Easter," says Janice Hale. "We had five nights in a row with temperatures from 18 to 24 degrees, and at that time the trees were in full bloom. It's really devastating and brings home how important Mother Nature really is." Apple lovers will be consoled by availability of the Rome Beauty, an all-purpose variety that—being a late-blooming—weathered the frost. In addition, all the trees are healthy so yields are expected to return to normal next year, weather cooperating. Though yields will be low on a variety of fruits nationwide due to late frosts, it's no reason to stay away from farms—in fact, farmers will need support more than ever. Hillcrest Orchards of-

Photograph by Carole Topalian

fers a variety of activities to make a visit worthwhile, including barbecues, wagon rides, pig races, performances, a grist mill, a moonshine museum with several working stills, and a farmhouse museum depicting life in the early 1900s.

DAHLONEGA DINING

Before heading home to bake my apple pies, I tested out some of Dahlonega's more than 30 restaurant options, which range from fast food to fine dining. (In addition, several of the wineries serve gourmet fare to pair with their wines; call ahead for details and reservations.)

Corkscrew Café offers quality food preparations in a casual atmosphere. After welcoming me with a friendly smile, proprietors Rob and Coleen Rotunno recommended a round bistro table next to the window. I munched on a stuffed portobello mushroom appetizer and filled up before ordering tempting menu options like crab quiche, steak panini, blackened salmon, and trout scampi.

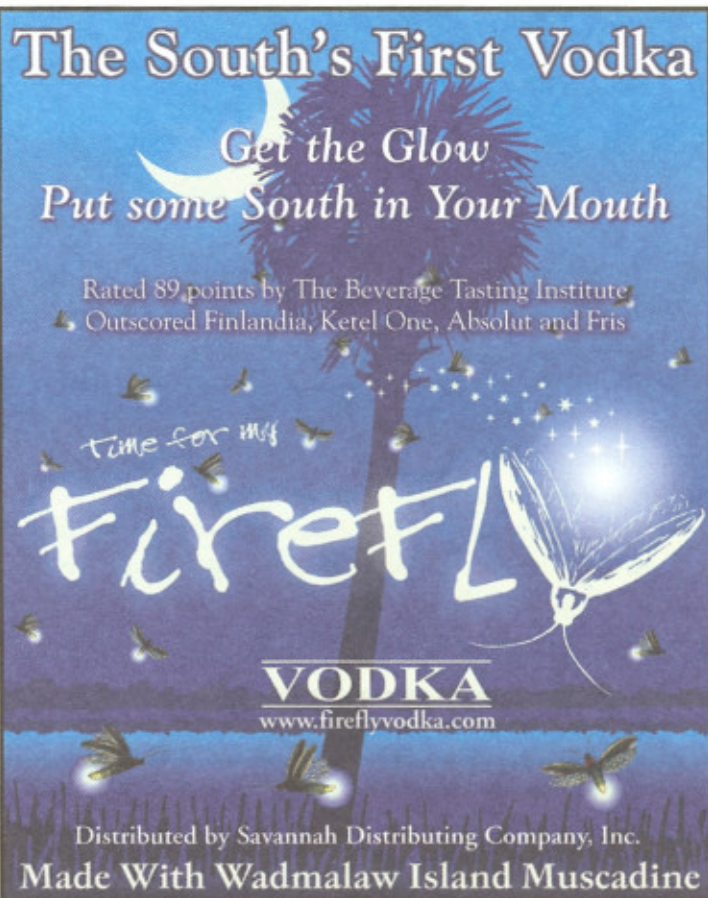
Piazza Italian Restaurant serves classic dishes with a contemporary twist and is my favorite Dahlonega restaurant to date. White tablecloths and candlelight add elegance, but casual dress is fine. Some of my favorite menu options are bruschetta and the spinach walnut ravioli.

Smith House serves classic Southern dishes family style—I didn't bring a family, but one was provided for me as I was seated at a nearly full long table. Heaping bowls and platters arrived to the table filled with fried chicken, baked ham, roast beef, fried fish, mashed potatoes and gravy, creamed corn, fried okra, sweet potatoes, black-eyed peas, green beans, coleslaw, and more.

RUSTIC TO LUXURY ACCOMMODATIONS

From cabins to resorts, Dahlonega offers a variety of overnight options.

At Amicalola Falls State Park, one of Georgia's most popular, thanks to its 729-foot waterfall, lodging includes 20 campsites, 14 cottages, a 57-room lodge with hotel comforts and the rustic 20-room Len Foote Hike Inn. For an authentic back-to-nature experience, I opted for the five-mile hike through the park and the Chattahoochee National Forest to reach Len Foote Hike Inn. The hike, which is rated "moderate," weaves through trees and over creeks and takes an average of three hours to complete—but as I discovered, it can take longer if you're not in shape, it's a hot afternoon, or you become enamored of the native plants, wildflowers, and colorful mushrooms growing along the stony path. I managed to arrive by five o'clock, just in time for the facilities tour. The Hike Inn has achieved gold level certification in Leadership for Energy Efficient Design (LEED). Conservation programs include solar panels, odor-free composting toilets, and a "clean plate" policy to reduce the amount of food waste that ends up in landfills. Four worm beds help recycle almost all of the Inn's organic waste, including office paper and kitchen scraps. The worms "eat two times their body weight each day" to help cre-



