

# HIGHWAY 51 SOUTH

STORY AND PHOTOS BY PAUL KNIPPLE

**N**orthern Mississippi is at once the richest and poorest of places. Its poverty is well documented. Just as well documented, however, is the richness of history, heritage, and culture. We could talk endlessly about the duality, but we're here to dine.

For the longest time, King Cotton ruled north Mississippi life. The biggest things growing there now are catfish and casinos. (No, I didn't forget the sweet potatoes or the rice. We'll get to those eventually. I promise.) Growth has been good for the area, but it has come at a cost. Some of the character of the region is being lost to cookie-cutter sprawl. There are still treasures to be found, though, starting with our old friend U.S. Highway 51.

Cruise down 51 until the sprawl starts to fall away and the feel of country returns. This happens in Nesbit, where **Curtis Grocery** is a perfect example of country and community. The tiny store provides the residents with nearly everything they need—groceries, housewares and even some clothing. In times past, access to larger towns and cities was limited, so the country store played an important role in the community. Now superhighways and supercenters are not-so-gradually eliminating the need for such businesses.

Betty Usry, who, with her husband, Curtis, has owned the grocery since 1974, knows there is more to life than getting there. "The interstate is just a route. It gets people from place to place quickly. They miss out on what's along the way though," she says.

Intrepid day trippers can stock up for the road at Curtis Grocery. The well prepared traveler can go home with beautiful ham hocks or freshly sliced bacon. The observant traveler will leave with a sense of history. The grocery is still relevant, though, for more than just what you can buy there. It's a focal point for the area as evidenced by the frequent visits of area politicians pressing the flesh.

Continuing south, the scenery changes from country to suburb and back before you finally ease into Hernando. Just before you reach the town square, you'll find **Velvet Cream**. Called "The Dip" by locals, Velvet Cream has been a Hernando landmark for more than 60 years.

You can hit the drive thru for a quick bite, but the real magic is at the front window. Park the car. Walk up to the front. Peruse the large menu. When you're ready, go up to the window. The lovely young ladies will write your order on a white paper sack. When your food is ready, it's handed to you in that same white paper sack.

You may need some help placing that order. There are more than 70 varieties of milkshakes alone. And there are other treats like mule slobber. No, no. You'll just have to go find out for yourself.

But why so many choices? Staying competitive. With fast food chains moving into town, it pays to stand out. But it's not the choices. It's standing out. Standing out in front of a little shack that your parents took you to. Taking your own kids there. Reminiscing with friends while waiting on a darned good burger. That's outstanding.

If you would rather rest your dogs than eat dogs, **Cafe 51** offers good home cooking and desserts. The cozy spot in a house right on Highway 51 offers everything you could hope for in a meal on the road. You have to play hooky though. They're only open Monday to Friday.

Since Hernando is the county seat of Desoto County, it makes sense that the denser population would create a positive environment for restaurants. At first glance, our next stop defies all such logic.

Como, Mississippi, is a tiny speck of a town, but on Main Street, there are five restaurants within a few blocks. And there are no chains,

Clockwise from top: Curtis Grocery, Nesbit, MS; The Hollywood Cafe, Robinsonville, MS; Fried pickles at the Hollywood Cafe; The Blue and White Restaurant, Tunica, MS





## If you go...

### Nesbit

#### Curtis Grocery

1674 Highway 51 North, Nesbit, MS • 662-429-9775

### Hernando

#### Velvet Cream

2290 Highway 51 South, Hernando, MS  
662-429-6540 • www.myspace.com/velvetcream

#### Cafe 51

2450 Highway 51 South, Hernando, MS  
662-429-7812

### Como

#### The Como Steakhouse

203 Main St., Como, MS  
662-526-9529 • www.comosteakhouse.com

#### Windy City Grille

217 Main Street, Como, MS • 662-526-0331

#### The Ranch

223 Main St., Como, MS • 662-526-1000

#### Del Rio Mexican Restaurant

109 Main St., Como, MS • 662-526-5121

#### Diner on Main

103 W Oak St., Como, MS • 662-526-1202

### Tunica

#### The Hollywood Cafe

1585 Old Commerce Rd., Robinsonville, MS  
662-363-1225 • www.thehollywoodcafe.com

#### Blue & White Restaurant

1355 Highway 61 N, Tunica, MS • 662-363-1371

#### Main Street Diner

1347 Main Street, Tunica, MS • 662-363-4211

#### Historic Café Marie

1195 Main St. Tunica, MS • 662-357-0988

#### Tunica Museum

1 Museum Blvd., Tunica, MS  
662-363-6631 • www.tunicamuseum.com

#### Tunica County River Park

1 Riverpark Dr., Robinsonville, MS  
662-357-0050 • www.tunicariverpark.com  
www.tunicaqueen.com

no cookie cutter clones. There is creativity and passion and owners that you can actually talk to.

