



HIGHWAY 51 NORTH

STORY AND PHOTOS BY PAUL KNIPPLE

The journey is its own destination. HOMER

The journey is its own destination? Maybe if you have a bag of good donuts to eat on the way. But we're foodies. When we're going somewhere, we want there to be a good meal at the end. Memphis is in an excellent location. We are an easy day's drive from innovative cuisine and a spectacular glimpse into native American history in Tulsa, Oklahoma. To the south, more history and a chance to sample the differences between Cajun and Creole in New Orleans and the rest of Louisiana. To the east, there's the insane traffic and good food of Atlanta. To the north? We're Southerners. Let's not talk about the north.

But what if you want to be back in your own bed at night? We have that well in hand too. Head any direction from Memphis (even north) and you can find good food and interesting places to visit. So pick out some good driving music and come spend a day with us. We're going to find all the fun places, interesting people, and of course, great food.

Nestled atop bluffs high above the Mississippi River, Memphis is a rather flat city. I grew up in a house on the very top of one of the few hills in town. On the top of the next hill over was another house where another boy lived with his mother. The mother was known as Gladys. The boy was known as The King. Yes, Elvis was my neighbor.

The only thing that really separated the two of us, aside from a tall stone fence and prodigiously talented hips, was U.S. Highway 51. The road that became known as Elvis Presley Boulevard heads south into Mississippi where it passes near the home of another rock great, Jerry Lee Lewis. Heading north, Highway 51 does a quick shuck and jive to shake off the name of Elvis and take on the name of St. Jude founder Danny Thomas. While 51 is not as celebrated as its counterpart just to the west, Highway 61, following 51 in either direction leads to interesting places and great food finds. Today, we're going to give the north a try.

Just how far do you have to drive to make it a day trip? Not that far really, and you can make quite a day out of it. After a devastating frost in 2007, **Jones Orchard** is looking forward to a better year in 2008. The orchards offer you the opportunity to spend the day picking your own peaches, apples or strawberries, depending on the season of course. Nothing makes canned goods taste better than knowing you picked the fruit with your own hands. And after your day's work, you can

Clockwise from top left: Tina pulls pies from the oven; Shelby Forest General Store; Salsas and preserves at Jones Orchard, photo by Carole Topalian; the "guard" rooster at the General Store; the Gilt Edge Cafe

replenish your strength with a sandwich or an excellent bowl of beans and cornbread. And in case that didn't fill you up, try a slice of the fresh baked pies. The chess pie is sweet, rich, and one of the best around. Should you find your motivation to pick lacking, you can still go home with a supply of fresh fruits and vegetables or skip the whole canning process and get your preserves from the Jones market.

Now some of you may be looking not for agriculture but for a different communion with nature. You're not too far off from that either. Just stop in at the **Shelby Forest General Store**. Once you get past the guard rooster who lives on the front porch, you will find all the fixin's you need for a good picnic lunch along with gems like honey straight from Shelby Forest. You can also get hearty breakfasts and lunches remarkably cheap. Fried baloney, that sinful slice of nostalgia, is available all day. On Friday nights, you can get a steak and listen to banjo picking. If you decide to even bother leaving the store, you can head into Shelby Forest State Park for a day of fishing, swimming or hiking.

But many of you are thinking that we are talking road trips. We should be driving not hiking. And worse, we haven't even left the county yet. So let's get back on the road.

As you reach the heart of Covington, you'll notice a sign that reads, "Mississippi River 19 Miles. No ferry." Who could pass up a challenge like that? While this stretch of state highway 59 is not as scenic as some routes we could take, the rewards are great. The **Gilt Edge Café** is solid gold. This is strictly a hole-in-the-wall place. What counts, though, is the menu. Barbecue sandwiches feature melt-in-your-mouth meat and a sauce that goes from "man, that's too sweet" to "man, that's good!" The real masterpiece here, though, is the homemade caramel and peanut butter pies. There is absolutely no question that either pie alone is worth the drive.



