



# Keys to the South

Michelin may be handing out the keys—but these Southern stays are opening the door to a new kind of getaway.

*By Melissa Howsam*

The South has never needed help defining what's hot—but Michelin's paying attention anyway. And its growing Southern footprint stretches far beyond stuffy luxury and impossible reservations, spotlighting food-forward cities that prove destination-worthy travel is less about white tablecloths and five-star access and more about flavor, personality and stays worth building a weekend around.

This year, we're reading the room and checking into the Michelin-recognized cities redefining travel across the South—and swapping aspirational overload for attainable cultural cachet. Think stylish boutiques, rooftop hangs, design-forward escapes and food scenes worthy of guidebook treatment—all with a little more accessibility and a lot less pretension. Because these days, the flex isn't dropping \$1,400 a night. It's taste—and knowing exactly where to go. Meet the stylish stays in food-forward cities proving luxury-adjacent travel doesn't have to be unattainable. →



Hotel Hartness

## SOUTH CAROLINA

With iconic chefs, seductive stays and endless ways to play, the lower Carolina's most coveted cities serve Southern charm with a cooler edge. Whether it's Chucktown's seaside polish or Greenville's mountain-meets-main-street lure, the Palmetto State blends history, hospitality and just enough heat to keep you coming back.

### CHARLESTON

#### The Ryder Hotel

If retro-chic, Rainbow Row and palmetto energy had a love child, it would be The Ryder. Sitting along a vibrant stretch of Meeting Street just blocks from the waterfront, the vibey boho boutique is at once core Charleston and a laid-back counterpoint to Chucktown's polish. At its center is Little Palm, the elevated (literally) pink-hued pool patio and bar, where striped loungers, swaying palms and colorful cocktails make the city feel a little more tropical (and tipsy) by the hour. At once sophisticated and beachy, the stylish rooms lean minimalist-organic in all the right ways—warm woods, airy textures and relaxed luxury that somehow makes flip-flops always feel like the move. By night, the whole property shifts from sunny pool hang to swanky coastal retreat, reminding you Charleston is, after all, still the South's oasis of cool.

#### The Nickel Hotel

Straight out of a Mediterranean villa—with just a touch of Victorian flair—this lush Upper King Street stay blends old-world European romance with contemporary Southern sophistication—earning it a primo spot on *Travel + Leisure's* 2026 It List. Evoking a natural light-filled residence (if your residence happened to be in Italy), The Nickel's homey rooms, suites and penthouses leave no detail overlooked—think earth-tone decor, dramatic design details, and private balconies and terraces overlooking the French



The Nickel

Quarter-esque courtyard, where you'll no doubt find yourself with a morning cuppa or evening vino. Further inviting you to kick back, the rooftop Rosemary Rose bar and lounge is ideal for a sunset sipper, while second-floor Bar Daniel serves up mean craft cocktails that'll leave you quietly smug that you don't have to get an Uber home.

**Bib Gourmand**  
 Leon's Oyster Shop  
 Lewis Barbecue  
 Rodney Scott's BBQ

### GREENVILLE

#### Hotel Hartness

If *Bridgerton* traded corsets for cocktail bars and spa robes, it might look something like Hotel Hartness. Tucked into a 449-acre former estate just outside downtown, the property blends old-world grandeur with modern retreat appeal—think indulgent spa, manicured grounds, elegant suites (including four spa suites) and balconies practically built for slow mornings. Beyond the estate grounds, there's also a 15-mile wooded trail network winding past ponds and streams, plus cozy cocktail den The Captain and



Lewis Barbecue




The Ryder



The Anchorage

glass-encased Patterson Kitchen + Bar for post-hike unwinding. Essentially, it's like disappearing into someone else's very expensive life for the weekend.

**Mendon**  
 The Anchorage  
 Jianna  
 Soby's

The Nickel: Matthew Williams; courtesy of hotels

Bomb Biscuit Co.



## GEORGIA

Southern swagger is on full display in the A. From boundary-pushing chefs and scene-stealing stays to creative grit, cocktail culture and neon-lit nightlife, A-Town hits you with its signature blend of raw energy and urban edge where one thing's for certain: The city never does boring.

### ATLANTA

#### The Tess

Call it big rascal energy—The Tess has been channeling it since the days of Beard-nom Todd Ginsberg's Dirty Rascal rooftop concept. Still bringing a hip, moodier edge to Buckhead luxury, the boutique stay blends mod-inspired glam with polished creature comforts—think statement interiors, skyline views, rooftop resto/lounge Tesserae, plus a sky-high pool deck that keeps the scene seekers lingering long after sunset. Mere steps from Buckhead Village's supreme shopping and social life, the bold boutique quietly flexes ATL cultural cachet without being try-hard. Add rooftop 'tails and a soundtrack that gets louder as the sun goes down, and your inner little rascal might come out to play.

