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The Food Issue

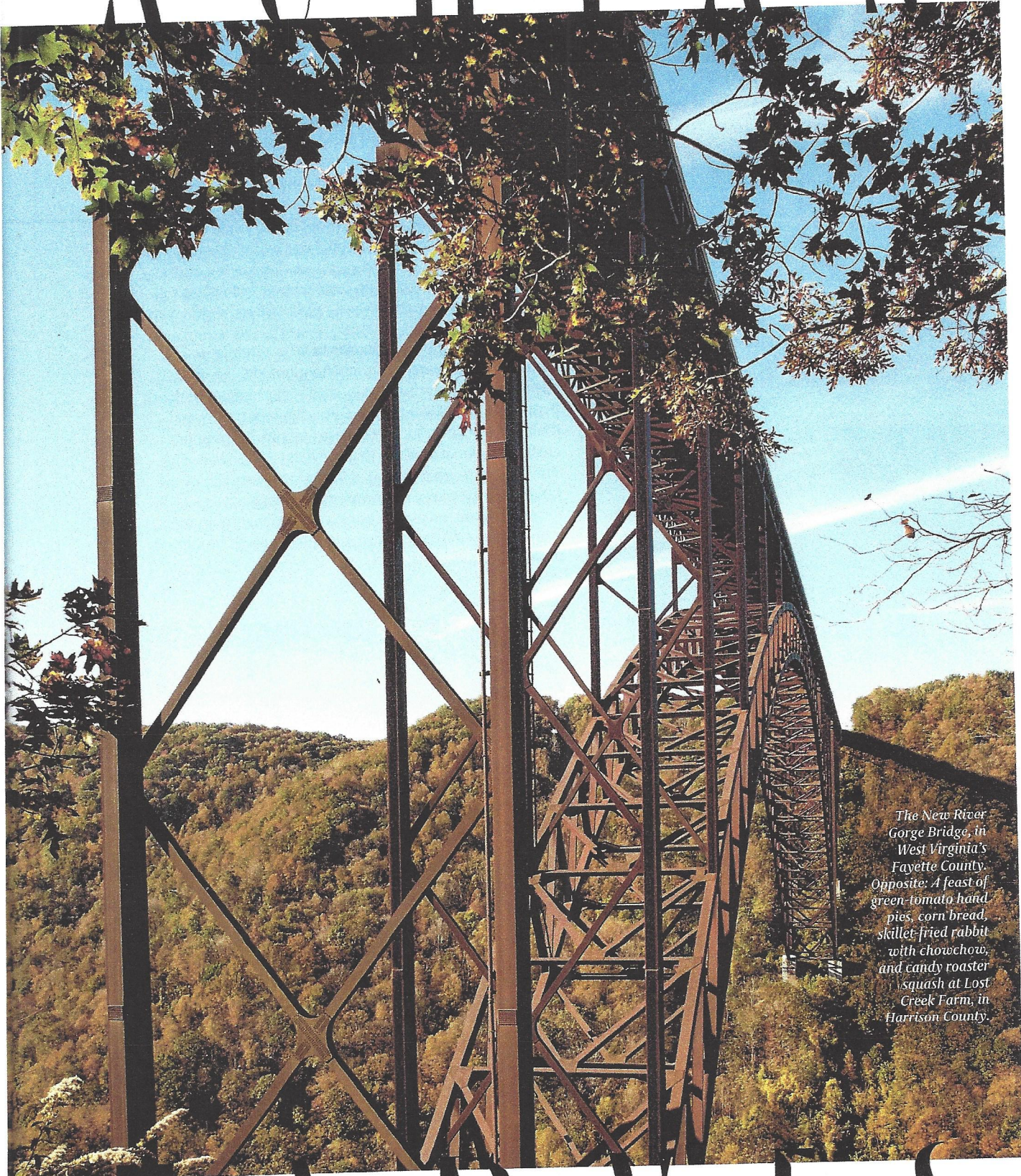
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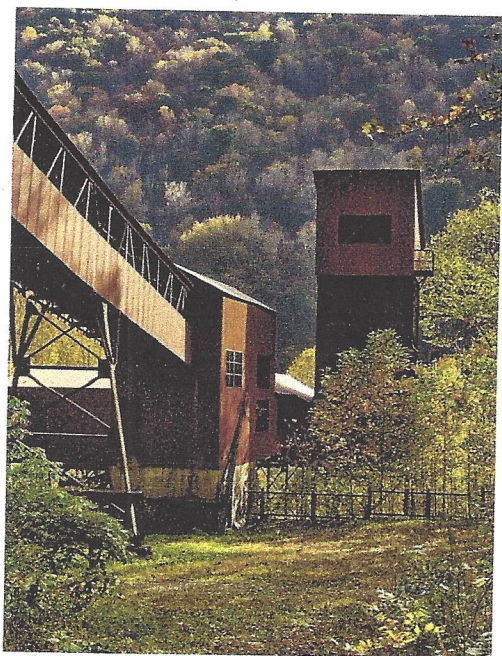
When setting off on a food tour of West Virginia, it's best to leave your preconceptions at home. From a farm supper to an innovative white-tablecloth meal, **SHERI CASTLE** samples the state's specialties—and discovers their surprising multicultural roots. **PHOTOGRAPHS BY ROSS MANTLE**

