

Restaurant Notes

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Story and photos by Carol Stigger



Pass the spoon bread and hold that sissy sauce!

Dining around town in Roanoke, Virginia

Roanoke is moving from a quiet hum to a new vibe, and its restaurants are ahead of the curve when it comes to farm-to-table.

But first, let's go back in time at the iconic Hotel Roanoke that opened in 1882. Their restaurant, the wood-paneled Regency Room, serves its signature peanut soup and spoon bread that has been on the menu since 1935. This traditional Southern fare was born when food was food, not organic, lite, gluten-free, calcium enriched, fiber packed, or free range. Railroad moguls dined in the Regency Room with ladies wearing corsets, not counting calories.

In addition to its culinary homage to history, the Regency Room has the innovative spirit of Roanoke's chefs. Its Court Bouillon Poached Head-on Prawns is a fancy name for "shrimp cocktail," but with two surprising additions: smoky chipotle cocktail sauce and lemon marmalade. The sweetened citrus and spicy chipotle give shrimp a unique flavor someone should have cooked up

decades ago. For an entrée, the Hotel Roanoke Gumbo enlivens a Southern classic with pancetta, lobster, and duck confit instead of sausage. Okra, a gumbo basic, provides the familiar texture and a hint of New Orleans. With no corsets to tighten, modern women often skip dessert but may wonder how a pecan tartlet with candied bacon tastes. Was the chef inspired by a dream involving Michelin stars and heritage-breed porkers?

Billy's Restaurant, also larded with history, began as a tavern and brothel. Before the stroke of midnight made Prohibition federal law, townsfolk drank \$100,000 worth of liquor at Billy's and other nearby taverns. Then, the bootlegging began with nine out of ten families in the county making moonshine. Less than 20 years ago, people would order a brew at Billy's and watch the shady action: pimps and prostitutes, winos and wackos, gun shots and police officers resigned to local crime. Billy's remained a cornerstone of the Red Light District until the late 1980s. In 2012, after a four-year renovation, Billy's re-opened with brick walls intact in a now-gentrified section of town. Award-winning Chef Tyler Mason sources food from local suppliers and selects fresh produce daily from City Market right across the street.

Shrimp and stone-ground cheddar grits is a popular entrée with grits, country ham, and tomato forming a base for warm, plump shrimp. Ample seafood offerings include mahi-mahi, crab cakes, and grouper. Diners can discover a taste of Jamaica in the jerked chicken marinated in chilies, ginger, citrus and garlic. Carnivores make difficult choices among prime rib, Angus filet, and rib eye, all served with smoked cheddar smashed potatoes and grilled asparagus. The cocktail menu includes enticing drinks such as Bloody Billy, Billy's Bellini (think Georgia peaches and vodka), Prohibition Punch, and the Skinny Billy Margarita with fresh lime juice.

After bluegrass music and microbreweries, party-mined folk don't need to go home hungry thanks to The Texas Tavern. Open 24/7 since it opened in 1930, this Roanoke institution is still run by the same family. Grab one of the six stools or chow down standing up. The chili recipe hasn't changed since it allegedly was stolen from a cook in Texas by Nick Bullington, the original owner. In addition to chili, the tavern is famous for its Cheesy Western, which is fried egg, hamburger patty, pickle, onion, and relish served on soft white bun. The cook is crabby in an endearing way. Men who order catsup are loudly advised that their "sissy sauce" will be right up. A lady's catsup order is delivered discreetly, her culinary insensitivity overlooked with Southern gallantry.

In my experience, the only bad food to be had in Roanoke is in vending machines. I like to choose restaurants with a history, but that is usually secondary to the menu. I took a chance on the Texas Tavern, but the chili has a distinct gun-slinger personality. The Cheesy Western is a nostalgic reminder of the days when a burger was a burger with relish instead of fifty toppings to choose from with calories meticulously counted. When I order a burger, I really don't want to know how much of it will end up on my hips.