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**STATE-OF-
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Haute & Hot

The Natural State — known for good food and

By Marilyn Myers

Though President Bill Clinton has put Arkansas on the map, most people still can't figure out what the state's culture and cuisine are all about. Are we talking Deep South? Or should it be considered southern-midwest? Is Arkansas the land of grits—as well as political opportunity—or is Kansas City-style barbecue king.

Arkansas, in fact, has as many culinary facets as the man in the White House. It's about killer hamburgers and haute cuisine, mean barbecue and down-home lunch counters as well as locally grown foods from chickens and rice to peaches, grapes and blueberries.

Arkansas cuisine, like the terrain, is divided on the diagonal from the northeastern to the southwestern corners—with the line cutting through Little Rock, the capital, in the middle of the state. Below this demarcation is flat farmland that is closest to the Deep South, literally and figuratively. Helena—on the eastern edge of the state overlooking the Mississippi River—exemplifies classic Delta and southern foods like biscuits, grits and long-simmered beans and greens as well as barbecued pork and fried catfish. Though rice is one of the state's biggest crops, Arkansas isn't noted for famous rice dishes, with the possible exception of rice pudding.

Above the diagonal are hills where chickens, timber and tourists reign. Hot Springs—in the heart of the Ouachita Moun-

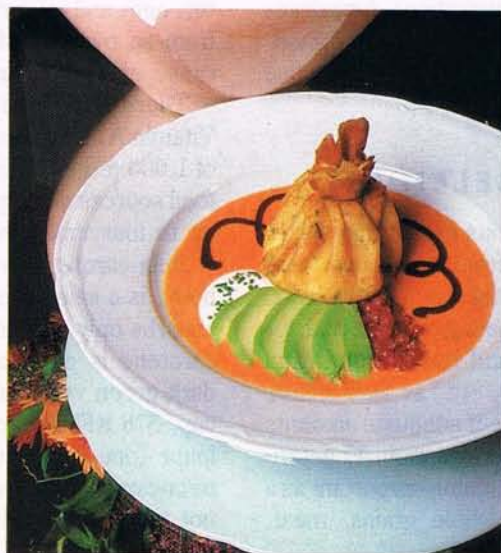
tains—draws visitors to its natural beauty. Locals supplement their diet at Mollie's restaurant with northern-influenced potato knishes or pick up a corned beef on rye at Oaklawn race track. Though millions of chickens are raised on hill farms nearby, beef is still preferred.

Little Rock, the state's most glittering city, is the meeting point of these influences. Haute cuisine made its debut here in the mid-'70s, when six Swiss-trained chefs arrived to open a restaurant atop a downtown building. Little Rock is where you'll find foie gras, radicchio and fresh caviar—some from paddlefish in the White River. But Little Rock also is influenced by the spicier foods of Texas and New Mexico, and by traditional local favorites like barbecue and plate lunches.

At Alouette's in Little Rock, goat cheese in a beggar's purse floats on roasted pepper sauce and avocado.

The food that best connects the state is the hamburger—and it's not lean and trim. The chili cheeseburger, a mainstay of the president's throughout high school, is still popular at Bailey's Dairy Treat in Hot Springs. In Little Rock, burgers are the drawing card at Doe's Eat Place and the Buffalo Grill. And in Helena, Casqui Restaurant notes its bluesburger, honoring Delta music and the annual King Biscuit Blues Festival.

But food is only one of the attractions these three cities have to offer. Helena overflows with classic Delta character and fine examples of antebellum and Victorian planter's townhouses.





in **A**rkansas

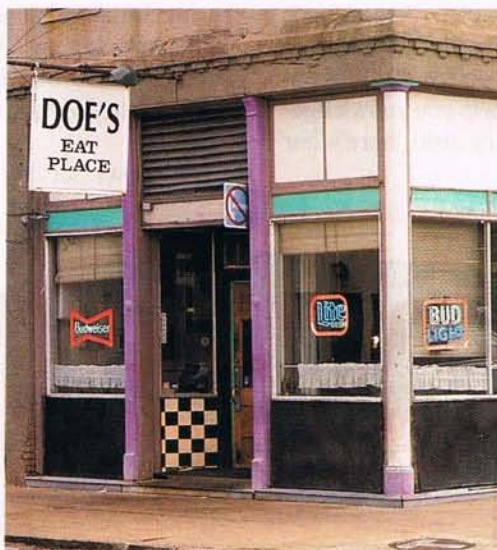
good fun — shines with all sorts of possibilities.

Many of Helena's turn-of-the-century buildings are being restored to their former glory with the help of the Main Street Helena program. The recently opened Delta Cultural Center in the railroad depot spotlights the land and racial mix that made this region hum during its riverboat heyday.

Beyond hamburgers, Casqui's also specializes in biscuits and gravy, turnip greens, fried catfish and sweet potato pie. Other eateries include the rustic Armstrong's Bar-B-Que for thick-sauced, chopped-pork barbecue and the more elegant Bell's Ducks By The Levee for Louisiana-influenced blackened redfish.

From January through April, the horse races are the primary Hot Springs draw, swelling the population dramatically with fans. The other drawing card is the thermal springs, for which the city is named. If you want to "take the baths," Buckstaff Bathhouse continues to operate, or check out the Arlington Hotel with its jungle-inspired pink-and-green lobby. In the public bathhouse at the hotel, naturally heated water is piped into the old-fashioned tubs. After a long soak, further relaxation comes with a massage.

Little Rock's Capital Hotel is another grand old hostelry—President Ulysses S. Grant once slept here. The hotel exemplifies the care the city has paid to renovation projects.



Being near the Capitol, Doe's Eat Place, above, is a popular Little Rock hang-out for the political crowd—and anyone else who enjoys a good tamale and a hefty steak, just like at the Greenville, Mississippi, namesake. Doe's also is known for a thick, juicy hamburger served on a plain soft bun with chopped lettuce, sliced tomatoes, mayo or mustard and often jalapeño cheese, bottom right.

A walking tour of the Quapaw Quarter around the Governor's Mansion reveals both grandly elaborate and cottage facades.

Other downtown attractions include the Arkansas Arts Center and the Arkansas Museum of Science and History. Both are located in MacArthur Park, named after General Douglas MacArthur, who was born at the old military installation that houses the science and history collection.

For the visitor who likes to combine touring with tasting, Little Rock brims with options. Ashley's in the Capital Hotel has Old South-atmosphere with a Continental overlay. Other elegant spots are Josephine's in the Excelsior Hotel and Alouette's, where southern ingredients take on new culinary meaning. For a Tex-Mex and Southwestern edge, try Juanita's and Blue Mesa for spicy and innovative fare.

At the less imposing end of the scale, plate lunches are the order at Hungry's and The Blue Plate Special. Or go for Jimmy's Serious Sandwiches. For the essential Little Rock food experience, however, don't miss the thick, juicy hamburgers. Best bets are: the Buffalo Grill and Doe's Eat Place. After you've chowed down, you can always drive to Hot Springs and take the water.

