

TASTEMAKERS

the OUTER BANKS

One visit and you'll understand why cars hundreds of miles inland sport "OBX" stickers, the code name for the Outer Banks and their bounty.

EVERY SUMMER, HORDES OF VISITORS TREK TO THE OUTER BANKS, the long chain of barrier islands off the North Carolina coast. Many attractions draw them here: the natural beauty of miles of beaches and wetlands, lapped by the sparkling sea and inland sounds; a colorful history peppered with pirates, shipwrecks, and the gravity-defying Wright Brothers; and, not least, a thriving food scene fueled by talented chefs and first-rate ingredients, starting with fresh seafood.

BY JEFF BOOK / PHOTOGRAPHY BY SARAH SWIHART





REFINED COMFORT

When high school friends Sam McGann and John Power opened **The Blue Point** in Duck in 1989, upscale eateries were rare on the banks, especially at the sleepy northern end. Their “waterfront diner”—complete with checkerboard floor, roomy red booths, and counter stools overlooking an open kitchen (also rare at the time)—was a hit from the start. As it has gradually enlarged, with an inviting screened porch and other beach-cottage elements, The Blue Point has garnered a raft of fans and critical kudos. Regulars know the distinct pleasure of watching the sun set over Currituck Sound while savoring she-crab soup, Carolina shrimp with shiitake and pork belly over udon noodles, or grilled beef tenderloin with a truffle-horseradish sauce. For dessert, try the pecan pie, served à la mode with a bourbon-infused caramel sauce. You can count on an extensive wine list and deft service. But Sam also complements refined dishes with comfort food such as a sampling of “Southern spreads” like pimiento cheese and deviled ham. “John and I are both from the Tidewater area of Virginia and grounded in Southern hospitality,” he says. “We get a lot of families, and we like to appeal to all ages. Good food doesn’t have to be fancy.”

OFF-THE-BOAT SEAFOOD

You might not expect to find one of the banks’ best crab cakes in a simple sandwich—until you see the out-the-door line waiting to order at the counter of the **Atlantic Coast Café** in Waves. “All killer, no filler,” the motto behind the plump lump-meat cakes, reflects the café’s focus on flavor (all seafood is locally sourced). The crowd-pleasing menu includes a grilled Cajun-spiced tuna burger and Reuben sandwiches, both classic and coastal (swapping a crab cake or fried shrimp for corned beef and coleslaw for sauerkraut). Grilled mahi tacos get extra crunch and structure from shredded cabbage and a hard shell



Crab cakes aren’t the only star at Atlantic Coast Café. Their shrimp and grits can’t be missed.

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tucked inside a soft one. Cheese, coleslaw, pineapple, and Thai-style sweet chili sauce add zest to the Cajun chicken wrap, finished on the grill. Breakfast is available at the café in Waves (try a fresh-baked chocolate cappuccino muffin). A second Atlantic Coast Café, by the pier in Avon, has table service, more entrées, and live music. At both these Hatteras Island fixtures, you'll find indoor and outdoor seating and a cheery, casual atmosphere.

DINNER WITH A SIDE OF HISTORY

Nestled in the **Tranquil House Inn, 1587 Restaurant** overlooks Manteo's pretty marina—and a replica of an Elizabethan ship. That's a clue to why its name is a number: Roanoke Island's famous Lost Colony was founded in 1587. The island is also home to the banks' main fishing port, Wanchese, where chef Brian Whitehurst goes every morning to select seafood. "I grew up in Kill Devil Hills," the Johnson & Wales graduate says. "I usually know whoever caught

it." The menu offers traditionalists a classic bouillabaisse or a choice of grilled meats with mashed potatoes and vegetables, alongside more imaginative fare such as fish steamed in a banana leaf, with pineapple salsa and orange coconut rum sauce, or sesame seared scallops with Asian slaw and wasabi soy aioli (echoes of the chef's off-season travels in Costa Rica and Thailand). He also caters to vegetarians, for example, making the latter dish with tofu instead of scallops. Have a drink at the copper-topped bar, and then settle in for a reliably elegant dinner. And be glad civilization has advanced during the past four centuries.