A C H I L I A N



The New River Gorge Bridge, in West Virginia's Fayette County. Opposite: A feast of green-tomato hand pies, corn bread, skillet-fried rabbit with chowchow, and candy roaster squash at Lost Creek Farm, in Harrison County.

H A R V E S T



▲ From top: A coal tipple at a disused mine in New River Gorge National Park & Preserve; the Red Needle, a tequila-based cocktail served at the Billy Motel & Bar.

THE aromas rushing through my car window at the drive-through of the Donut Shop in Buckhannon, West Virginia, were a heady mash-up of late-night pizza and early-morning bakery. I had planned to drive to a nearby scenic overlook to eat my pepperoni rolls, but I never made it out of the parking lot. Instead, I tore straight into the bag, pleased to see drips of red grease on the wrappers—a sure sign that the rolls were generously filled and wouldn't be dry. The first bite was burn-my-whistle hot. I didn't care, although after things cooled a bit, I was better able to appreciate how the salty, tangy, minced pepperoni nestled into the pillowy bread. The second one—called a pizza roll because it contains peppers and a ribbon of red sauce—was maybe even better.

Pepperoni rolls are a favorite in West Virginia, so beloved that they were recently nominated as an official state food. At their most basic, they're nothing more than pepperoni baked inside bread. But different bakers add their own touches, such as cheese and pickled peppers, creating regional loyalties that are deep and unwavering. The rolls were created almost a hundred years ago by the Country Club Bakery in Fairmont, and designed especially for coal miners, many of whom were Italian immigrants, who needed a filling, satisfying meal that could be carried underground in lunch buckets.



About two blocks from the Donut Shop is Fish Hawk Acres, a food market where you can select imported Italian pasta or pick up a pound of Ground Hog pork breakfast sausage, a family recipe whose name winks (and eye-rolls) at the assumption that hillbillies eat groundhogs and other lesser mammals. I hadn't intended to buy pepperoni rolls, but then I saw a man stride in for one—not his first that day, he confided, and perhaps not his last. He tossed his necktie over his shoulder to keep it safe from crumbs before tucking in. I added a roll to my lunch order. It was the size of a fist, but the dough was as tender and buttery as brioche. The pepperoni was finely chopped (although other bakers use long sticks or thin slices) and included cheese and peppers, both sweet and hot. It was served at room temperature, miner-style.

