

# LAYERS

## OF LEGACY

Kentucky's Black culinary heritage is both deeply rooted and forward looking

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THOMAS WAVID JOHNS

Murray's Creole Pub





CHEF  
*Lawrence  
Weeks*

The version of Kentucky’s food story most people know—bourbon, hot browns, and the usual Southern canon—is only part of its culinary legacy. Even when their stories weren’t centered, Black chefs, farmers, and entrepreneurs have long influenced the Bluegrass State’s foodways.

Today, Black Kentuckians are an integral part of the state’s contemporary food culture. Whether preserving deep agricultural and culinary legacies or helming metropolitan restaurants, their work connects past and present in ways that continue to define how the state eats. A road trip through central Kentucky offers travelers the opportunity to see these contributions for themselves.

Start the journey in Louisville, a city whose dining scene reflects much more than its Southern roots. As a refugee resettlement hub since the 1970s, the Derby City’s tables have been shaped by decades of African, Caribbean, and global influences. This is especially visible along Bardstown Road, where independent restaurants, bars, and shops give the Highlands neighborhood a buzzy, lived-in energy.

Here, Louisville’s culinary evolution comes into focus at **Murray’s Creole Pub**. Chef Lawrence Weeks—a 2020 Southern Foodways Alliance Smith Fellow and 2024 James Beard Award semifinalist—built his reputation as cofounder of North of Bourbon, where he melded the flavors of New Orleans and Kentucky. Then he launched Ensō, a now-closed Southern-Japanese fusion spot.

His latest project, which opened in December 2025, carries that same throughline but in a space that leans more personal. The two-story restaurant pays homage to Weeks’ grandfather and great-grandfather, both men who cooked professionally but were denied a chef title in their lifetimes. Downstairs is the pub, which boasts a well-rounded cocktail menu heavy on Louisiana influence. Think hurricanes, Creole coffee, and classic martinis. The upstairs dining



room offers a more structured service that showcases the progressive side of Creole cooking, with nods to British and Indian cuisine.

Inspired by a sense of motion, the food menu moves between regions and histories. Scotch eggs and olives sit alongside a salt beef po’boy and boudin burrito. Meanwhile, dishes such as curry crab rice, chana masala, and fish and chips rub elbows with shrimp yakamein and duck gumbo. Warm beignets, gâteau Breton (French butter cake), and rice and Mandarin sherbet are among the delectable desserts.

Elsewhere in the city, several African restaurants serve diaspora foods to hungry locals. At **Queen of Sheba**, meals arrive atop injera (Ethiopian flatbread) meant for sharing—an introduction to communal dining that’s shaped the city’s palate since 2004.



**Clockwise from left:** Georgia’s Sweet Potato Pie Co.; Wing KYng; Genesis Coffee House & Eatery.

rants serving Southern staples, masterful desserts, and more. Celebrity photos line walls behind the well-loved bar at **Shirley Mae’s Café**. In business since 1988, Shirley Beard is the first Black owner of the storied former J & H Food Bar building, which was a premier destination for stars like Redd Foxx, Della Reese, Cassius Clay, and Quincy Jones back in the day.

Travelers with a sweet tooth won’t want to miss **Hip Hop Sweet Shop** for colorful, quirky, over-the-top desserts ranging from classic to trendy. Or indulge for a great cause at **Georgia’s Sweet Potato Pie Co.**, whose “Pies With Purpose” initiative distributes free children’s books to families. For ice cream lovers, **Louisville Cream** serves up Southern-inspired flavors like banana pudding, bourbon smoked pecan, and pistachio honeycomb.

EXPLORING THE SOURCE

Visitors could spend weeks exploring Louisville’s Black-owned food spots, but there’s so much more to see and taste. On the easy two-hour drive east to Lexington, city streets give way to lush grazing pastures. Long stretches of green and bucolic working farms begin to tell a different side of Kentucky’s food story, one that reinforces its connection to Appalachian ingenuity and terroir.

Start with lunch at **Genesis Coffee House & Eatery**, Lexington’s first Black-owned coffee shop. Run by a local pastor, the brunch-heavy, all-day café offers standout items like Cajun grits and blueberry stuffed french toast.