If the excitement of blink-and-you'll-miss-it Gilt Edge isn't enough for you, keep following 59 for just a few more miles. The **Sugar Creek Trails ATV Club** provides a place to get off road, way off road and way up in the air if you try your hand at jumping some of their ramps. You will have to provide your own ATV, but they will provide all the muddin' you could want.

You can't find brains just anywhere....You may not even be looking for brains, but now you know where to find them.

If you prefer "here's mud in your eye" to refer to your cocktails, heading back to Covington will provide you with something more your speed. On, or actually under, the historic town square, **Marlo's Down Under** is bringing elegance and innovative cuisine to Covington. The Scott family has carved out a beautiful space from the former dry goods storage space of the long-gone grocery store upstairs. The bar was once the produce counter in the grocery store.

History is preserved, but the future is in the food. Young chef Nick Scott has created a menu that is special enough for those big nights but accessible enough for families to make the restaurant a regular stop. Choices range from simple items like decadent onion rings and steaks with sumptuous mashed potatoes to more innovative dishes like crawfish empanadas and butterscotch scallops. You can't go wrong with Marlo's.

"So where did you go on your road trip?" If you don't want to admit to eating at half a dozen different places, you'll need something else to bring up. That's where Henning can help. Heading east from 51, you can visit the boyhood home and grave site of **Alex Haley**, author of *Roots* and *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. Head west to the river and visit the site of the **Civil War Battle of Fort Pillow**. Whichever way you go, get back on the road. We've got more to eat, and Ripley is next.

A tingle of anticipation starts as you approach Ripley. You'll start to notice signs. Finally, when you are in the heart of town, there they are, smiling down at you from the town's welcome banners—Ripley tomatoes. Debate rages as to whether they are really the best or whether they are as good as they once were, but their fame does not wane. If you hit Ripley in the summertime, pick up a few tomatoes and lend your voice to the debate.

Biting straight into a ripe tomato is one of life's great joys, but you will probably want more to eat than one of your newly purchased treasures. **Emily's Bakery and Restaurant** has a good menu, but the highlight is their home-baked desserts. The **Blue and White Restaurant** offers sandwiches and a buffet for lunch and dinner. The real draw is breakfast; their menu specifies "city ham" versus "country ham." Best of all, though, is the traditional dish brains and eggs. You can't find brains just anywhere. Certainly not with rambling travel writers. You may not even be looking for brains, but now you know where to find them.

If you bring a cooler, you can leave Ripley with more than just a full belly. Bennie and Elaine Barcroft, owners of **B & E Buffalo Farm**, raise bison on their ranch near Ripley. They sell steaks, roasts, ground meat and sausage at their store. Buffalo is delicious meat. If you aren't sure what to do with it, the Barcrofts can provide you with recipes and advice as well.

At this point, you should have enough treats to call your road trip a success. Head home and rest up. Tomorrow you can grill buffalo burgers with a slice of fresh tomato. And don't forget to save room for that fresh fruit pie you're going to make.

Once upon a time, **Paul Knipple** drove 50 miles without stopping to eat. He nearly died. He'll never made that mistake again.

IF YOU GO...

JONES ORCHARD

7170 Highway 51 North, Millington
901- 873-3150
www.jonesorchard.com

SHELBY FOREST GENERAL STORE

7729 Benjestown Road, Millington
901-876-5770

GILT EDGE CAFE

6864 Highway 59 W, Burlison
901-476-6446

SUGAR CREEK TRAILS ATV CLUB

18024 Highway 59 W, Drummonds
901-835-3691
www.sugarcreektrails.com

MARLO'S DOWN UNDER

102 Court Square E, Suite DU, Covington
901-475-1124
www.marlosdu.com

EMILY'S BAKERY AND RESTAURANT

815 Highway 51 N, Ripley
731-635-2127

THE BLUE AND WHITE RESTAURANT

1320 Highway 51 N, Ripley
731-635-1471

B & E BUFFALO FARM

1243 Highway 51 North, Suite 1, Ripley
731-635-3472



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5101 Sanderlin Ave.
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