#### Hotel Granada

The Roaring '20s are so back—and nowhere is that revival more alluring than this Midtown hideaway. Tucked inside a restored 1923 landmark, the storied stay layers Spanish Colonial architecture with contemporary Southern flair, delivering a stylish urban sanctuary that feels worlds away from Atlanta's nonstop energy—while still sitting just steps from the action when the mood strikes. Charming rooms echo the building's historic bones, balancing old-world character with the kind of quiet luxury built for disappearing into a weekend. At the center of it all is Pom Court, a leafy open-air courtyard where Spanish flavors and all-day dining unfold beneath the glow of cafe lights. When the mood turns moonlit, underground velvet glamour beckons



The Tess



The Burgess

you to subterranean cocktail chamber May Peel, where conversation and carefully crafted cocktails feel like the main event—proof that sometimes the coolest part of the city is what's hidden beneath it.

#### The Burgess Hotel

Hip and regal collide at The Burgess, a boutique stay that trades buttoned-up luxury for something far more personal. A true labor of love, the design-forward aesthetic nods to the owners' Hong Kong roots across layers of bespoke furnishings, globally sourced finds and artfully dotted spaces that feel at once worldly and intimate. The stately rooms somehow manage to be both warm and transportive—where it feels oddly fitting for an oiled Queen Elizabeth II to look on as you freshen up—while the tucked-away pool courtyard delivers a quieter kind of escape amid the Buckhead bustle. Downstairs, Mediterranean hot spot Fia tempts with wood-fired fare, and moody cocktail den Mr. B channels the glamour of old-school nightlife with a contemporary edge. A second-round martini beneath the velvet banquettes is all it takes to remember why they call it Hotlanta.



Hotel Granada



- Bib Gourmand**  
 Antico Pizza Napoletana  
 Bomb Biscuit Co.  
 The Busy Bee  
 Estrellita  
 Fishmonger  
 Fred's Meat & Bread  
 Heirloom Market BBQ  
 Little Bear  
 Superica  
 Whoopsie's

Courtesy of hotels



Virgin Hotels



Maidstone



Lufu Nola



Copper Vine



Cochon



The Old No. 77

# LOUISIANA

The Big Easy doesn't chase trends—it births them. From bold bites and brass notes to Bayou mystique and storied stays, New Orleans hums with the kind of soul that can't be manufactured. Here, elegance feels lived-in, history runs deep and every corner seems to have a story worth retelling.

## NEW ORLEANS

### The Old No. 77 Hotel & Chandlery

New Orleans may be known for brass notes and Bourbon Street, but The Old No. 77 is here to broaden the syllabus. Positioned squarely in the vibrant sophisticated Warehouse/Arts District inside a former coffee warehouse, the hotel blends exposed brick, weathered wood and artwork from savvy students at the New Orleans Center for Creative Arts into something that feels both gritty and inspired. Proving the arts are more than just feed fodder and aspirational thinking, every corner hums with creative swagger. Compère Lapin doubles down on the lesson plan, marrying Caribbean flavors and French technique under acclaimed chef Nina Compton. The result is like stumbling into a stylish elective you never meant to take—and somehow ending up completely obsessed with the subject.

### Virgin Hotels New Orleans

Virgin may be a chain, but there's nothing manufactured about its NOLA persona. Tailored by local designers, the brand's signature irreverence gets a distinctly Big Easy remix, pairing retro red appliances, fringe-trimmed furnishings and a subtropical color explosion with the city's flair for spectacle. The modern tower pays homage to the Warehouse District's industrial roots, while inside the vibe swings between European sophistication and a Studio 54 daydream. From the ever-social Shag Room lounge to the rooftop pool lined with candy-striped cabanas, nearly every space seems engineered to convince you that one more drink is an excellent idea. Suddenly dinner turns into a nightcap, the nightcap turns into rooftop cocktails—and your return flight starts feeling like a scheduling error.

Virgin: Press Virgin, Virgin Hotel Collections, courtesy of hotels

Maidstone: G Legan, courtesy of hotels

### Copper Vine Wine Pub & Inn

If Julia Roberts needed a reason to resurrect that bubbly tub scene, Copper Vine would be her why. Part inn, part wine pub, the intimate boutique answers the Big Easy's call for slow luxury. Pleasing palates since the late 1800s—when Maylie's fed NOLA from behind this brick facade—the Vine blends Caribbean and Creole culture with a deep appreciation for hospitality. Eleven lofty guest rooms pair soaring ceilings, floor-to-ceiling windows and locally curated artwork with thoughtful details that make sleeping in feel like an accomplishment. Downstairs, the wine-forward pub and lush courtyard practically conspire to keep your wine order going, while the coveted Terrace Suite rewards those willing to splurge with exposed brick chimneys and sweeping downtown views. In a city famous for excess, Copper Vine makes a compelling case for never leaving at all.

### Maidstone New Orleans

The Maidstone will have you checking your boarding pass to confirm you didn't land in Palm Springs—in the best way. The former guesthouse trades the city's trademark maximalism for something decidedly sunnier, pairing American midcentury design with tropical ease. Across just 18 rooms, cork floors, custom birch furnishings, rattan accents and textiles by Oaxacan artist Ismael Gutierrez Montano create a vibe that feels like a clever mix of tropical hideaway and artist retreat. Outside, a saltwater pool framed by checkered loungers and citrus-hued umbrellas that look lifted from a Slim Aarons photograph anchor a lush courtyard made for losing track of time. It's a refreshing alternative to the Big Easy's grand dames and bustling party hotels—a stylish, spirited little escape hatch hidden right in the middle of New Orleans.