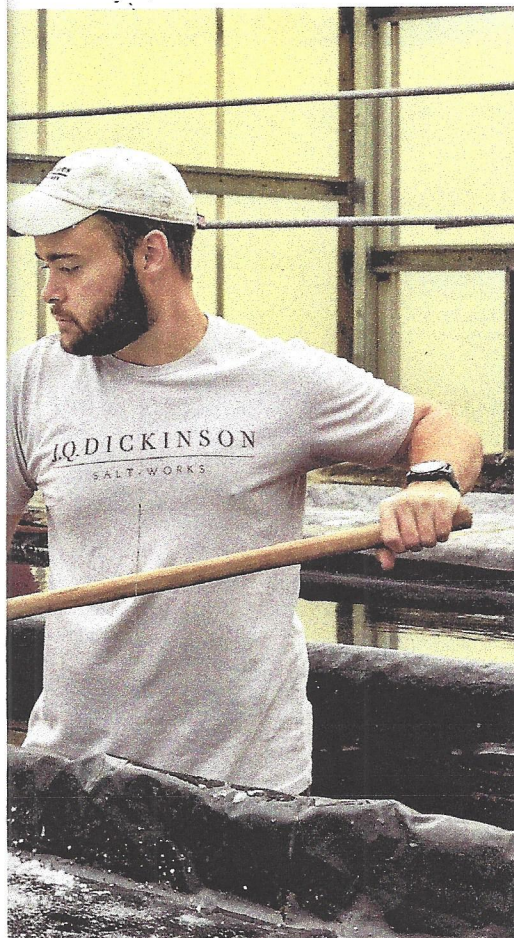
I munched on leftover pepperoni rolls for the next two days as I continued to hike and explore, and they never faltered or faded from deliciousness, a testament to ingenious Appalachian cooks who can make a moveable feast out of next to nothing.

I went to West Virginia in search of Appalachian food, old and new. I'm a food writer and cook who grew up in a different part of the Appalachian Mountains—in North Carolina, a few miles from the Tennessee and Virginia borders, a place that hasn't been



▶ *Appalachian Mercantile, the retail outlet of J.Q. Dickinson Salt-Works.*

◀ *Raking up salt at J.Q. Dickinson.*



my address in ages but will always be home. I'd never spent any real time in West Virginia, the only state that sits completely within the mountains, so I arrived with both a newcomer's curiosity and an old hand's familiarity. I aimed to find the vernacular cooking of West Virginia, and I was confident that I'd know it when I tasted it with my native Appalachian tongue.

Over the course of eight days I drove 1,148 miles, hiked a few dozen more, and crossed a river in a boat that skipped along the water like a stone. Yet I covered only a sliver of a stunningly beautiful state that feels remote, but is within a day's drive of roughly 40 percent of the U.S. population. (It's also home to our newest national park, the New River Gorge National Park & Preserve.) Most of the time I just followed my nose, guided by what the locals said they like to eat.

These stories are the souvenir postcards I wrote about what tasted true to me.

THE restaurant 1010 Bridge sits on a hillside that feels like charming downtown Charleston's upper balcony. This state capital seemed bustling compared with the tiny towns I'd driven through on the way, but has just under 50,000 residents.

The comfortable dining room was full in the middle of a workweek, a mix of people who were there for special occasions and those who were just there because it was Wednesday and they were hungry. Aaron and Marie Clark

manage the front of the house, while chef Paul Smith, who's a celebrity in these parts, holds sway in the kitchen.

Throughout my trip, I noticed two types of restaurant menus: those that want you to get a pinpoint-specific taste of that place, and those that want you to understand that their chefs can cook as well as chefs anywhere in the country. At 1010 Bridge, those strategies aren't mutually exclusive.

The first thing I devoured was a bowl of guacamole studded with finely chopped boiled egg, as found in Colombia and El Salvador, and topped with a spoonful of vibrant pickled-ramp *pico de gallo*. Chunky and piquant, it was everything I wanted, but not at all what I expected, and it recalibrated my idea of what guacamole can be. That's the thing about eating in West Virginia, and about touring this gorgeous state in general. Too many people come with preconceived (read: not great) notions that make them find only what they expect. It's wiser to let what we find reset our expectations.

