



# Columbia's Comeback

SOUTH CAROLINA'S CAPITAL CITY IS EXPERIENCING A CULTURAL RENAISSANCE. **BY BARBARA NOE KENNEDY**

► “Columbia’s moment is now,” says Andrea Mensink, director of communications at Experience Columbia SC, the city’s tourism organization.

Of course, it’s one thing for a Columbian to declare her pride in her city. But it’s another for her to prove it. This is Columbia, after all, with its steamy summers, football fever and rollicking state politics. And don’t forget, *National Geographic* in 1984 declared Gervais Street—which runs right past the Capitol—“America’s ugliest street.” There’s no reason to go out of your way to visit, right? Or is there?

“Columbia is a big puzzle, with many different pieces,” says Bill Ellen, president and CEO of Experience Columbia SC. “But it’s all coming together at the same time. Columbia as a destination is going to be on people’s minds.”

With the synergy of neighborhood revitalization, innovative chefs, cutting-edge cultural events and trailblazing artists, South

**CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT: Soda City Market; Indie Grits at the Nickelodeon Theatre; Vista Coffee Shop; Seared scallops on a bed of roasted tomatoes and sautéed spinach with Asiago crisp and beurre blanc at Blue Marlin.**

Carolina’s capital definitely is experiencing its moment.

### On the Culinary Forefront

You can’t visit Columbia without hearing about the movement to save Midlands-centric heirloom crops—including the Bradford watermelon, Carolina African runner peanuts and Jimmy red grits. Glenn Roberts of Anson Mills, a company that works to preserve these heirloom crops, and Dr. David Shields, a food historian at the University of South Carolina, are at the forefront. You can taste some of their efforts at restaurants around town. Chef Todd Woods at **The Oak Table**, for example, uses a killer Bradford watermelon molasses based on a pre-Revolutionary seed.

Chef Mike Davis at **Terra** delved into Columbia’s farm-to-table movement more than a decade ago, and his locally sourced, seasonal new Southern cooking is adding to the mix. **The Motor Supply Co. Bistro**, headed by executive chef Wes Fulmer, has been a Vista neighborhood standard since 1989, growing alongside Columbia’s emerging food scene. “Anything we can get local, relate back to South Carolina, to the Midlands, we will work with those farmers and promote,” says owner Eddie Wales.

### Arts, Culture and History

It’s not just about the food and drink. Columbia’s cultural scene is burgeoning as well.

“Every weekend there’s something going on,” says Merritt McNeely, South Carolina State Museum’s marketing director. “It wasn’t like that 15 years ago.” The **Nickelodeon Theatre**, for example, has grown into a hub of cultural activity, notably as the host of **Indie Grits**. This innovative film festival, slated this year for April 12 to 15, interweaves the visual arts, storytelling, even a puppet slam.

The world-class **Columbia Museum of Art** features a year-round menu of concerts and classes—which explains why in 2016 it was awarded a coveted National Medal for Museum and Library Service. The museum is undergoing a \$5 million expansion, including adding galleries and studio space. “We believe art is meant to be experienced, not just seen,” says Milena Engh, the museum’s media relations specialist.

The popular **Soda City Market**, which unfurls on Main Street on Saturday mornings, also has expanded its purview, overseeing such collaborative events as the Gervais Street Bridge Dinner, Mardi Gras and pet adoptions. “Soda City is a stepping block for people who have a passion

and are looking for collaboration,” says Heather Cooper, Soda City’s PR director. “And that’s what you’re seeing in Columbia, a lot of industries, events and projects blending, working together, to make Columbia better.”

### Neighborhood Revivals

Columbia is a city of neighborhoods, each a microcosm of the city’s overall renaissance. Not five years ago, few people ventured to **Main Street**, for example. Virtually overnight, the few viable businesses, including **Mast General Store**, have been joined by an ever-growing surge of cool, hip venues. There’s now **The Grand**, a boutique bowling alley, and the wood-paneled **Lula Drake Wine Parlour**, with its carefully curated small-batch wines.

The artists came first, decades ago, to the then-dilapidated-warehouse-filled **Congaree Vista**, just south of Main. And now, with nearly \$1 billion worth of investment over the past five years, this neighborhood is transforming into a thriving artist and entertainment district.

“We’re in a neat position that the Vista is a designation from the South Carolina Arts Commission,” says Meredith G. Atkinson, executive director of the Congaree Vista Guild. “It started with the artists, and we celebrate that in every-

thing we do.”