### The Barnett

The Barnett is the hotel equivalent of the person everyone wants to sit next to at the bar. Housed inside a restored 1920s art deco landmark in the Warehouse District, the music-centric boutique is the city's unofficial living room—with the energy of someone who knows exactly where the party is but doesn't need to share. Soaring ceilings, vintage furnishings, locally sourced artwork and just enough posh bring character to the rooms, while a collection of lively bars, restaurants and gathering spaces ensures you're never far from a good cocktail or a better story. Social spaces hum with enough verve to turn a single cocktail into an entire evening. Meanwhile, Seaworthy—set inside an 1832 Creole cottage—serves up Italian-meets-Southern fare worthy of a standing ovation, and upstairs, lush rooftop hang High Five delivers rooftop sips, skyline views and a pool scene that practically begs you to cancel your flight home. Just minutes from the French Quarter, Caesars and the Superdome, The Barnett doesn't simply put you in New Orleans—it drops you directly into its rhythm.



The Barnett



### Bib Gourmand

- Acamaya
- Cochon
- Cochon Butcher
- Domilise's Po-Boy & Bar
- Dooky Chase's
- Hungry Eyes
- Lufu Nola
- Mister Mao
- Parkway Bakery & Tavern
- Saba
- Turkey and the Wolf



The Laurel



The Admiral



Oven Bird



Elyton

## ALABAMA

Industrial grit feels less like a signature stamp and more like a right of passage. Between Birmingham's Civil Rights legacy and evolving eats scene, Auburn's college-town charm and Mobile's coastal character, the state is quietly building one of the South's most underrated travel stories—one stylish stay at a time.

### AUBURN

#### The Laurel Hotel & Spa

Don't let the campus location fool you—this is not a college party. It's a master class in hospitality. Operated alongside Auburn University's hospitality program serving up the next gen of hoteliers and chefs, The Laurel is a perfectly executed answer to the question: What if every detail actually mattered? With impeccably appointed rooms, culinary craft and a Himalayan Salt Room, nearly every corner of unbothered luxury nudges you toward a slower pace, practically daring you to become someone who sits under a cashmere throw in a firmly pressed 'fit, Thrive Farmers coffee in hand. Nothing feels rushed—and that's precisely the point. It's easy to picture yourself sprawled poolside in a rooftop cabana or sipping 'tails at Walt's rooftop garden and lounge—where suddenly one night feels wildly insufficient.

### MOBILE

#### The Admiral Hotel

Mobile's answer to old-Hollywood luxury—where Gulf Coast glamour merges with chic French-Colonial flair—The Admiral channels the vibe of a maritime Moulin Rouge: crystal chandeliers dripping from the ceiling, wild horse sculptures rearing in the halls and red velvet punctuating nearly every corner. The rooms dial back the drama just enough with flashes of royal purple and gold, but the mood remains firmly “see and be seen.” By the time the martini arrives, you'll be deciding whether to stay for one more (spoiler: you are)—the very essence of Gulf Coast glamour.

### BIRMINGHAM

#### Elyton Hotel

As if?! If pop-culture icon Cher Horowitz needed a Magic City reset—you'd find her here. Fittingly set in Birmingham's symbolic Empire Building (circa 1909), the industrial-chic stunner is a beacon of Birmingham lore rising from the “Heaviest Corner on Earth.” Crisp *Clueless*-esque pops of white and yellow bring brightness to the posh rooms, lending a playful edge to the historic landmark. The result is a stylish collision of rich history and mod-designer daydream—stylish enough to feel fresh, rooted enough to remind you where you're standing. Up top, the cheekily dubbed “Moon Shine” rooftop bar crafts cocktails worthy of a full-on montage, leaving you wondering why that trip to Birmingham didn't land on your radar sooner.

The Admiral: Steven Gray, courtesy of hotels



Mention

1856 - Culinary Residence



Bib Gourmand

The Noble South



Bib Gourmand

Bayonet    OvenBird  
La Fête    Pizza Grace

## TENNESSEE

More than Music City, Tennessee is where timeless soul meets modern cool. From the electric energy of N'ville to the blues-soaked pulse of Beale Street, vibey venues, standout chefs and design-forward stays strike the perfect chord between grit and glamour. Fresh enough to keep things interesting, familiar enough to keep you coming back for an encore.

### NASHVILLE

#### Graduate

Forget your 9-5—Dolly would be so proud. Pretty in pink and dripping in Backwoods Barbie attitude, Graduate Nashville feels like a fever dream Dolly designed herself. Cranking Southern charm all the way up, floral prints, Easter-egg hues, guitar headboards and larger-than-life portraits of Music City's favorite daughter collide in a playful explosion of color and nostalgia that somehow never crosses into kitsch. The public spaces are equally over the top—in the best way possible—while rooftop hot spot White Limozeen serves skyline views alongside unapologetic glamour. But the real showstopper? Cross-Eyed Critters, the hotel's country-themed karaoke bar (naturally) where actual animatronic puppets serve as your backing band. And, yes, we're serious. If ever there was a love letter to Dolly, Graduate is anything but subtle.

