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by **RAYMOND SOKOLOV**

Richmond, Va.

Some people come to this historic Southern city to see Thomas Jefferson's state capitol. Fans of the TV drama "Hawthorne" can try to find locations where the show's star, Jada Pinkett Smith, has allegedly been pursuing her on-air career as a nurse. On a Saturday night, crowds of local pleasure-seekers fill Richmond's rehabbed historic center. I was happy to join all these folks.



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Buz and Ned's Real Barbecue

Buz and Ned's ribs.

I admired the life-size statue of George Washington by his great French contemporary Jean-Antoine Houdon and Houdon's brilliantly malicious portrait bust of the Marquis de Lafayette in the capitol's rotunda. And I had drinks in a couple of watering holes on cobbled streets nearby. But for serious food, I lit out from this somewhat over-restored oasis to various serious sources of down-home sustenance and culinary sophistication.

In the down-home department, Richmond offers the barbecue lover a high density of way stations at which to feed his habit. After some studious inquiry, I settled on two expert purveyors of meat slow-cooked in pits. For a Saturday lunch, I joined some clean-cut families in Bermuda shorts at Buz and Ned's Real Barbecue, where reality lay suspended somewhere between the spic and span patio, with its vertical rolls of paper toweling meant to invoke some backwoods haunt, and a fine-looking modern car wash. The smoky, juicy ribs were worth the slight detour from downtown, but the brisket sandwich wasn't.



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Further out of town, on a stretch of Jefferson Davis Highway not beautified by Lady Bird Johnson or anybody else, I hunkered down happily at the counter of Hank's Pit Cooked Barbecue, in view of the full-size Elvis replica, a big American flag and assorted collectibles. Hank's was founded in 1963 by Bill and Helen Hanchey (whence the "Hank"), who brought their notion of Q with them from Rose Hill, N.C. (pop. 1,330, alleged home of the world's largest frying pan and muscadine winery). If you want barbecue at Hank's,

your choice boils down to pork shoulder, sliced or chopped, both with a strong vinegar tang. We picked chopped and reveled in the austere, sour pigginess of the experience. Hank's is an import to the Commonwealth of Virginia, sure, but once you are inside you'll have no trouble imagining yourself at some country crossroads south of Raleigh.



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Buz and Ned's Real Barbecue

The brisket sandwich from Buz and Ned's.

You get a similar whiff of what Horace the Roman poet called "boondocks in the city" (*rus in urbe*) at Comfort, found in a re-emerging Richmond neighborhood. Chef Jason Alley acquired his knowledge of fried green tomatoes, okra and catfish at his birthplace in Appalachia, Va., but seasoned himself in serious kitchens from Atlanta to Illinois before heading here and staking a claim for food that, he says, won't scare people. The night I stopped by, the minimalist dining room was very full of nice

people deciding whether to try the meatloaf or the grilled pork chop. Comfort is a superficially simple but culinarily expert nod to the basics of its region. But if you just must cater to your inner gourmet, you can order the Kobe skirt steak.

Or you could drive your Prius to the other side of town, to an un-picturesque stretch of Main Street down the hill from the pristine old Richmond neighborhood where Patrick Henry demanded liberty or death, and see what's on for dinner at Millie's Diner.

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Back in the mid-20th century, Millie's really was a diner, slinging hash at workers from the Lucky Strike plant down the way in Shockoe Bottom. The current owners, Paul Keevil and Lisa Edwards, who celebrate the new Millie's 20th anniversary this year, have gone almost overboard in keeping the greasy spoon note ringing at the 44-seat, two-room joint, while inserting a menu as deft and knowing as you could ever really want. There are vintage graphics on the walls, and vintage chrome-and-push-button Seeburg Wall-o-matic remote selectors connected to the eclectic main jukebox. But the setting is just a deceptively retro and downmarket backdrop for a very interesting dining adventure.



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Allison Dinner for The Wall Street Journal
The Elvis-era décor at Hank's Pit Cooked Barbecue.

The menu is a deliberate fusion of ingredients and cuisines, concocted from ingredients gathered from nearby and the antipodes. Much of the food is prepared in a cramped open kitchen on an old Vulcan range by young men who trade tattoo stories and move with determined languor toward a spiffy finish. I sat a few feet away and, if I hadn't been pretty sure they were working on my order, I couldn't have guessed that they were multi-tasking their way through the assembly of a very large pork chop stuffed

with ripe plaintains, pancetta and sage, and garnished with stone-ground mascarpone grits and bitter, rangy broccolini.



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Jeff Moore

I started this feast with Millie's idea of fried green tomatoes: a perfect version of the classic dish tricked out with roasted red pepper, baby arugula and toasted hazelnuts. Maybe I should have started with beef carpaccio accompanied by local beets, preserved lemon and fancy Parmesan, or the local poblano peppers stuffed with chorizo, corn and black beans, followed with a duck duo (breast and confit) in guava gastrique.

Comfort's banana pudding.

You want to remember to keep room for the peach cobbler or the Almond Joy gelato. And

the truly great American-style coffee. And, yes, pay attention to those pictures of the charming dog all over the restaurant and even worked into the pages of the Wall-o-matics. There once was a real dog at Millie's that got lost. The original sketch was posted to alert the neighbors. Now the dog is irretrievably gone but immortal at Millie's. Leaving me and you to bark with pleasure after dinner here.

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