So what's up with Como? In **The Como Steakhouse**, grillmaster Cedrick Allen answers that question by saying, "this steakhouse." At Windy City Grille, manager Michael Monaghan is slightly more humble. He says, "Como is the best kept secret in north Mississippi." When asked what the secret is, why Senatobia, the much larger town to the north isn't a culinary destination, his answer is simple, "it's in a dry county."

Don't get the impression that Como is like the lawless wild west. Much to the contrary, Como is the most family-friendly place you may ever see. The restaurants are filled with young people, older folks, and families with children of all ages. It seems that for every bottle of wine, there is at least one sippy cup.

The undoubted star is The Como Steakhouse. The atmosphere grabs you right away. Soaring pressed-tin ceilings, wood paneling, and of course, a grill in the center of the room covered with huge steaks. The steaks are superb, but the transcendent moment of the evening is dessert. The aptly named Como delight is the Mississippi madeleine. A Proustian return to childhood and dinners on the lawn of the church. Graham cracker crust, cream cheese, chocolate pudding, Cool Whip and a sprinkling of pecans. Perhaps not the height of pâtisserie, but a beautiful thing nonetheless.

Later in the evening, when the kids are tucked into bed, live music rings out from the **Windy City Grille**. The Windy City offers Chicago-style deep dish pizzas and hearty sandwiches named for Chicago landmarks. This is no pale imitation either. Of several authentic Chicago delights, the best is giardiniera, a spicy condiment of peppers, olives and other veggies that is spectacular on sandwiches and pizzas.

Just a few doors down, **The Ranch** offers barbecue and other western-influenced dishes. **Del Rio Mexican Restaurant** offers an attractive place for a south-of-the-border alternative.

The newest addition to the Como dining scene is **The Diner on Main**. Saira and Faheen Khan came to Como from Chicago in 1997 and quickly mastered Southern hospitality. Their lunches range from gyros to turkey necks. At breakfast, the grits alone are worth the drive.

So maybe Nesbit, Hernando and Como aren't what you think of when you start planning a trip into north Mississippi. Maybe you're thinking more about that little town along the river that has become a destination in the region for travelers from across the country.

When folks say "going to Tunica," of course they generally mean going to the casinos. Tunica is more than that, though. Tunica is the county, and if you get past all the other distractions, Tunica is the town. When you reach the **Blue & White Restaurant**, you've reached the town. The Blue and White began life in 1937 as a gas station and restaurant. Now the only fueling done is by the folks living in the area

or on their way to the casinos. The Blue & White offers plate lunches and a lunch buffet. The real draw, though, is huge, hearty breakfasts.

Everyone knows the Marc Cohn song "Walking in Memphis." What you may not know is that when Cohn walks, he really walks—all the way to Tunica County. The line "catfish on the table and gospel in the air," is about the **Hollywood Cafe** in Robinsonville, MS as is much of the rest of the song. And Cohn wasn't the first. John Grisham was a regular customer, and he mentioned the Hollywood several times in his novel *A Time to Kill*.

The Hollywood's fame is not the product of any PR campaign. No, it's all about the food and the atmosphere. This is the kind of place where a blues band headed from Memphis to Clarksdale will stop in for dinner and an impromptu performance.

Did someone say dinner? Finally! The menu is what you would expect, but it's all excellent. Start with fried dill pickles or fried green tomatoes or both. There are steaks, burgers, catfish and shrimp. And frog legs.

If you have been hesitant to try frog legs, this is the place to try them. If you're still not convinced, you won't go wrong with anything else you choose while on the path to a dessert of pecan pie or cobbler.

Now, you can't just go gallivanting all over the place eating at every place you pass. You need a cover story. Tunica can provide that for you. Just off Highway 61, Tunica's Main Street is as quaint and peaceful as the casinos are glitzy and frenetic. **Main St. Diner** and **Cafe Marie** provide additional dining opportunities while antique shops abound.

The **Tunica Museum** covers the history of the county from the Cretaceous to the casinos. Of course, food plays a role at the museum with a look at what a commissary in the country was like—Curtis Grocery isn't that far from being museum quality. The museum pays tribute to the history of the Blue & White. And, there's also a look at the role of cotton, soybeans, rice and casinos in the county. The **Tunica RiverPark** features a museum of river history, four large aquariums filled with examples of river life, an observation deck overlooking the river, and a boardwalk through 130 acres of riverside wetlands forest.

One thing to consider, while Hernando has banned smoking in restaurants, Como and Tunica haven't. That's no reason not to head that way though. Get out. Get off the interstate. See the country. Find the treasures. *eM*

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Paul Knipple suffers valiantly for his art. He actually ate the whole thing.



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