#### Noelle

If Graduate is Dolly, Noelle is Reese Witherspoon. Less electric Barbie-core and more supreme Southern sophistication, Noelle is where you go for artful luxury while reading a leather-bound book or sipping bourbon in a cushy handwoven robe. Tucked inside a beautifully restored 1929 art deco landmark, the boutique trades Broadway's tipsy neon chaos for more sophisticated soaring arched windows, original architectural details and understated polish. Local artists, makers and chefs shape nearly every corner of the experience—from rooftop cocktails at Rare Bird to gallery-worthy installations and thoughtfully curated retail. It's not so much “look at me” as it is cultural-clubhouse “I know a place”—making you feel like a Nashville insider before you've even unpacked, and reason enough alone to book a stay in Music City.

### MEMPHIS

#### Central Station Hotel

“Walking in Memphis with my feet 10 feet off of Beale...” The birthplace of the blues has never felt so electric. Framed inside a functioning rail and trolley station on historic South Main, the transportive stay riffs on Memphis music lore at every turn. Towering neon concourse signs glow above record-lined shelves, listening lounges and speaker walls that transform the 123-room stay into a tribute to the city's soulful soundtrack. Early 20th century charm, winding staircases and oversized windows overlooking South Main and the Mississippi River soften the Station's industrial bones, and custom in-room speakers and curated playlists handle the rest. Keeping the beat, music-centric bar Eight & Sand pairs craft cocktails with Memphis-inspired vinyl beneath the glow of vintage station lights. And outside, trains still roll through as they have for more than a century—proof that some stations are worth missing your train for.



Central Station



Graduate



Bib Gourmand  
Hog & Hominy



Bib Gourmand  
Kisser  
Peninsula  
Redheaded Stranger  
St. Vito Focacceria  
Sho Pizza Bar  
S.S. Gai  
Uzbekim



Noelle

Courtesy of hotels



Kimpton Tryon Park

## NORTH CAROLINA

Sometimes the best getaways are closer than you think. From Wilmington's sun-soaked coast to Asheville's boho Blue Ridge charm—and the buzzy cities in between—our home state delivers postcard-perfect stays with serious personality. Add in standout chefs, creative cool cred, and a vibe that's equal parts refined and relaxed, and NC quietly flexes some of the South's best weekend escapes.

### CHARLOTTE

#### Kimpton Tryon Park Hotel

Charlotte isn't exactly subtle, and neither is Kimpton Tryon Park. Read: less Uptown funk, more real queen sh\*t. Perched above Romare Bearden Park, the glass-and-steel stunner layers Uptown edge with boutique polish, from jewel-toned public spaces and dramatic walls of windows to rooms dressed in calming shades of gray, white and indigo serving up skyline views that make an early wake-up call feel glamorous. By day, it's corporate hotshot territory. By night, the rooftop bar fills with cocktails, city lights and beautiful people who definitely have a dinner reservation somewhere and a strong opinion about where everyone should go next. Built as much for the after-dark crowd as the Monday-morning power player, it isn't just among the scene—it's part of it. Call it Charlotte's main-character-with-an-Amex hotel: polished, social and perfectly positioned in the middle of the action.

### PITTSBORO

#### The Fearington House Inn

If the English countryside accidentally landed in North Carolina, it might look something like Fearington. Tucked inside a storybook village of gardens, boutiques and white-fenced pastures, the Relais & Châteaux retreat delivers a polished Southern hospitality that is increasingly rare. Individually designed rooms blend fresh flowers, fireplaces and garden views with the quiet confidence of a place that knows exactly what it is. Beyond the inn, the village itself is part of the experience—whether browsing the beloved bookstore, lingering over wine or settling in for a meal at the acclaimed Fearington House Restaurant. It's where everyone says "ma'am," no one appears to be in a hurry and every detail contributes to a sense of cultivated serenity. Prim? Perhaps. Proper? Absolutely. But somewhere between the rose gardens and front-porch rocking chairs, you'll understand why guests keep coming back.



Luminosa

### ASHEVILLE

#### The Restoration Asheville

If you've been to the brand's first-born in Chucktown then you know. The Restoration isn't selling luxury—it's restoring a slower way of living through every exposed brick detail, thoughtfully curated space and intentional touch. Breakfast arrives in a basket at your door. Wine-and-cheese hour appears each afternoon. Rooftop cocktails at The Watch come with Blue Ridge views. It's basically built for slow mornings: coffee in hand, mountain air drifting through the window and the sudden urge to become someone who journals. And before long, between the soaring library, yellow velvet sofas, spacious suites, local craft brews and in-house bowling alley—because Asheville—you'll start convincing yourself this is exactly how every day should feel.



