



Everyone to the Table

The culinary scene in Asheville, North Carolina, is more dynamic than ever. Meet three chefs and a brewer who are leading the way. **By Jasmine Ting**

AS I BIT INTO a flaky croissant filled with a Mallorcan chorizo spread, the smoky taste of paprika took over my senses. After this spicy start to my day, I wandered over to a pop-up serving Filipino barbecue, drawn by the sweet smell of pork skewers caramelizing in a soy glaze. Later, I enjoyed a tangy bowl of ceviche and a frozen pisco sour, relishing the tart citrus. Extraordinary food experiences like these are now common in Asheville, a town of transplants with a thriving multicultural community. On a recent trip to the North Carolina mountains, I met four people who are defining the city's culinary footprint.

FAMILY-STYLE FILIPINO FOOD

The first thing Silver Iocovozzi learned to cook was rice. His mother always had a batch ready when he got home. "Rice has texture and warmth and steam and gumminess," Iocovozzi says. "It gives you the comfort of cooking."

Iocovozzi was nicknamed "Neng Junior" after his mother, who is known as "Neneng" to her friends. He was raised in North Carolina, but his mom's Filipino culture played a huge part in his upbringing. While

Clockwise from top left: A night out at Neng Jr.'s; chef Silver Iocovozzi, the restaurant's owner; chicken inasal, adobo oysters, and pinakbet, a vegetable dish made with fermented fish paste, at Neng Jr.'s.

the family enjoyed American classics like Campbell's soup and grilled cheese, Iocovozzi also cherished the days when his mother served fried eggs with tomatoes and onions beside a heaping pile of rice, topped with banana ketchup—a staple in Filipino pantries.

These food memories inspired Iocovozzi to open **Neng Jr.'s**, a 17-seat restaurant in West Asheville in summer 2022. (This year, it's a finalist for the James Beard Award for Best New Restaurant.) One standout dish is duck adobo, rich with fat and crispy skin, accompanied by a thick, coconut-forward sauce. Another is ice cream made with sharp cheddar and *mimolette*, a hard French cheese, that mimics the *keso sorbetes* sold as street food in the Philippines.

The restaurant's décor is a colorful celebration of LGBTQ culture. The centerpiece is a painting by Drake Carr, showing Iocovozzi's mother posing in a glamorous yellow dress, with the chef to her right, and other queer people of color surrounding them. From the frock extends a yellow ribbon, which Iocovozzi says represents the passing down of tradition and recipes through time.

Neng Jr.'s has already taken off as one of the city's hottest tickets (reservations are often booked up a month out). Iocovozzi says, "I just try to emulate that friendly or familial quality of a gathering at a house where everyone's in the kitchen and hanging out, watching while you cook." nengjrs.com; entrées \$16–\$100.



◀ Morgan Owle-Crisp, the founder of 7 Clans Brewing.



Above, from left: Chicken pakora at Chai Pani; chef Meherwan Irani, founder of Chai Pani and other Asheville restaurants.



STREET-STYLE INDIAN

Many restaurants in the U.S. have a similar roster of dishes from northern India: tandoori chicken, *saag paneer*, chicken tikka masala. This cuisine doesn't represent what Meherwan Irani grew up eating in Maharashtra, in western India. "Naan was something I ate maybe once a year," he says. But spiced snacks topped with sauces, called *chaat*, and other street foods are dishes "that every Indian can relate to—it's affordable and approachable."

That's why Irani's first restaurant, **Chai Pani**, which opened in 2009, shows off the biggest hits of his childhood: *uttapam*, a pancake made with a rice-and-lentil batter; chicken *pakora*, juicy yet fried crisp with a curried-chickpea coating; and his favorite, *bhel puri*—a delightfully bright and crunchy combination of puffed rice, dry chickpea noodles, roasted chickpeas, cilantro, and onions, all tossed with tangy tamarind, green-herb, and spicy-garlic chutneys.