Wings are a religion for some people, and **Wing KYng** in Greyline Station doesn’t disappoint. The lineup of more than 30 housemade sauces is a crowd pleaser, but the hand-diced fried

With a menu of Somali and East African staples, **Banaadir Café & Grill** is as much a neighborhood gathering place as a restaurant. Try the chicken or beef suqaar, a savory comfort food dish of diced meat sautéed with onions, peppers, tomatoes, and aromatic spices served over saffron rice.

**Mashallah African Restaurant** serves up West African staples like jollof rice, grilled meats, and richly spiced stews—dishes that offer a point of entry for diners less familiar with African cuisine.

Caribbean flavors add another layer to the city’s dining landscape. **Elliment Restaurant and Lounge** brings Jamaican influences into the mix, with menus built around traditional jerk dishes and slow-braised stews.

While international flavors certainly aren’t lacking in Louisville, there’s also an abundance of Black-owned restau-

C/O VISIT LEXINGTON. OPPOSITE: THOMAS WAVID JOHNS

potatoes dressed in garlic parmesan sauce have their own legion of fans.

For an elevated meal, try **Sassy Bleu**, where the menu is packed with Southern favorites. In addition to anchors like fried chicken, steak, lamb chops, and deep-fried ribs, there are a few surprises like the fried oyster mushroom sandwich and apple cinnamon cheesecake.

Now it's time to explore the countryside. A short drive from downtown Lexington, **Coleman Crest Farm** is the state's first African American-owned USDA-certified organic farm—and there's a remarkable story behind it.

The farm's founder, James Coleman, was born enslaved in 1845. At 19 years old, he joined the Fifth United States Colored Infantry Regiment of the Union Army, fighting in the Battle of Milliken's Bend, Louisiana, in 1863. That pivotal battle spurred President Abraham Lincoln and General Ulysses S. Grant to rapidly expand the recruitment of freed African American enslaved men into the Union Army.

After he returned from his service in the Civil War, Coleman and his wife, Lucy, purchased Coleman Crest Farm for \$1,200 in 1888. In the 138 years since, more than 300 Coleman descendants have benefitted from the generational legacy and financial stability the farm has provided. Today, Coleman's great-great-great-grandson Jim oversees the farm's three operating divisions: its Certified Organic Produce operation, Aspiring Farmer Incubator Program, and Coleman Crest Farm Agritourism & Events.

The three branches of the farm operate synergistically. Proceeds generated by agritourism events—parties, Derby events, retreats, reunions, fundraisers, and more—support the incubator program, which helps prepare Kentucky's next generation of farmers.

Aspiring farmers face many challenges to entering the profession, mainly lack of funding, access to land, and business knowledge passed between generations of family. Coleman Crest is committed to removing these barriers.

During one-to-two-year incubator engagements, participants learn how to grow, harvest, and market their produce, and how to access funding.

Working with financial institutions like Lexington's Community Trust Bank, the program equips incubator participants with the skills and resources they need to purchase their own small farms.

Coleman Crest Farm also partners with the nonprofit **Black Soil KY** to provide farm-to-table food for its events. A Black woman-founded and -led nonprofit, Black Soil KY's primary mission is to help foster a greater market share for Black farmers and producers in Kentucky.

Black farmers represent a mere 1.4 percent of the primary farm operators in the state, accounting for less than 600 of its more than 76,000 agricultural operations. Through events like farm tours and dinners, Black Soil KY centers Black-owned farmland as gathering spaces and outdoor classrooms. Farm tours are on the calendar from June to October, so schedule a visit around one of their monthly events.

The last leg of the journey leads an hour and a half southwest to Bonnieville and **Cleav's Family Market**. Another Black Soil KY partner farm, the 55-acre operation produces naturally raised beef, pork, chicken, and seasonal produce using sustainable practices that prioritize soil health and long-term viability of the farmland.

But Cleav's is as much about knowledge sharing as it is about growing food. Workshops like Raising Meat Rabbits for Income, Pigs on Pasture, Meat Bird Production, and Knowing What Your Lender Wants reflect the owners' broader vision of helping more Black farmers gain a foothold in an industry where they remain vastly underrepresented.

By the end of the road trip, one thing is clear: Black-owned restaurants and farms are a central part of Kentucky's food story. They've been shaping the story all along, and a new generation of farmers and entrepreneurs now holds the baton.



**From top:** Sassy Bleu; Black Soil KY. **Opposite:** Lexington, Kentucky, landscape.

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