The Radical



The Fearington House Inn

#### The Radical

Asheville has always marched to the beat of its own drum. The Radical simply handed that drum a craft cocktail and a design budget. Housed inside a 1920s cereal factory in the River Arts District, the posh-punk boutique mixes soaring warehouse walls, street-art murals and industrial bones with a thoughtful luxury that keeps it from feeling like a gimmick. Guest rooms double as living galleries, where color spills across exposed brick and dramatic drapery frames oversized windows—creating a stay that's crunchy, creative and cooler than it needs to be. Beyond the aesthetic, Afterglow, Golden Hour and The Roof keep the creative spirit flowing long after gallery hours, serving a healthy dose of wood-fired fare, cocktails and people-watching. Living up to its name, The Radical is basically Asheville distilled into hotel form—and once you check in, leaving is entirely optional.

### DURHAM

#### 21c Museum Hotel

With a bright white aesthetic that lands closer to contemporary art installation than *Severance* office—though you may find yourself wishing for an innie who could stay here indefinitely—21c turns a Downtown Durham stay into cultural immersion. Situated inside a restored art deco landmark, the boutique hotel preserves just enough of its historic bones—including the elevator relic from its past life—to ground its thoroughly modern sensibilities. Gallery-like corridors, design-forward rooms and contemporary works blur the line between hotel and museum, making a simple walk to your room a cultural detour. And unlike properties that treat art as an accessory, the museum here is the main event, with rotating exhibitions unfolding throughout the building year-round. Downstairs, Counting House delivers a worthy encore with inventive fare and craft cocktails that make lingering an inevitability.



The Restoration



The Durham Hotel

#### The Durham Hotel

If Durham had to introduce itself in hotel form, it would look something like The Durham. Housed inside the city's iconic midcentury-modern Home Savings Bank building, the boutique stay wears its local pride on its sleeve—from Merge Records vinyl and Cone Mills denim accents to the one-of-a-kind Raleigh Denim quilt draped across every bed. Bright geometric carpets, mustard-hued drapery and vintage-inspired furnishings give the hotel a playful retro mood pulled straight from a design magazine while somehow not taking itself too seriously. Distinct menus rooted in local ingredients deliver a taste of the state's culinary heritage, and the buzzy rooftop remains one of Bull City's preferred perches for golden-hour cocktails, skyline views and prime people watching. Stylish without trying too hard, The Durham makes a compelling case that sometimes the coolest thing a hotel can be is itself. RW



21c Museum Hotel



Courtesy of hotels

The Fearington House: John Warner, courtesy of hotels



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Every visit to the North Carolina Zoo helps save wildlife and wild places, including the American Red Wolf! To help save North Carolina's native wolf species, purchase tickets or a membership to the North Carolina Zoo and Botanical Gardens, or donate directly to the North Carolina Zoo Society's "Save the American Red Wolf" campaign.



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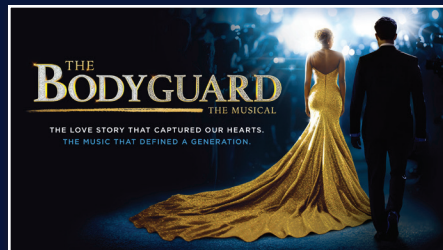
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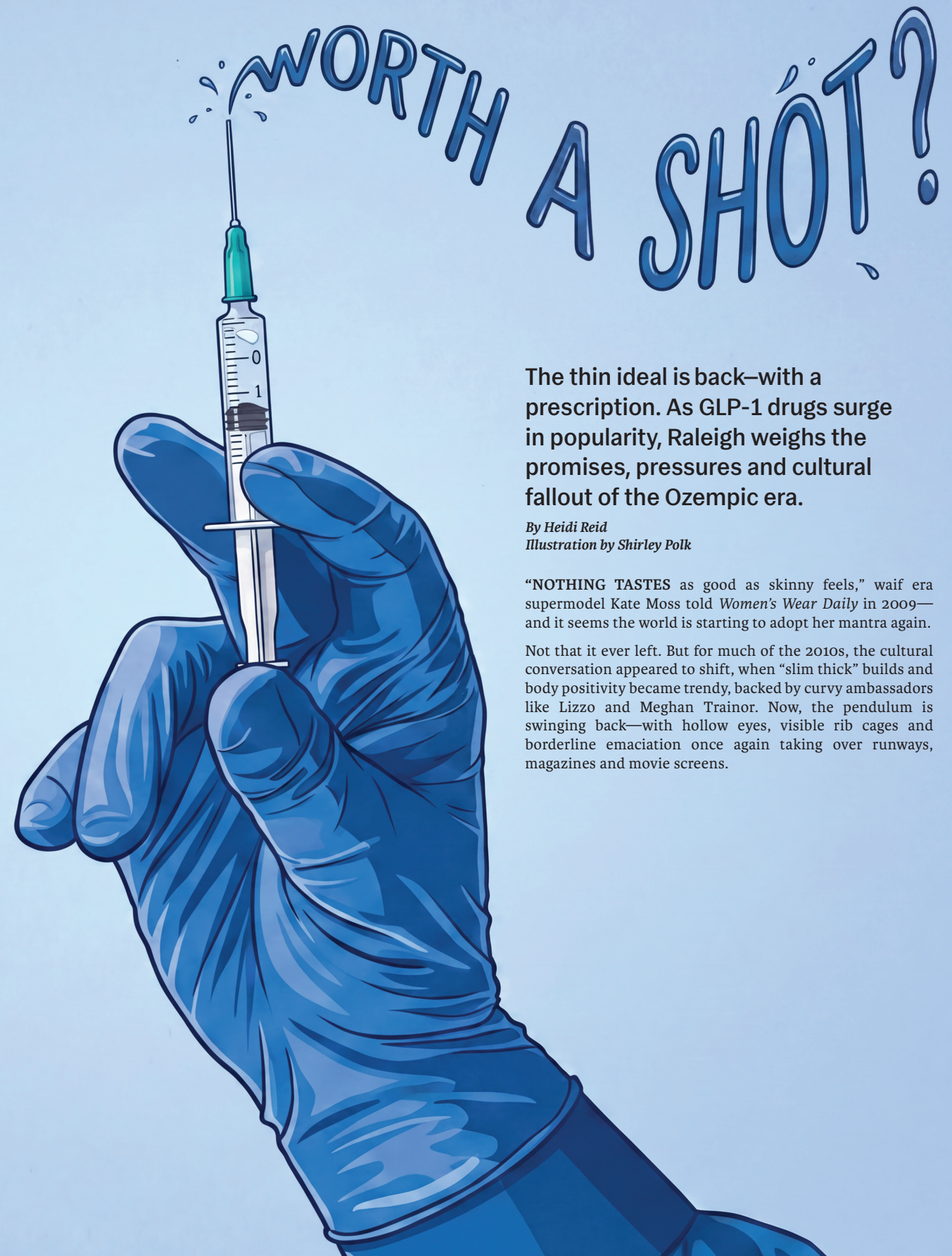
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DURHAM, NORTH CAROLINA

