

A Catskills State of Mind

Luring acclaimed chefs away from the city, this meander from Manhattan is one of America's most impressive culinary outposts.



Follow the Hudson River north out of New York City, and within a few hours you'll be driving through the natural beauty of the Catskills — upstate New York's popular long-weekend getaway.

With bucolic views of rolling farmland and mountain peaks, plus a burgeoning farm-to-table food movement, the region offers a taste of 'pure'

Americana that has sparked a tourism revival, with hipsters eagerly transforming into 'hicksters' for a weekend.

Up until the 1970s, the Catskills was nicknamed the 'Borscht Belt', a nod to the predominantly Jewish resorts which characterised the area — and also to the traditional Eastern European beetroot-based soup that appeared on their menus.

Food is again making a name for the region, with top chefs seeking a place to establish themselves outside the city, while further shortening the distance from farm to table.

Chef Ryan Tate was the holder of a Michelin star before he made a decision to switch out the hectic pace of manning the burners in NYC for the tranquillity of

a mountainside hunting lodge, taking the helm at the Deer Mountain Inn. It's a Catskills culinary favourite, complete with rustic suites, sweeping views of nature and roaring fireplaces. "Leaving the city is a lifestyle choice," says Tate. "Here we have [the] chef's garden, herb garden, 170 acres of woodland, and we work closely with local farmers."

His seasonal menu aims to capture the history of the area, "by modernising the cooking that might have taken place here years ago". This is reflected in dishes such as marinated beets served with a smoked Catskill trout, and milk sorbet with forest honey and honeycomb for dessert.

A similar philosophy is in play at Prospect, overlooking Hunter Mountain. The new arrival's playful take on alpine



FROM FAR LEFT The Phoenicia Diner; strawberry rose sorbet from Prospect; the cosy surrounds of the Deer Mountain Inn; Prospect's chicken liver mousse; the Catskills are known for fresh produce; Scribner's Catskill Lodge.

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cuisine has been a hit with blow-in foodies and locals. Chef Joseph Buenconsejo left the city in hopes of spending more time foraging and hiking, and brings his love of nature to the menu. "Everything is made in-house. We make our bread, we culture our own butter. What's on the menu is what I can find around the area, and what's available at the farms," he explains.

One delicious example is spruce frozen yoghurt, made from the aromatic tips of the spruce trees surrounding the restaurant. Another highlight is corn custard with puffed barley and fennel, showcasing the region's agriculture.

For husband-and-wife duo Devin and Marybeth Mills of Peekamoose, Big Indian —

who previously worked at some of NYC's top-rated restaurants — the region's farm-to-table movement has marked an "exponential increase" in tourism during the last couple of years. "We've seen an incredible shift. And it's wonderful to have so many people visiting, and supporting responsibly sourced food," says Marybeth. Try the signature slow-braised beef short ribs, cooked for three days for melt-in-your-mouth tenderness.

Road Tripping

The Catskills are best enjoyed via the open road, taking in quaint picture-postcard towns boasting exotic names (such as Andes and Delhi) and a range of culinary hotspots.

Kick off your day with brunch at the Phoenicia Diner. This Catskills institution serves classics with a modern spin, using farm-fresh ingredients at affordable prices. The breakfast skillet is a delicious menu highlight, including duck and grits.

From Phoenicia, take the Old Route 28 to 212 towards Woodstock, known for the historic music festival of 1969 (which actually took place 80 kilometres down the road in Bethel). Spend the afternoon visiting shops, cafes and art galleries. Stock up on treats and gifts in Shop Little House.

If hiking's more your thing, take a trek up Mount Tremper. Climb its fire lookout tower and take in the fresh mountain air. Alternatively, the trail from the Tibetan Buddhist monastery to Overlook Mountain culminates in 360-degree views of the Hudson River and surrounds.

Fireside Living

Cosy down for the night at Foxfire Mountain House, a revamped inn tucked away

on four hectares of Mount Tremper. Designed with vintage furniture pieces and having nightly bonfires, it's a snug spot to relax and while away a chilly evening.

For a more stripped back style, check in to Scribner's, a hipster haunt-cum-ski lodge in nearby Hunter. A Brooklyn design firm is responsible for the minimalist aesthetic of the bedrooms, while the front desk will provide marshmallows to toast on a campfire beneath the stars. Visit in winter to experience one of the best upstate ski terrains, Hunter Mountain, which conveniently lies just across the street.

Before you leave, make sure you stop off at some of the roadside farm stands to stock up on local maple syrup, crisp apples and heirloom tomatoes for delicious memories of the Catskills.

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DETAILS

- Deer Mountain Inn**
790 County Route 25; www.deermountaininn.com.
- Foxfire Mountain House**
72 Andrew Ln; www.foxfiremountainhouse.com.
- Peekamoose**
8373 Route 28; www.peekamooserestaurant.com.
- Phoenicia Diner** 5681 Route 28; www.phoeniciadiner.com.
- Prospect** 13 Scribner Hollow Rd; www.scribnersprospect.com.
- Scribner's Catskill Lodge** 13 Scribner Hollow Rd; www.scribnerslodge.com.
- Shop Little House** 47 Tinker St; www.shoplittlehouse.com.