I was smitten with the risotto carbonara. The creamy rice was topped with a silky sous vide egg and a smattering of crisp *lardons* and fried shallots under a topknot of bright-green garden-pea compound butter, a tangle of pea tendrils, and a generous dusting of salt-cured egg yolks that looked like marigold pollen.

The evening's vegan entrée (and let me be clear, vegans can eat well in West Virginia) was a savory tarte Tatin. A crisp puff pastry nest held a medley of roasted vegetables drizzled with an *agrodolce*-style apple-cider glaze and bold, peppery olive oil so good I had to ask where it came from. Turns out Villa DiTrapano olive oil is made by a family who immigrated to Charleston a couple of generations back but kept their estate near the Mediterranean, in Italy's Lepini Mountains. They now ship crates of their namesake oil home to sell.

The Clarks describe 1010 Bridge's ever-changing seasonal menu as "Appalachian cuisine with Lowcountry influence," so there are fresh seafood choices, but a steak dinner never goes out of rotation. West Virginia is beef country, with Black Angus cattle dotting the hillsides. The well-seasoned and judiciously sauced steak is *teres major*, an underappreciated cut that butchers once kept for themselves. Chef Paul calls it the 1010 cut because it's unfamiliar to many diners and, let's be honest, *teres major* sounds more like a constellation spotted by the state's Green Bank Telescope.

The service at 1010 Bridge was as hospitable as the food, but that's what I experienced everywhere, from a roadside stand operated off the back of a lowered tailgate to this white-tablecloth restaurant in a tony neighborhood. I didn't meet a soul who wasn't proud of what they served.

THE long wooden troughs looked as though they were filled with melting snow, which would make sense in West Virginia, but the rustling of the rakes through the sparkling crystals suggested otherwise. The humid air inside the evaporation room smelled like the ocean. To harvest sea salt in a landlocked state sounds like something from an ancient riddle, but that's the story of J.Q. Dickinson

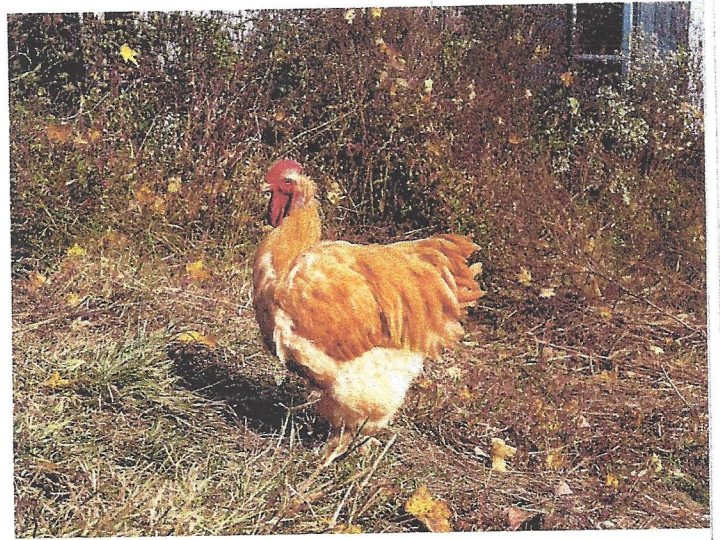
▶
Brie-filled beignets
with jelly
at 1010 Bridge
restaurant, in
Charleston.



▼
Hawk Knob
Cider & Mead,
in Lewisburg.



A Buff Cochin rooster at Lost Creek Farm.



Salt-Works, located a short drive downriver from Charleston in Malden. When this section of the Appalachian Mountains rose up some 400 to 600 million years ago, it trapped beneath it the Iapetus Ocean, an untouched sea older than the Atlantic. Starting with the Native Americans, people have come to this spot in the Kanawha Valley to pump out brine and make pristine salt.

