

ADVENTURE & TRAVEL

JOURNAL CONCIERGE: AN INSIDER'S GUIDE



Photographs by Caroline Allison for The Wall Street Journal

LOUISVILLE, KY.

DAYS AT THE RACES

THINK OF SATURDAY'S KENTUCKY DERBY, now in its 137th year, as a long-running party that Louisville throws for its out-of-town guests. For the 150,000 or so revelers who annually land (some face-down) upon the city, Louisville is a gracious host who enjoys breaking out big hats and offering up mint juleps while debating whether hometown jockey Calvin Borel will make it his fourth Derby win in five years.

But once the last guests have emptied from the Churchill Downs infield, the north-central Kentucky town is just as happy having a quiet evening to itself. Well, not *that* quiet—one horse race isn't all Louisville has going for it.

A few weeks before Derby, Thunder Over Louisville, North America's biggest annual fireworks display, marks the city's unofficial start of spring. After the drab winter, Louisvillians shoot from the starting gate, resuming their rituals of strolling and picnicking in the 389-acre, Frederick Law Olmsted-designed Cherokee Park, dining al fresco along the nearby Bardstown Road and taking in Louisville Bats Class AAA baseball games at Louisville Slugger Field. Last year, the 1875-founded Churchill Downs permanently added lights to its track, making way for the Friday night social-coaster that is Downs After Dark, a stylish but less formal, exorbitant and crowded affair than the Derby.

Located on the Indiana border, Louisville manages to be both genteel South and sensible Midwest. One local house of worship recently attracted press for its bring-your-guns-to-

church day, while another nabbed headlines by refusing to sign marriage licenses for straight couples until gay unions were legally accepted, too.

Locals are boastful of native sons who made the big time, like Muhammad Ali and the late Hunter S. Thompson. Yet Louisville took decades to commemorate "The Greatest," five years ago honoring the boxer with the Muhammad Ali Center, an arts-and-social-events hub along its Ohio River banks.

Two blocks over, downtown's hotel scene emerged from the Jazz Age in 2006 when 21c Museum Hotel debuted its forward-thinking concept, nesting 90 lodgings atop the U.S.'s first museum devoted to 21st-century art. Just east of downtown, in NuLu (New Louisville) and Butchertown, boutiques, galleries and cafés are hanging fresh "open" signs. Dinner with speakeasy drinks at 732 Social and brunch at Toast on Market the next day are a winning exacta bet.

While food-wise Kentucky is best known for being the home of KFC, Louisville's cuisine goes beyond 11-herbs-and-spices fare. Recent palate-pleasing openings like Eiderdown and Hammerheads have boosted working-class Germantown to the leaders' pack.

Post-Derby, a breezy spring visit is best: The ponies will be racing...the city, not. As it witnessed in 2009, when Mr. Borel brought the gelding Mine That Bird from dead last to win the Kentucky Derby, Louisville knows that success doesn't come at a consistently breakneck pace.

—Zach Everson



PLUS, DON'T MISS...

• **The Blind Pig:** 8 At this Butchertown gastro-pub, wash down a four-course meal—all things pork—with a Bacon Manhattan.

theblindpiglouisville.com

• **Magnolia Bar & Grill:** Go with a can of cheap beer and chat up the guy on the stool next to you—he's friendly—at this Old Louisville dive. 502-637-9052

• **La Bodega:** The chef from Spain has been serving expert tapas—and sangria—in the Highlands area for 23 years. delatorres.com

• **Dot Fox and Cherry Bomb:** Dueling boutiques sell clothing (mostly women's, some men's), vintage and new, along with chic jewelry and accessories. dotfoxclothingculture.com and cherrybombloouisville.com

• **The Comfy Cow:** 1 Ice cream flavors like mint julep (at Derby time) and a Georgia butter pecan with chocolate chips and a splash of Old Forrester bourbon make this retro-soda fountain a local hot spot. thecomfycow.com

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The Rocker

Jim James
Louisville-born lead singer and guitarist for My Morning Jacket



Lunch Line: Meridian Cafe. For a quick, delicious noontime bite, pop into this former residential home in St. Matthews. It has the best comfort food variety, and delicious falafel. 112 Meridian Ave., themeridiancafe.com

Highlands Fidelity: ear X-tacy. To find the music you need for a Kentucky road trip, you've got to stop by Louisville's oldest independent record store, located in the Highlands. 2226 Bardstown Rd., earx-tacy.com

Grave Rave: Cave Hill Cemetery. A beautiful sanctuary, it's filled with surreal landscapes, and so many places to sit and think and just take it all in amongst the dead. 701 Baxter Ave., cavehillcemetery.com