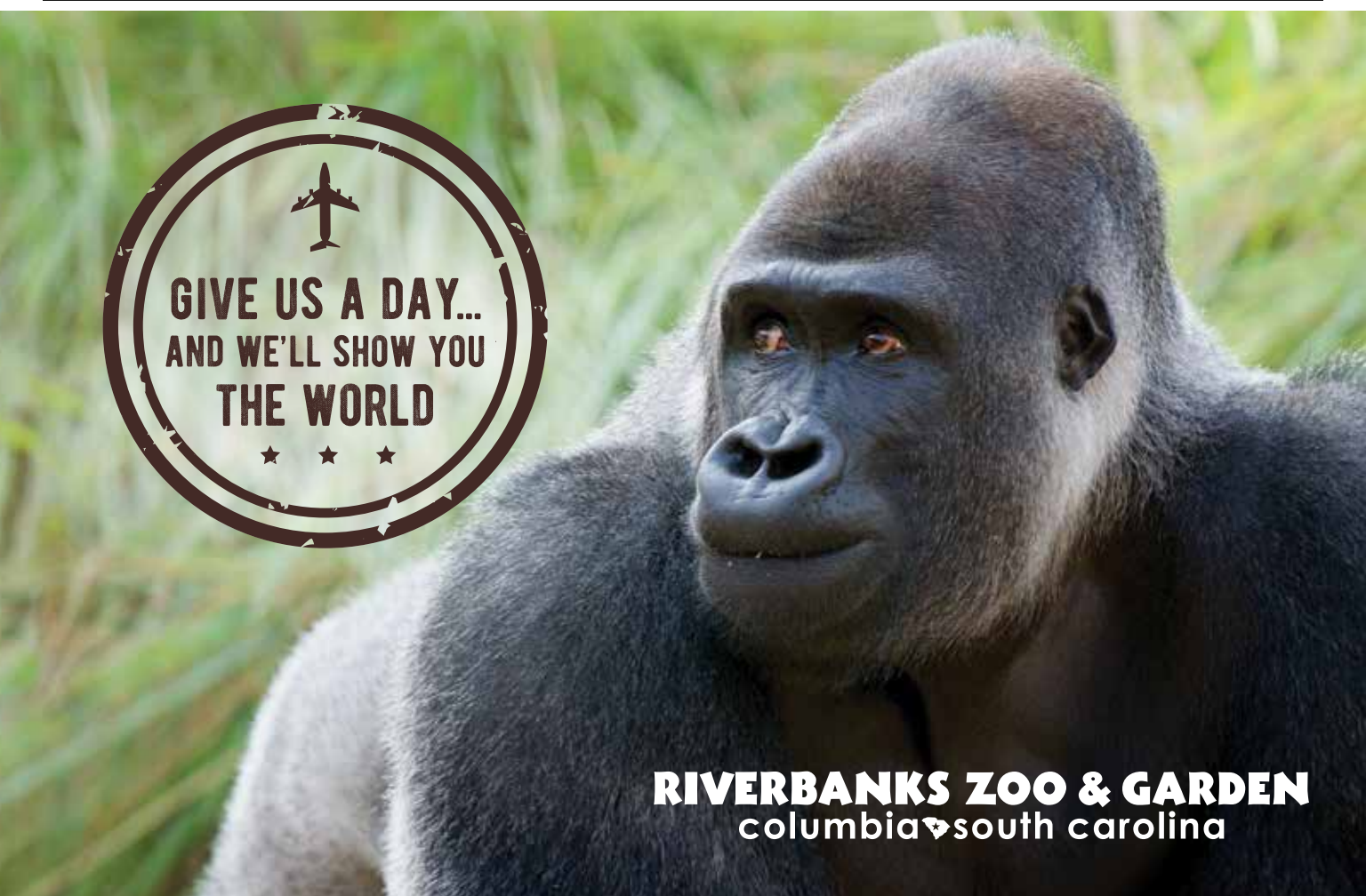
Galleries and studios line its tree-shaded streets, as well as more than 85 restaurants and bars, including **Blue Marlin**, which serves the best shrimp and grits in town. **Music Farm Columbia** hosts touring indie bands, while **Trustus Theatre** pushes the envelope when it comes to progressive community theater. **Cromer’s** has been making peanuts and gourmet-flavored popcorn since 1935. Anchoring the Vista neighborhood, the massive **South Carolina State Museum** provides insight into the state’s art, history, natural history and science and technology.

Dating back to 1915, **Five Points** calls itself Columbia’s original village neighborhood and is the old stomping grounds of local band Hootie & the Blowfish. Among the hot spots, **The Gourmet Shop** is part café, part kitchen store, part amazing wine shop, while **Baan Sawan Thai Bistro** is a small Thai fusion restaurant where you’ll find Columbia’s chefs dining on their nights off.

“We have come into our own in the last five years,” says Wales of Motor Supply Co. Bistro, speaking of Columbia in general. “We’re not being overshadowed by Charlotte or Atlanta. We’ve become a tourist destination and a food destination in our own right.” ▼



Dale Chihuly chandelier at the Columbia Museum of Art.



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