

ALABAMA



BEST STATE PARK

Gulf State Park

WITH THE GULF of Mexico on its southern border, 3 ½ miles of white-sand beaches, three lakes, and nine ecosystems on its 28-mile paved trail system, Gulf State Park is popular with beach bums, anglers, and naturalists alike. Visitors can swim, fish, and paddle on Lake Shelby; see native flora and fauna at the Nature Center on Middle Lake; and then flit around the Butterfly Garden east of Little Lake. At more than 1,500 feet long, the Fishing and Education Pier is one of the largest on the coast and one of the few public piers on the Gulf in Alabama that is open for fishing and strolling.

TOP 5
STATE
PARKS

1. **Gulf State Park** Gulf Shores
2. **Oak Mountain State Park** Pelham
3. **Lake Guntersville State Park** Guntersville
4. **Chewacla State Park** Auburn
5. **Cheaha State Park** Delta



Linda Vansweringen is a veteran server at The Bright Star.

BEST LOCAL RESTAURANT

The Bright Star

ON AN OVERCAST afternoon at a sleepy corner in downtown Bessemer, The Bright Star's doors keep swinging open as hungry guests shuffle in. Linda Vansweringen has waited tables here for over 15 years. She is one of a fleet of servers with an average tenure of seven years, an almost unimaginable amount of time in an industry where, especially recently, managers can only hope for an employee to stay a year.

Vansweringen's shift starts at 10 a.m., an hour before the restaurant opens for lunch. She begins by sanitizing the tables and chairs, setting out the place mats and silverware, cleaning the salt and pepper shakers, brewing sweet tea, and putting out bottles of pepper sauce. The staff has a lot of ground to cover (more than 12,000 square feet) to get ready before patrons arrive.

The oldest restaurant in Alabama, The Bright Star opened in 1907 just a few blocks from where it now stands. It started as a 25-seat establishment, and today it can hold 330 customers (with five dining rooms plus a bar) and a staff of 70. Recently restored murals painted in 1915 line the wood-trimmed walls;

“You are never too big or so important that you won't wash a dish or bus a table.” —Stacey Craig

only the back corner of the restaurant still has the cigarette-smoke patina of another era.

Not long after lunch begins, Vansweringen's section is stacked with customers. Half are regulars who ask for her by name. She serves this place's signature blend of Greek and Southern food to over two dozen people, including a 12-top table. While the menu doesn't include moussaka or dolmas, oregano makes its way into most entrées, garlic is liberally used, and lemon brightens the hearty fare. For first-timers, Vansweringen often brings a complimentary cup of gumbo and welcomes them with an introduction that feels both practiced and genuine.

As diners debate over what to order, she fields their questions, rattling off the ingredients in dishes as if reciting the alphabet. She suggests the Greek salad, which has tomatoes, feta, kalamata olives, and pepperoncini. It comes with two dressings, a vinaigrette and a garlic-cheese sauce, and she explains the delicious alchemy that occurs when they're combined. “The garlic is going to be your friend for the rest of the day,” she warns with a wink to couples traveling home in the same cars.

Her customers fill up on fried snapper throats, which come from the underside of the fish, behind the gills. This was once the staff meal, leftovers from cutting up whole fish in-house, but now the throats often sell out faster than the fillets. Carl Thomas, a line cook, has been at The Bright Star even longer than Vansweringen. He has butchered the fish here since 1975. Alongside a few other cooks, he regularly preps 1,400 to 1,500 pounds of snapper every week.

Vansweringen began working in the food-service industry as a teenager in Panama City, Florida, at a short-order restaurant. When she first started at The Bright Star, years later in 1997, she hosted to learn the table layout before she moved into serving. After three years, she took a break before returning to the restaurant in 2010. It reeled her back in, as it does so many people. “I love the environment; the customers are like family,” she says.

The Bright Star is definitely a family affair. It was passed from founder Tom Bonduris to brothers Bill and Pete Koikos in 1925 and then to Bill and his sons Jim and Nick Koikos in 1968. After Jim's passing in 2019, Nick took over ownership along with his niece Stacey Craig (who also serves as the manager) and his cousin Andreas Anastassakis (the executive chef). Craig grew up watching her grandmother,

TOP 5 LOCAL RESTAURANTS

1. **The Bright Star**
Bessemer
2. **Acre**
Auburn
3. **Jesse's Restaurant**
Magnolia Springs
4. **Highlands Bar & Grill**
Birmingham
5. **The Hound**
Auburn

Anastasia Koikos; her uncles; and other relatives shape the business, both behind the scenes and on the dining room floor. “You are never too big or so important that you won’t wash a dish or bus a table,” Craig says. She fondly remembers her grandmother cutting lemons, making tea, and greeting guests. The matriarch was also known for baking loaves of bread to give to regulars. It’s this close-knit dynamic that permeates the restaurant and keeps longtime servers around.

After taking orders, Vansweringen weaves through the narrow alleyways between tables, scanning as she passes to look for low water glasses or empty plates to clear. But she doesn’t stop to rest. “If you’ve got time to lean, you’ve got time to clean,” she says.

Once diners polish off their meals, they don’t have room for pie, but the way Vansweringen runs through all the flavors—Lemon Ice Box, Coconut Cream, Chocolate Almond, Pineapple Cheese, and Peanut Butter—has customers testing the strength of their waistbands. Over the loudspeaker comes bad news: “86 Pineapple Cheese pie.” Everyone will have to choose a different flavor, but Vansweringen assures patrons that they can’t go wrong with any of the options. After disappearing to the kitchen for a few seconds, she returns with slices of pie that nearly envelop the plates.

As she delivers checks to neighboring customers and starts closing down her section to prepare for dinner service, she tells diners getting up to leave, “Y’all come back and see me.” Something about their grins hints that they will.

—Alana Al-Hatlani



BEST HOME-AND-GARDEN STORE

Leaf & Petal

THERE’S NEARLY 50 YEARS of history behind these four family-owned shops in Birmingham. Leaf & Petal specializes in indoor and outdoor plants plus garden accessories, home decor, and local goods. Each store is a well-curated botanical oasis where the community goes to exhale. Leaf & Petal’s latest location, sandwiched between a bagel shop and a Latin American restaurant, features an 8,000-square-foot space that’s filled to the brim with brilliant blooms, spectacular succulents, and other fantastic picks.

TOP 5 HOME-AND-GARDEN STORES

1. Leaf & Petal Birmingham
2. Petals from the Past Jemison
3. Corner Copia Gardens Fairhope
4. Brooks & Collier Huntsville
5. Blair’s Nursery & Gifts Mobile

TOP 5 BARBECUE JOINTS

1. SAW’s BBQ Birmingham
2. Big Bob Gibson Bar-B-Q Decatur
3. Archibald’s BBQ Northport
4. Down South BBQ Foley
5. Miss Myra’s Pit Bar-B-Q Birmingham

TOP 5 SMALL TOWNS

1. Fairhope *
2. Gulf Shores/Orange Beach
3. Opelika
4. Guntersville
5. Mentone

* Read our feature on page 130.

TOP 5 MEAT 'N' THREES

1. Niki’s West Birmingham
2. Pannie-George’s Kitchen Auburn and Montgomery
3. City Cafe Northport
4. Johnny’s Restaurant Homewood
5. Blue Plate Cafe Huntsville