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The Spirit of
Mexico

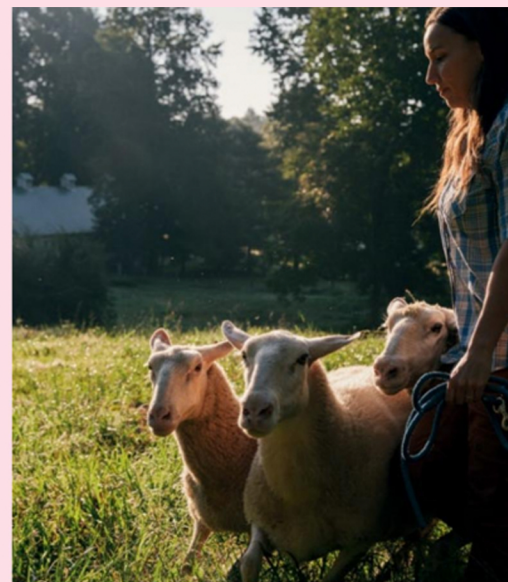
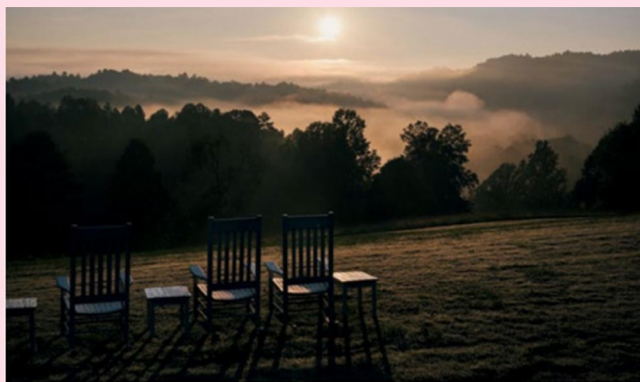


SMALL PLATES



A lush peek
into the Main
House dining
room, and some
of the farm's
fresh produce.

WORDS BY MARY HOLLAND. PHOTOGRAPHY BY MATT DUTILE



A Taste of Tennessee

Southern sustenance gets a sumptuous makeover at Blackberry Farm's new restaurant, The Dogwood.

BEFORE YOU EVEN ARRIVE at Blackberry Farm, send that last email. Do it as you turn off the main highway onto the winding pastoral road fringed with paddocks, red barns, and white picket fences. Once you reach the farm and open that car door — where you'll immediately be hit with fresh Smoky Mountain air and the overwhelming chirps of bugs, followed by a barrage of friendly staff who genuinely want to know how your day was — the last thing you'll want to do is check your inbox.

At Blackberry Farm it's impossible not to be slowed by the unhurried way of the South, where agendas all but fizzle out. Not that you come here to do nothing (well, you easily could). There are activities galore: fly-fishing, horse riding, hiking, and tennis. But really, these are all just supplements to the main activity at Blackberry Farm, why people really come here: to eat.



It's been this way at the luxury hotel in East Tennessee since the early 2000s, when the late proprietor Sam Beall turned the farm into a gastronomic powerhouse. Having sharpened his knives at The French Laundry, he returned to his family's property, overhauling the entire program and opening the celebrated fine-dining restaurant, The Barn, in 2007. Today, the Beall family's commitment to culinary excellence remains. The farm's most recent unveiling is the rebirth of the hotel's long-standing restaurant in the Main House dining room, located in the family's original 1930s home. In the Main House guests can enjoy breakfast and lunch, while The Dogwood serves dinner.

"Anything that's cool and happening in food and beverage, Blackberry is doing. And they're doing it really well," says Sarah Steffan, executive chef of The Dogwood. Blackberry Farm is like a rural Disneyland. There's a garden, dairy, larder, beehive, brewery, and an underground wine tunnel lined with rare whiskeys and wines. They forage, grow, or make much of the produce themselves (their Brebis sheep's milk cheese was awarded top three cheeses in the world by the American Cheese Society); otherwise they source from local purveyors.

It's the view from the Main House that people familiar with Blackberry Farm will recognize: Visitors can often be seen perched on the ridge overlooking the Smoky Mountains, where wisps of early morning fog cling to the magnificent peaks as the sounds of cicadas soar. "How do you enhance

Outside the Main House, rocking chairs look over the Smoky Mountains. In other parts of Blackberry Farm, one may find the property's sheep.

► what's already here?" asks Jason Bell, Blackberry Farm's director of design, looking out the dining room's bay window that frames the mountains. So as not to compete with the view, the team recreated the country-like space with floral drapes, light-green paneled walls, chandeliers, leather booths, and green tartan wingback chairs centered around an old stone fireplace and a large vase filled with seasonal greenery. New additions include the striking bar with British racing green tiles, wooden floors, a paisley rug, and smooth leather seats with tartan cushions.

Behind the bronze and wood-paneled counter, bartenders stir and shake vodka cocktails infused with blackberry and raspberry, and make old-fashioned with 10-year-old bourbon whiskey. "We want people to come back and experience something new but also feel like they're home," says Bell. It's not easy redoing a restaurant that's loved by many; alter it too much and you may disappoint returning guests — but change it only slightly and, well, what's the point of a redo?

"It was a family home, and it still has a homey family feel. You want the menu to be a hug, very welcoming, and a little bit surprising," says Steffan.



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Artful dishes are matched only by the farm's sumptuous lodging.

Dinner dishes are less traditional but still have Southern twists: brown butter-basted salmon with corn butter and maitake mushrooms, and sheep's milk cheesecake with hazelnut crumble and peaches.

She has worked at Blackberry Farm for 13 years and was tasked with overseeing part of the restaurant's rebirth, including the menu, which changes daily. To align with today's diets, Steffan has added nut butters and healthier grains and oils. One of her favorite rotating dishes is a kale salad with a zippy dressing of zhug and crushed cashews, topped with chili and lime peanuts. "I think our late proprietor Sam Beall would have loved it," says Steffan. "It blurs genres in a way. It's not Southern — it's weird and funky and delicious but also approachable."

Of course, there's also no shortage of Southern delights, usually found on the lunch menu, like fried chicken and blueberry cobbler ice cream. At breakfast, comforting hoe cakes with bacon from a nearby smoke master are on offer, as well as flaky poppy seed scones crusted with sugar. Dinner dishes are less traditional but still have Southern twists: brown butter-basted salmon with corn butter and maitake mushrooms, and sheep's milk cheesecake with hazelnut crumble and peaches. But no matter how "rustic" the dishes may sound, they look and taste like something out of a Michelin-starred kitchen. "I feel like we are an actual restaurant now," says Steffan of the restaurant's evolution. "It's been really cool to see The Dogwood come into its own and stand in equal measure with The Barn. It took a lot of hard work to get here."

In the evenings, the Main House dining room transforms into The Dogwood; chandeliers are dimmed, and, in the background, the sound of bluegrass gently fills the space. There's not a pandemic outfit in sight. Families from New York and couples from Charleston dressed in heels, blazers, and the odd bow tie slide into grand chairs, chattering about their afternoon hikes. The atmosphere, much like the food, feels elegant but approachable. The genial staff dressed in white shirts pour fine bourbons and French wines, stopping to ask how your day was with delicious Southern drawls. Even as plates of farfalle and seared diver scallops leave the kitchen, there's not a moment at The Dogwood when you question where you could be: It's all quintessentially Tennessee. ●