The South's First Vodka

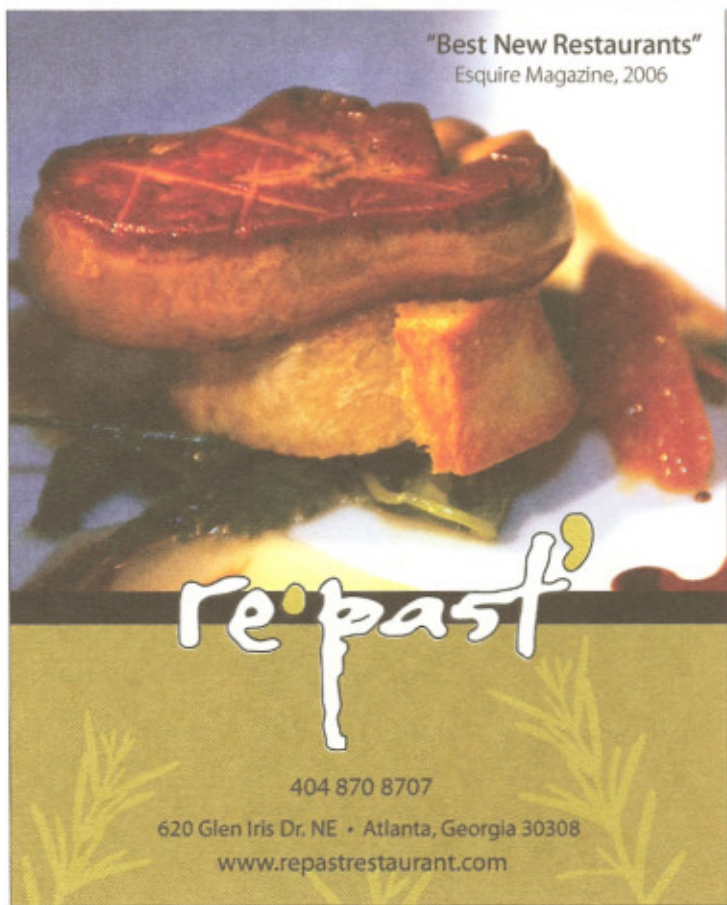
Get the Glow
Put some South in Your Mouth

Rated 89 points by The Beverage Tasting Institute
Outscored Finlandia, Ketel One, Absolut and Fris

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VODKA
www.fireflyvodka.com

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Made With Wadmalaw Island Muscadine



"Best New Restaurants"
Esquire Magazine, 2006

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ate “wonderful fertilizer for our native plant gardens,” says Sandy Straw, education manager. The Inn holds a bathhouse with hot showers, a dining room for breakfasts and dinners that are served family-style, a game room, and guest rooms outfitted with bunk beds.

For a quiet mountain retreat with modern facilities, you can't beat Lily Creek Lodge, one of Dahlonega's nine B&Bs. After a day outdoors I found the whirlpool tub relaxing and the comfortable bed inviting. I fell asleep under a cozy feather comforter while the crickets outdoors chirped a lullaby. Small and large suites are available, and whichever is your preference, owners Donald and Sharon Bacek will make you feel right at home. In the morning don't miss the yummy breakfast featuring homemade granola, fresh fruit, baked treats, and a creative egg dish.

It may be tempting to sleep late, but with over 60 waterfalls to find and activities from canoeing to shopping, hiking to fishing, golfing to horseback riding, Dahlonega offers plenty of reasons to climb out of bed and head outdoors. »

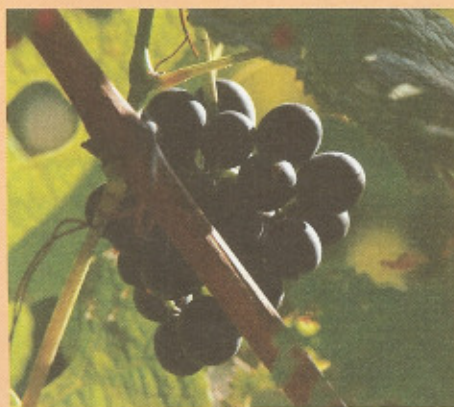


WHEN YOU GO

Amicalola Falls Lodge
418 Amicalola Falls State Park Rd.
Dawsonville
(800) 864-7275
www.gastateparks.org/info/amicalola

Blackstock Vineyards & Winery
5400 Town Creek Rd.
Dahlonega
(706) 219-2789
www.bsvw.com

Burt's Farm
4801 GA Hwy 52
Dawsonville
(706) 265-3701
www.burtsfarm.com



Corkscrew Café
51 Main St. West
Dahlonega
(706) 867-8551
www.thecorkscrewcafe.com

Dahlonega-Lumpkin County Chamber
& Convention and Visitors Bureau
13 South Park St.
Dahlonega
(800) 231-5543
www.dahlonega.org
Frogtown Cellars
700 Ridge Point Dr.
Dahlonega
(706) 865-0687
www.frogtownwine.com

Hillcrest Orchards
9696 Hwy 52 East
Ellijay
(706) 273-3838
www.hillcrestorchards.net

Len Foote Hike Inn
240 Amicalola Falls State Park Rd.
Dawsonville
(706) 867-6203
www.hike-inn.com

Lily Creek Lodge
2608 Auraria Rd.
Dahlonega
(706) 864-6848
www.lilycreeklodge.com

Piazza Italian Restaurant
24 East Main St.
Dahlonega
(706) 867-9881

Smith House
84 South Chestatee St.
Dahlonega
(706) 867-7000
www.smithhouse.com

Three Sisters Vineyards & Winery
439 Vineyard Way
Dahlonega
(706) 865-9463
www.threesistersvineyards.com

Wolf Mountain Vineyards & Winery
180 Wolf Mountain Trail
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(706) 867-9862
www.wolfmountainvineyards.com