PRIDEFUL PRESERVATION

People who used to whiz past this former coffee shop on the causeway between Nag's Head and Manteo now stop for a bite. They discover a creative menu and big views of Roanoke Sound from the outside deck of this cute pink cottage. Chef Andrew Donovan and sommelier Ashley Whitfield met in Manhattan's high-end culinary



TAKE TO THE SKY ◀◀◀

The Wright Brothers National Memorial in Kill Devil Hills marks the spot where Wilbur and Orville Wright achieved the first successful powered flight in 1903. View the full-scale model of their pioneering plane, then take advantage of the near-constant breeze that brought them here. Kite flying is a popular choice, but at nearby **Jockey's Ridge State Park**, you can be the kite—floating down a huge sand dune after a hang-gliding lesson from **Kitty Hawk Kites** (soft landing guaranteed). The banks are also ideal for the way-cool sport of kiteboarding (KHK and REAL Watersports offer gear and instruction). Toast the action with a breezy beer at America's first wind-powered brewery, **Outer Banks Brewing Station** in Kill Devil Hills.

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whirl, then returned to their native North Carolina in 2010 to open **The Brine and Bottle**, an eatery emphasizing small plates and local, seasonal ingredients. “If it doesn’t swim here, it’s not on my menu,” Andrew says. To please customers, small plates like tuna carpaccio with candy-striped beets have been joined on the menu by large plates such as shrimp and grits and rack of lamb with caramelized onion risotto. In the Southern tradition (with thanks to his grandmother), he pickles everything from baby carrots and beets to okra and asparagus, as well as makes chutneys and other preserves. They’re all available for purchase, so if you like the bacon jam that adds pizzazz to a BLT sandwich, you can take home a jar or three. That’s the “brine.” Ashley supplies the “bottle,” a thoughtful selection of distinctive wines and craft beers, some, such as Mother Earth, from North Carolina breweries. The menu proudly cites top Southern ingredients with the likes of Falls Mill grits, Benton’s bacon, and Sweet Grass Dairy cheese. “The food has roots deep in the South because of who I am and where we are and where the products come from,” Andrew says.

CASUAL FINE DINING

At the **Café Pamlico**, at the **Inn on Pamlico Sound**, tables spill out from the window-lined dining room onto a sound-front deck. Its menu of small plates is also available in the dining room, but there you’ll likely opt for main dishes like crab cakes with chive whipped potatoes, sweet corn succotash, and lemon horseradish aioli or duck breast with roasted potatoes, sautéed mushrooms and arugula, and a balsamic fig reduction. The farmers’ market plate or a risotto with seasonal produce will satisfy vegetarians. The kitchen draws from the inn’s herb garden and “the best ingredients we can find to express who and where we are,” says chef Forrest Paddock. That means free-range chicken and quail and just-landed seafood, all beautifully presented.

BACK PORCH ◀◀◀

What could be more Southern than dining on a screened porch cooled by ceiling fans? **Back Porch Restaurant**, on charming Ocracoke Island, also has indoor seating. But in summer, the porch is the place to dine on specialties such as crab beignets, poke (a Hawaiian ceviche of sashimi-grade tuna tossed with ginger sauce and sesame), and bourbon pecan chicken. “My parents are French, so we have a Mediterranean influence, but also Asian flavors that suit the hot climate,” explains owner Daphne Bennink. There’s a good range of wines by the glass from a well-chosen list, and the bar serves smaller plates like fish and chips and a caprese burger with mozzarella and pesto.



PHOTO BY JESSIE MORRISSEY PHOTOGRAPHY



MARITIME MAINSTAY

Even without the maritime memorabilia that covers its walls, **Owens’ Restaurant**, a Nag’s Head mainstay, would be historic. “My parents opened it in 1946 as a café serving fried seafood and box lunches for fishermen,” says Clara Mae Shannon. Over the years the restaurant has expanded, taking design cues from the banks’ vintage lifesaving stations. Entrées come with old-school touches like a cheese crock and crackers, garden salad, and hushpuppies. But the menu goes beyond the requisite steaks and seafood platters to reflect Asian and other influences, from house-breaded coconut shrimp and ginger soy-lacquered tuna to tequila-marinated scallops with a Key lime vinaigrette. Other highlights include Carolina jambalaya (with scallops and tasso ham) and crab cakes made with lump meat, “the same recipe my mother used,” Clara Mae says. Her daughter and other relatives are also active in the business. “We want to keep it in the family,” she says, “and never rest on our laurels.”