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The thin ideal is back—with a prescription. As GLP-1 drugs surge in popularity, Raleigh weighs the promises, pressures and cultural fallout of the Ozempic era.

By Heidi Reid  
Illustration by Shirley Polk

“NOTHING TASTES as good as skinny feels,” waif era supermodel Kate Moss told *Women’s Wear Daily* in 2009—and it seems the world is starting to adopt her mantra again.

Not that it ever left. But for much of the 2010s, the cultural conversation appeared to shift, when “slim thick” builds and body positivity became trendy, backed by curvy ambassadors like Lizzo and Meghan Trainor. Now, the pendulum is swinging back—with hollow eyes, visible rib cages and borderline emaciation once again taking over runways, magazines and movie screens.

## The 52-year-old designer who's cycled through diets, workout plans and weight-loss strategies, in her own words:

**GLP-1 + TIMELINE:** Zepbound, four months

**YOUR WHY?** I'd been trying to lose weight for two years. After having my thyroid removed in 2021, I gained about 40 pounds. Then came perimenopause, adding an entirely new set of challenges. I did everything I was told would help: I went to a dietician and was doing Weight Watchers. I tracked my meals, got 10,000 steps a day, did strength training three times a week and still couldn't lose weight at all—not even a pound. Despite my efforts, the scale never budged. Several doctors told me that losing weight would be an uphill battle and that I might need to accept this as my new normal. I was frustrated, discouraged and exhausted.

**ANY DIFFICULTY WITH ACCESS?** Wegovy was approved to help people with cardiovascular risk, and I had heart failure—so I was supposed to be a prime candidate. My insurance company said no, not until I hit the diabetic stage. I went through a website to get [Zepbound] myself after seeing ads on TikTok about how you can just pay out of pocket for it. Two months and three more pounds later, my doctor was like, 'If you're just going to pay out of pocket for it, let me prescribe it to you, and that way we know you're getting a real dose.'

**"I used to struggle with social anxiety because I hated the way I looked. Now, I actually look forward to going out. My clothes fit the way I want them to; I'm able to wear what I want; and I feel comfortable and confident."**

**STATUS REPORT?** I've lost 20 pounds in four months. It's a slow loss—I'll go a week with no loss and then the next week lose a pound and a half. But with all my frustration, I don't care as long as I see the numbers going down.

**ANY SURPRISES?** In the first couple of months, the biggest thing I noticed was I didn't hurt anymore. Before, I'd get up every morning and walk like a 75-year-old woman who had a hip-replacement surgery. All of a sudden, I was just hopping out of bed and going on my walks—plus my fingers weren't swelling up and my knees didn't hurt. When I took my socks off, I didn't have that ring around my ankle. My doctor said it makes a huge difference for inflammation—and that can be a factor for not being able to lose weight.

**TELL OR DON'T TELL?** I have no problem telling anyone, 'Oh, yeah, I went on the shot.' But it's probably not something I'll post on social media for the world to know because people are so judgmental about it.

**SIDE EFFECTS?** I've not had the nausea or constipation issues that people complain about. I used to struggle with social anxiety because I hated the way I looked. Now, I actually look forward to going out. My clothes fit the way I want them to; I'm able to wear what I want; and I feel comfortable and confident.



grooming rituals—even when Ozempic and the likes were prohibitively expensive, scarcely available and far from common.

