Rabun County: Georgia's Farm-to-Table Capitol

In Georgia’s northernmost county, bordering both North and South Carolina, Rabun County, Georgia is the state’s farm-to-table capital. This area has more than a dozen waterfalls, impressive vineyards, five Best Chef America award recipients and an eclectic mix of residents who work together to make their businesses and everyday lives possible. At 10 a.m., 10 of us loaded into a comfortable small van along with a driver and local tour guide. Off we went to discover, taste and be thoroughly entertained by the charm of the town of Clayton.

A 100-Year Old Inn For Food And Wine Lovers

Beechwood Inn welcomed us into their 100-year-old renovated property. The mountains looked back at me as I counted every shade of green I knew from the covered porch. Owners David and Gayle Darugh are Best Chef America recipients. As we arrived, David was in the kitchen plating our morning tasting. After a property tour we were served in the Inn dining room: a rich creamy grit cake with local shiitake mushrooms, cream sauce, and a prosciutto rose.

Both the Darugh’s were raised in Napa valley and now curate their own local wine for the inn’s daily guest service, “wine-thirty.” Enjoy a choice of wine and thoughtfully prepared appetizer to welcome the evening ahead. Sip away as you soak up the sunset.

The winding two lane grassy tree lined road just off the town square was the route to our next destination. We learned some history of the area, including that the movie *Deliverance* was filmed here. One of the actors was working at the local WalMart and two others had started the rafting company that is now a main attraction in the area.

The Chattooga River has some challenging scenic rapids for adventure lovers.

A Passion for Sustainable Farming

The land steward of Timpson Creek Farms, Darby McCray, hosted us next. She is a millennial with an extraordinary passion for organic bio-dynamic growing practices—not the type that uses organic approved pesticides and fertilizers. Darby greeted us in the U-pick blackberry section of the mountain back drop property. Her crops are grown to naturally resist to mild droughts, pests and other perils of Mother Nature that can rob a harvest of optimal bounty. Cover crops re-nourish the oil.

Timpson Creek Farms also has teaching programs that include 3-5 day agricultural intensives and school tours.

Sleep In a Caboose

Returning to the town square, my eye spotted Black Bear Creek Antiques, namely the 1929 red caboose that has been transformed inside to a vacation rental property! A few steps outside of the caboose is a silo which has the property bathroom. I went back for an in-depth look and enjoyed a video streaming inside the train that showed the process of transporting the caboose to the property in 2016 and the renovation to convert the interior. The bathroom is an innovative space and surprisingly modern inside. The owner, Jim Reaves, has a real passion for history and antiques which drove his desire to see this caboose re-imagined into one of the most unusual vacation rentals in North Georgia.

Vino Venues in Rabun County

The wine produced in this area is quite frankly, unexpected. I have had Georgia wine sourced in other parts of the state but the wine here in Clayton was rather remarkable. Each of the vineyards is vastly different; it’s the altitude. 12 Spies, Tiger Mountain and Stonewall Creek were part of the tour.

My eyes devoured the striking straight rows of vines, rolling green hills and mountain backdrop as the van took us closer to the tasting room and wine-aging facility. What used to be an apple orchard was transformed into a vineyard that successfully grows grapes like Malbec, Petit Verdot, Cabernet Franc and Petit Manseng.

Carl Fackler is a retired surgeon and together with his wife Carla, they have created a welcoming property that produces award winning wine. We were treated to five tastings while sitting outside on a covered patio. The porch is clearly the optimal place to sit and view the expansive property. It triggered Napa Valley memories both visually and the wine of equal quality. During harvest season, volunteers are treated to a two- hour three course lunch paired with wines made from the grape in harvest from prior seasons.

There Are Goats On The Roof

As you drive into the city of Clayton, you won’t miss Goats on the Roof. It’s an over the top quirky tourist stop that is to be embraced. I counted at least 10 goats of varying age walking on the ground, up ramps and on the roofs of the property buildings much like a giant goat hamster habitat! I was delighted the tour took us here. We were treated to custom-made flavored nitrogen ice cream from the property's restaurant. I filled my basket with Amish goods like spicy pickled okra and apple butter in the main store. Buy some goat feed to serve to the goats in edible ice cream cones. (The owners ask you feed them nothing but this during your visit.)

The Food Bank of Northeast Georgia

All the tours begin and end at the Food Bank of Northeast Georgia with a chef demo. The county is very proud to have this teaching space within the food bank because it is pioneering the future of what food banks can do for a community beyond just providing much needed food. They engage the community by hosting lively chef throw-downs, fundraisers and most importantly providing education about the importance of healthy eating and how to prepare nutritious real food at home. Acclaimed Chef David Sweeney (who also cooks farm-to-table food at Red Barn Cafe at Tiger Mountain Vineyards) did a whole food nutrient dense demo explaining his passion for farm-to-table every step of the way. A tour of the Food Bank followed.

More to Do in Rabun County Georgia

If you’re spending a few days in Rabun County to enjoy a tour be sure to try some of the best eateries in the area. There’s fine dining at Fortify, deliciously quirky lunch at Fromage, and the great sides Chef Ryan Honey makes to go with his smoked meats at The Wicked Pig.

There's a newly renovated spa at Kingwood Resort where you can enjoy pampering treatments and golf.

The ear-popping drive up to Sky Valley is something that will linger in your mind for many years to come.

For More:

- Explore Rabun County, http://explorerabun.com/explore-new-adventures/attractions/waterfalls/
- Eat, Grow and Cook tour schedule: http://explorerabun.com/farm-food-tours/
- Stonewall Creek Vineyards http://stonewallcreek.com/
- Food Bank of Northeast Georgia foodbanknega.org/
- Goats on the Roof: www.goats-on-the-roof.com/
- Timpson Creek Farms: https://timpsoncreekfarm.com/
- Beechwood Inn : https://www.beechwoodinn.ws/
- 12 Spies Vineyards: www.12spiesvineyards.com/
- Tiger Mountain Vineyards: www.tigerwine.com/com
- Rafting the Chattooga river: https://wildwaterrafting.com/
- The Wicked Pig, https://www.twpbbq.com/
- Fortify, http://fortifyclayton.com/
- Black Bear Antiques Caboose Rental, www.vrbo.com/1114082
- Chef David Sweeney, www.chefdavidsweeney.com/
- Fromage and Other Fine Foods, www.fromageclayton.com/
- Kingwood Resort, http://kingwoodresort.com/
- On our site: More on Georgia

- All photos by Stephanie Anderson.