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SURF'S UP

Surfboards and license plates punctuate the décor of **Tortugas' Lie**, a long-popular spot whose name means "where the turtles gather." Locals and vacationers mingle at the lively bar, where one TV shows non-stop surf movies. The menu has the kind of tasty fare that begs for a cold beer, from burgers and Baja fish tacos to conch fritters and steamed clams. Among the Caribbean-style standouts are Jamaican jerk chicken with warm pineapple chutney and Coco Loco fried chicken, rolled in coconut and black pepper and served with a lime-curry dipping sauce. Try the Hatteras-style clam chowder, made with a clear broth instead of cream (cows were scarce on the banks). Regulars swear by the white garlic pizza and the pepper steak. Specials change daily, influenced by the local catch. Tortugas' Lie is a perfect place to refuel after a few hours on the beach (just across the road) or some spirited spiking in the volleyball games played on two sand courts behind the restaurant.

WHERE TO STAY

Houses and condos that rent by the week are plentiful, but another appealing option is waterside lodging. The beachfront **The Sanderling Resort and Spa** in Duck features a spa, a tennis and fitness club, cozy rooms, and highly rated dining rooms (one in a former lifesaving station). **The Inn on Pamlico Sound** in Buxton boasts warm hospitality, fine views of Currituck Sound, and a swimming pool. Enjoy a complimentary three-course breakfast at the esteemed **Café Pamlico** before setting out on one of the inn's kayaks, paddleboards, or bicycles. Set amid historic Manteo's shops and attractions, **The Tranquil House Inn** makes a fine base for exploring Roanoke Island and beyond. And **Shutters on the Banks** in Kill Devil Hills is perfect for discovering northern beaches. [f](#)

BEACONS FROM THE PAST ◀◀◀

The waters off the banks were long known as the Graveyard of the Atlantic. Five historic lighthouses were built in the 1800s to save ships from the dangerous shoals. Visitors can climb two easy-to-reach beacons: stately, 162-foot **Currituck Beach Lighthouse** in historic Corolla Village and spiral-striped **Cape Hatteras Lighthouse**, the nation's tallest (200 feet) on Hatteras Island. Both reward an ascent with breathtaking views. **Cape Lookout Lighthouse** can also be climbed, but it's not easy to reach—it stands beyond paved roads on an island accessible only by boat.

EAT ◀◀◀

1587 Restaurant
405 Queen Elizabeth Ave.
Manteo
252-473-1587
Dinner
1587.com

Atlantic Coast Café
25150 NC Hwy. 12
Waves
252-987-1200
Lunch, Dinner
atlanticcoastcafe.com

Back Porch Restaurant
110 Back Rd.
Ocracoke Island
252-928-6401
Dinner
backporchocracoke.com

The Blue Point
1240 Duck Rd.
Duck
252-261-8090
Lunch, Dinner
thebluepoint.com

The Brine and Bottle
7531 S. Virginia Dare Trail
Nags Head
252-715-1818
Lunch, Dinner
thebrineandbottle.com

Café Pamlico
49684 NC Hwy. 12
Buxton
252-995-7030
Dinner
innonpamlicosound.com/CafePamlico/Restaurant/

Owens' Restaurant
Milepost 16.5, Beach Rd.
Nags Head
252-441-7309
Dinner
owensrestaurant.com

Tortugas' Lie
3014 S. Virginia Dare Trail
Nags Head
252-441-7299
Lunch, Dinner
tortugaslie.com

SLEEP ◀◀◀

The Inn on Pamlico Sound
49684 NC Hwy. 12
Buxton
252-995-7030
innonpamlicosound.com

The Sanderling Resort and Spa
1461 Duck Rd.
Duck
252-261-4111
thesanderling.com

Shutters on the Banks
405 S. Virginia Dare Trail
Kill Devil Hills
800-848-3728
shuttersonthebanks.com

The Tranquil House Inn
405 Queen Elizabeth Ave.
Manteo
252-473-1404
tranquilhouseinn.com

Jeff Book first experienced the charms of the Outer Banks as senior writer for *Coastal Living*, covering the shores of the South (and beyond). "The Banks are a great getaway for anyone who believes, as I do, that travel is as much about fresh flavors as new sights," Jeff says. The work of this Birmingham-based writer has appeared in *Departures*, *Travel + Leisure*, *the Los Angeles Times*, *GQ*, *Elle Decor*, *Smithsonian*, *House Beautiful*, and other publications.



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