Now, GLP-1 is the word on everyone's lips, minds and screens, trickling down from magazines and movies to the fridges and cabinets of your mailman, your kid's rec soccer coach and everyone in between.

Despite being ranked 27th for obesity in the nation, North Carolina ranks 8th for weight-loss obsession. And residents are buying in: According to a source from DHHS, the number of NC residents taking the drug is skyrocketing, with national polling suggesting ~1 in 8 adults now take a GLP-1 medication—which could translate to more than 1 million NCers.

Sashkin

## "If you have a sinus infection, you're not 'cheating' by taking antibiotics. It's modern medicine—and we can improve lives. Obesity is the No. 1 modifiable risk factor. You have to get it under control, period."

—Dr. Laurel Carter, Wake Internal Medicine Consultants

Sure, weight-loss drugs and diet trends are nothing new: The Grapefruit Diet, Atkins, Weight Watchers and similar fads have been making rounds for over a century. So what gave GLP-1s such a grip?

Dr. Laurel Carter of Wake Internal Medicine Consultants lends her thoughts: "All other weight-loss drugs have been sh\*t. You can be nervous as hell on Phentermine and have your heart beating out of your chest; you can be pooping yourself on Orlistat; or you can be on Fen-Phen—which literally kills you."

GLP-1s, by contrast, tackle the problem differently. In laymen's terms, they mimic peptides in the stomach and slow digestion, explains Carter, who says she prescribes them regularly. "It makes patients feel fuller for longer and stimulates satiety," she adds, noting it also works on the brain's reward pathways, dialing down the urge to binge and the pleasure response tied to food.

While there are some caveats, it's clear why GLP-1s are a standout compared to weight-loss trends of years past: "It's a great drug," maintains Carter. That said, as with any treatment perceived as an artificial path to beauty, GLP-1s continue to attract plenty of side-eye and stigma despite the number of public-facing Americans who've taken advantage of the drug—whether they've admitted it or not.

That criticism comes from several directions—some questioning the long-term research or ease of access, particularly for people who are already a healthy weight, and others arguing that use amounts to "cheating" or reflects a lack of willpower.

"If your thyroid didn't work, you wouldn't think taking Levothyroxine is cheating," Carter pushes back. "If you have a sinus infection, you're not 'cheating' by taking antibiotics. It's modern medicine—and we can improve lives. Obesity is the No. 1 modifiable risk factor. You have to get it under control, period."

The alternative, Carter argues, is gambling with a host of preventable health complications later in life like kidney disease, kidney failure, heart attack or stroke. "For my patient who is 250 pounds, this can help them live longer," she maintains. "This could add 10 years to their life."

## The 50-year-old marketing agency owner who saw it work for his wife and gave it a whirl, in his own words:

**GLP-1 + TIMELINE:** Wegovy, six months

**YOUR WHY?** My wife started it and had great success, and I'd been thinking about it. I wasn't obese to the point insurance would cover it, but I am a better weight now, and I need to go back to my doctor and talk about what to do next.

**ANY DIFFICULTY WITH ACCESS?** It was easy. My doctor knew what I wanted to achieve out of it and made sure I wasn't aiming for 130 pounds or anything unhealthy. He was in agreement in my case—165 pounds is my healthy weight, and he's been unsuccessfully trying to convince me to do anything else, so he was on my side for this.

**STATUS REPORT:** It works really well. I've lost 30 pounds and have zero complaints.

**ANY SURPRISES?** This may be part of having lost the weight, but I've got a good bit more energy. I also don't feel quite as food-driven. It's not that my portions are smaller, it's more so that in-between snack or craving, like the candy bar in the checkout line at the grocery store.

**TELL OR DON'T TELL?** It depends. My mom's approaching 80, and I don't want to have that conversation. My close friends all know and if somebody asks me point-blank, I wouldn't lie to them. I was at my heaviest at 190 pounds, so I wasn't really fat, and I feel a little bit guilty for not exercising first. There are all kinds of things I could have done and probably lost the weight the hard way, instead of just moving through [to GLP-1s]. I feel like I cheated to a degree, and that's probably a good reason not to have that conversation constantly.

**SIDE EFFECTS:** When I change dosages, it affects my appetite, and I don't feel great for a day or so—but I get past that pretty quickly. I didn't really go out before, but now I drink less—I won't have that second drink. The positives definitely outweigh any negatives.

**"I feel like I cheated to a degree, and that's probably a good reason not to have that conversation constantly."**

The promise is significant. So are the questions. Plausible risks fuel the concern—and the stigma. Some patients say GLP-1s have robbed them of not just their drive for food, but their desire for *everything*—sex, social interaction and so on. Common side effects include nausea, vomiting, diarrhea and constipation—and then there’s “Ozempic face,” the internet’s nickname for the hollowed-out look some users experience after significant weight loss.

Yet Carter maintains most of her patients actually have a renewed zest for life thanks to newfound confidence—“they can walk up the stairs and pick up their grandkids,” she says. And despite the laundry list of potential risks, the benefits still outweigh them. Desperately needing to lose weight and *not* taking the drug is “cutting off your nose to spite your face,” she tells *RM*.