These days the business is in the able hands of Nancy Payne Bruns and her brother Lewis Payne, seventh-generation salt producers who are telling new stories about old Appalachian ways. There was no ingredient I heard mentioned more often across West Virginia than this salt. Fans call it JQD, as though it were a dear friend.

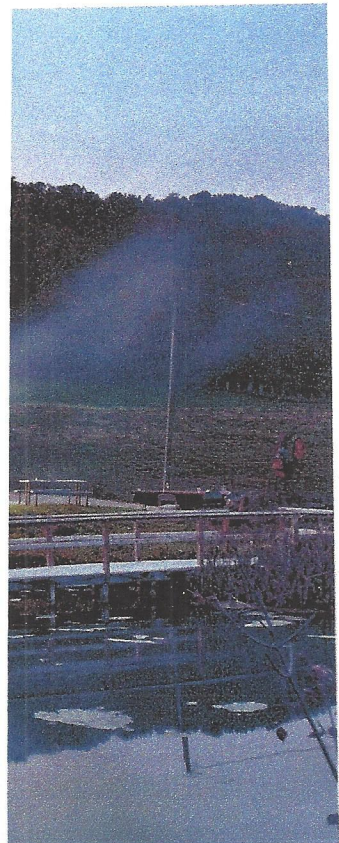
Around the corner from the saltworks is the company's retail outpost, Appalachian Mercantile,

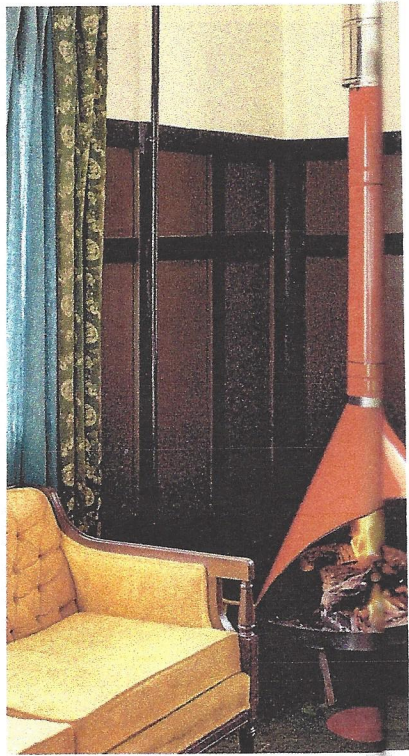
where it sells its products alongside other artisanal foods and handcrafted household goods from the region. Visitors can taste the various salts with ripe cherry tomatoes. (If they put out good bread and mayonnaise, folks would never leave.) People who think salt has no character beyond salinity have never tasted ones like these, which are complex and laced with natural minerals.

JQD also makes flavored salts. The applewood- and bourbon-barrel-smoked salts come from smokehouse



ILLUSTRATION BY LARA COSTAFREDA





▲ Retro styling at the Billy Motel & Bar. Opposite: The property occupies a revamped mid-century motor lodge.

◀ Owners Amy Dawson and Mike Costello enjoy the fruits of their harvest at Lost Creek Farm.

techniques that date back to the earliest forms of Appalachian food preservation. For its mushroom-herb blend, the firm works with George Patterson, of Hernshaw Farms, who grows at least 20 types of exotic mushrooms. Nancy makes jars of salted caramel sauce that hits that sweet spot just on the edge of savory. The company even makes *nigari*, the brine used in tofu and fresh ricotta that's rumored to take the edge off a hangover.

THE first thing I noticed when I stepped inside the Hawk Knob Cider & Mead tasting room, in Lewisburg, was the aroma—the earthy musk of ripe fruit and that sweet, sharp, yeasty funk of fermentation. Given my fascination with heirloom apples, those scents felt promising, like being dealt a good hand at the start of poker night. A tasting flight confirmed my

lucky streak. I now contend that the hard beverage that best conveys Appalachian terroir isn't moonshine or craft beer, it's cider.