The restaurant has been a resounding success: Irani is now a five-time James Beard Foundation Award semifinalist for Best Chef in the Southeast, and last year won in the foundation's Outstanding Restaurant category. Elsewhere in Asheville, Irani operates Spicewalla, a spice shop, and Buxton Hall, a barbecue restaurant. He also established Buxton Chicken Palace inside the new S&W Market, a food hall he helped create.

For Irani, the experience of being Indian and calling the South home remains essential to the story of his food. "Sometimes that requires being completely true to the way the dish would've been made in India, and sometimes that means changing it to a version that's appropriate for where you are," he says. "And I am in the American South." chaipani.com; entrées \$10–\$18.

HERITAGE AND HOPS

Asheville is a beer town, but until Morgan Owle-Crisp started **7 Clans Brewing** in 2017, there were no Indigenous-owned breweries, despite the area being the original home of the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians, of which Owle-Crisp is a member. In 2018, the brewery debuted a blonde ale that incorporates a hint of corn—a tribute to Selu, the original

mother in Cherokee creation stories, who was born from the first corn plant. Also in 2018, the brand released a chestnut-brown ale and an IPA, and the beers were soon carried by stores around the state.

Now the brewery has seven different beers, plus rotating seasonal flavors. “The variety of ingredients that you can use to capture time and place was important to me,” Owle-Crisp says, referring to the native plants, including chestnuts, corn, and strawberries, that she uses in her brews.

She admits that her business has raised eyebrows in her community. Historically, there’s been a stigma around Native communities and alcohol—in 1832, the U.S. government even banned the sale of alcoholic beverages to Indigenous people. Until the tribal council passed a referendum in 2021, alcohol wasn’t allowed within the Qualla Boundary (which defines the territory of the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians), except in the local casino. So when Owle-Crisp was looking for a space, “even when I had access to my own tribal lands, I had to go outside of the community.” She opened her taproom in Biltmore Village, south of downtown.

“Even people who live in North Carolina sometimes forget there are Native people,” she says. “For me the brewery was a way to say that we are still here.” 7clansbrewing.com.

A TASTE OF SPAIN IN THE SOUTH

If you ask around town, people will consistently tell you that **Cúrate**, a tapas restaurant, is a can’t-miss. At the helm



EVAN SUNG/COURTESY OF CÚRATE

is South Carolina-born chef Katie Button, who pivoted to the culinary world after dropping out of a Ph.D. program in neuroscience. She got her start at Café Atlantico in Washington, D.C.—and also met her now-husband, Felix Meana. Later, the two went to Meana’s hometown of Roses, Spain, to work at Ferran Adrià’s famed El Bulli.

In 2011, the couple moved to Asheville with dreams of settling down and building a restaurant. (Meana is a co-owner of Cúrate.) They considered other cities, but as Button recalls, “driving into Asheville—I swear this happens to a lot of people, it’s not just me—there was this moment where we said, ‘Oh my gosh, this is it.’”

Focusing on Spanish cuisine was a natural fit. Cúrate’s menu is simple, allowing the excellent produce and meats to shine. Naturally, it serves perfect, thinly sliced *jamón ibérico de bellota*, made from acorn-fed pigs. Then there’s *pulpo a la gallega*, a Galician-style octopus dish simply seasoned with sea salt, olive oil, and a touch of paprika. But the must-order item is *berenjenas con miel*: warm, crisp slices of fried eggplant drizzled with honey (even better when paired with the house-made rosemary ice cream). Last year, Button and Meana opened La Bodega by Cúrate, a café and wine bar that also sells Spanish products, around the corner from the main restaurant.

The long road has paid off: Cúrate won the 2022 James Beard Award for Outstanding Hospitality. “We’ve been working hard to introduce our team to new things about Spain and Spanish food,” Button says. “And that’s what we also do with our guests—create newness and excitement.” curatetapasbar.com; tapas \$8–\$32. 🌐

Below, from left: Chef Katie Button, co-owner of the Asheville tapas restaurant Cúrate; the bar and *jamonería* at Cúrate.



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