Get-Lit Venue: The Rudyard Kipling. If you want to catch one of Louisville's up-and-coming bands, or perhaps a new play, try this place on for size. It has an amazing atmosphere and cool courtyard. 422 W. Oak St., therudyardkipling.com

Sporting Club: 3 Jack Fry's. Without a doubt the best place to get a fancy traditional American dinner. One of Louisville's oldest restaurants, it still feels fresh. It's perfectly lit with a live jazz band playing, and tons of old racing and boxing photos on the walls. You may even run into Muhammad Ali there. 1007 Bardstown Rd., jackfrys.com

The Sleuth

Sue Grafton
Louisville-born best-selling author of the Kinsey Millhone Mysteries detective novels



Suite Inspiration: The Brown Hotel. Built in 1923, the English Renaissance architecture retains its Old World grandeur with all the comfort and convenience of the present day. Its English Grill offers some of the finest dining in town. 335 W. Broadway, brownhotel.com

Indigenous Eats: Lilly's. Proprietor and award-winning chef Kathy Cary serves delicious Kentucky-inspired dishes, using local growers and providers. She's also a good friend...though I swear that's not why I'm saying this! 1147 Bardstown Rd., lillyslapeche.com

Winning Bet: 7 Kentucky Derby Museum. This museum is a tone poem to thoroughbred racing. The multimedia presentation of Derby Day never fails to bring tears to my eyes. You hear the crowd start singing "My Old Kentucky Home," and it'll give you chills. 704 Central Ave., derbymuseum.org

First Base: 5 Louisville Slugger Museum & Factory. Take the tour. It offers a close-up view of the baseball bat manufacturing process. I'm not a sports nut, but I really enjoy this place. 800 W. Main St., sluggermuseum.org

Blow For It: Glassworks. You can spend a good hour there just watching demonstrations of blown glass-making, fusion and flame-work, all under one roof. The gift shop sells local glass artworks. 815 W. Market St., louisvilleglassworks.com

The Chef

Edward Lee
Co-owner and chef of 610 Magnolia restaurant; "Iron Chef America" winner



Sea Biscuits: Sevice. In a town where steak and potatoes dominate, it's a refreshing change of pace to feast on chef Anthony Lamas's Latin-inspired cuisine. The seafood dishes are prepared with sharp, bold flavors. 1538 Bardstown Rd., sevicherestaurant.com

Tanning Bed: The Leatherhead. When you've got clients like Johnny Depp and Orlando Bloom, you can afford to be quirky. But the owners' works—from guitar straps to handbags—will change the way you look at leather. 1601 Bardstown Rd., theleatherhead.com

Artful Lodgings: 21c Museum Hotel. This boutique hotel combines the art of luxury with the luxury of modern art. It has a trendy bar and the best men's bathroom ever. 700 W. Main St., 21cmuseumhotel.com

Maximum-Minimal: 9 Scout. In the Market Street district, it's great for cool home furnishings. Minimalist and cutting edge, without being cold. You walk in looking for a mirror and leave with a cool coasters stack. 742 E. Market St., scoutonmarket.com

Spirits Lifter: Holy Grale. The quest for the perfect beer ends at this Highlands newcomer housed in a former church. Complete with religious objects d'art and a gastro-pub menu, its beers come from around the world. 1034 Bardstown Rd., holygralelouisville.com

The Curator

Laura Lee Brown
Co-owner and founder of 21c Museum Hotel; arts patron



Communal Art: Zephyr Gallery. A wonderful source of great art by local artists that holds up against even Manhattan's. Not only is the quality outstanding, the gallery is actually owned by a cooperative of the artists. 610 E. Market St., zephyrgallery.org

Treasure Trove: 6 Kentucky Museum of Art and Craft Shop. My husband buys me a Derby hat every year, mostly from this downtown innovator. Phyllis George Brown founded it in 1981 to help Kentucky's craftsmen. I love finding jewelry, furniture, art and wearables there. 715 W. Main St., kentuckyarts.org

For the Birds: 2 Peacock Boutique. A lovely women's clothing store with a range of great designers, including milliners Philip Treacy, Memsahib Couture and Lady Muck. 2828 Frankfort Ave., shopthepeacock.com

Go With It: FLÖ. Julia Comer recently opened this gallery showing wearable art, including her newly launched jewelry line that is earthy yet delicate and pretty. 803 E. Market St., flostudioandgallery.com

Something Old: 4 Joe Ley Antiques. Located in an 1890 schoolhouse and encompassing its playground, this store has been open for 35 years; it's a fantasy land for antique lovers, two acres of treasures. 615 E. Market St., joeley.com