The cider makers at Hawk Knob seek out apple varieties that once flourished in West Virginia's terrain and climate, and that they hope will flourish again. Hard cider reigned as the New World alcoholic beverage of choice until the early 1900s, and cider apples grew in abundance until orchard decimation during Prohibition wiped out all but a handful. One of the goals at Hawk Knob is to help save and restore what's left, as an act of environmental and cultural stewardship.

Hawk Knob ciders are barrel-fermented, cool and slow in the West Virginia climate, which gives them complexity and depth on par with aged wine and high-end whiskey. These ciders aren't sweet, which is revelatory for those

who suspect all hard cider will taste like a kid's juice box left in a hot car for a few days.

I would be hard-pressed (pun intended) to pick my favorite, but the one I've told the most people about is the wild-fermented Traditional Hard Cider, which goes through spontaneous fermentation with wild yeast in oak bourbon barrels and ages on its lees for eight months. It's rich, smooth, and tastes like a whispered memory of the most interesting apple of your life.

Hawk Knob also makes a dry style of mead, or honey wine, known as cyser, which combines heirloom apple juice with local wildflower honey. It's aged in French and American oak, which leaves it tasting rich and buttery. This straw-colored beverage with a heavenly nose is more engaging than most Chardonnays.

I arrived liking hard cider and wary of mead. I left with a case of each in the back of my car.

AND this is our Red Needle," Josh Gambetta said as he handed me a cocktail in exchange for one of the two clay poker chips I received when I checked in. The drink was the Billy Motel & Bar's take on a tequila concoction created by songwriter Leonard Cohen in Needles, California, in the summer of '75. I spent my second poker chip on a Blue Meanie tinted with house-made blueberry shrub instead of the usual blue curaçao. I found a seat on the gold velour settee next to the

(Continued on page 101)

Get a Taste of West Virginia

Where to Stay Billy Motel & Bar

A refurbished motor lodge with a fun cocktail bar near the town of Davis. thebillymotel.com; doubles from \$100.

Brass Pineapple

This traditional B&B is a short walk from the state capitol in Charleston. brasspineapple.com; doubles from \$169.

Cabin on Coney Island

Outdoor enthusiasts will love this rustic cottage on an island at the southern end of New River Gorge National Park. guesthousewv.com; doubles from \$332.

Forks Inn

A recently renovated motel on a mountain near Elkins that has highland views and an acclaimed restaurant. attheforks.com; doubles from \$125.

Lafayette Flats Boutique Vacation Rentals

Four plush rooms in a repurposed bank, steps away from the restaurants and shops of Fayetteville. lafayetteflats.com; doubles from \$189.

Where to Eat Cathedral Café

A friendly place in Fayetteville to grab breakfast or a sandwich. thecathedralcafe.com; entrées \$5-\$13.

Donut Shop

Exemplary pepperoni rolls (and, of course, doughnuts) in Buckhannon. fb.com/thedonutshopbuckhannon.

Fish Hawk Acres

Chef Dale Hawkins's well-stocked specialty food market in Buckhannon. fishhawkacreswv.com.

Hawk Knob Cider & Mead

Take the brewery tour at this tasting room on the outskirts of Lewisburg. hawkknob.com.

Lost Creek Farm

Mike Costello and Amy Dawson host regular Farm & Forage Supper Club gatherings on their Harrison County homestead. lostcreekfarmwv.com; tasting menu \$100.

The Station

Fill a picnic basket before heading into New River Gorge National Park & Preserve—or enjoy dinner at the end of the day. thestationwv.com; entrées \$14-\$30.

1010 Bridge

A comfortable upscale Charleston restaurant serving a twist on Appalachian cuisine. 1010bridge.com; entrées \$15-\$39.

What to Do J.Q. Dickinson Salt-Works

This family-owned operation outside of Charleston is a rare inland source of sea salt. jqdsalt.com.

New River Gorge National Park & Preserve

Stunning scenery, world-class outdoor activities, and the New River Gorge Bridge, the longest single-span steel bridge in the Western Hemisphere. nps.gov. —S.C.