**“For somebody who’s smaller, it’s not worth it.”**

—Dr. Laurel Carter

*Wake Internal Medicine Consultants*

The catch? For most patients, the weight comes back once the medication stops. “Whatever is in [a person] that causes that intense drive for food is still there,” says Carter. “It’s like going off blood pressure medicine, and then saying, ‘Oh, my God, I have high blood pressure again.’” Once started, it’s a lifetime commitment.

The prospect of taking a medication indefinitely is precisely why many providers

don’t view GLP-1s as a great idea for anyone who doesn’t need to drop weight for health reasons—or hasn’t exhausted all other options if they do. Yet shifting beauty standards paired with increasing access to GLP-1s (wellness brands like Hers and Hims now offer options sans the traditional doctor’s visit) have piqued the interest of those who are *not* the target demographic—but are still willing to fork over big bucks for fast weight loss.

“For somebody who’s smaller,” adds Carter, “it’s not worth it.” Losing weight to live is one thing, but the Kate Moss mindset is another: The end goal is to be healthy, not a society-approved shape.

As a quick glance at any runway or magazine will tell you, beauty standards, like everything else, are cyclical. Health, ideally, is not.

## The 43-year-old reporter who gave GLP-1s a shot in 2023 and wasn’t impressed, in his own words:

**GLP-1 + TIMELINE:** Wegovy, for about a month in late 2023

**YOUR WHY?** Probably the same as everybody—I wanted to lose weight, and I’ve always struggled. I’ve done all different kinds of diets: Jenny Craig—that was a disaster; Nutrisystem, a huge success until I got off it. I believe what doctors and dieticians say is you need to have a long-term plan. It can’t just be a dependency on one kind of diet—or in this case, medication. I’ve been very successful with some, not so much with others.

**ANY DIFFICULTY WITH ACCESS?** I went to the doctor in late summer 2023. At the time, the new hot thing was GLPs-1s—and everybody was scrambling to get them. My doctor made it happen—but then I had to wait [months]. I [finally] got a call from the pharmacy at WakeMed. The woman said, ‘Hey, your prescription’s ready—you better come get it now.’ It sounded like there were people waiting, so I turned around and raced down the Beltline to the hospital. I couldn’t even find a parking spot, so I put my hazards on and found a back entrance. I was going after this stuff like it was gold.

**STATUS REPORT?** It made no difference whatsoever. It didn’t change my appetite, my food cravings—or anything.

When I started, you had to take it in increments—your first four weeks at a certain level, the second four at a different level—but you’d have to have each prescribed. And it was *impossible* to even find. Just because you could get on Level 1 didn’t mean you were going to be able to find Level 2. It created a bit of angst, but I wanted to see how it would work. Then, I felt exactly the same as before I started it—but I know it’s worked for others.

**ANY SURPRISES?** The scarcity. Not even long-term, but short-term, there was that worry: Is there going to be availability for the next highest dose? Any pharmacy I called, the answer was a fast no—they didn’t have it. But everything is different now, and I would never tell someone to not at least try it.

**TELL OR DON’T TELL?** I told a few people because if I’m doing something, I’m not embarrassed by it. I’ve had plastic surgery, and I’ve told my friends. We laugh about it—it’s 2026, everybody’s doing some kind of maintenance or making some kind of change. It’s no big deal.

**SIDE EFFECTS?** Almost no reaction whatsoever. It didn’t change my appetite—it didn’t change anything. It was just there.

**“It made no difference whatsoever. It didn’t change my appetite, my food cravings—or anything.”**

## The 34-year-old consultant manager whose 20-year battle with weight loss finally met its match, in her own words:

**GLP-1 + TIMELINE:** Wegovy, three years (now on maintenance dose)

**YOUR WHY?** I was taken to Weight Watchers by my mom for the first time when I was 13. I was never not trying to lose weight, and I tried pretty much everything—it seeped into every aspect of my life. There would be times where I didn’t want to go out because I didn’t like what I was wearing, I had gained weight, or didn’t want to eat in front of other people. It was mentally draining. I would be really good about dieting and exercising for three months and then I wouldn’t—because life happens. And guess what? You can’t *not* eat. I cannot tell you how much more freedom I have now.

**STATUS REPORT?** I lost over 60 pounds in 10 months—and you can pry GLP-1s out of my cold dead hands. It’s revolutionized my life and opened up so many doors for me that I never would have let myself experience because I was fat. I was definitely a binge eater and it’s completely transformed the way I interact with food. I no longer think about what my next meal is going to be all the time. I also started to feel good about myself and what I was wearing. I started wanting to date more and put myself out there more because I felt comfortable. It hasn’t completely removed *all* of my body image struggles—I grew up in the times of six-packs in *Cosmo* and Special K commercials and I’m never gonna get away from that. I have to find the balance, but the drug has been extremely empowering. I feel like I’m finally in control of my relationship with food.

**ANY SURPRISES?** I never thought I would reach a point where food would ever repulse me. I just could not mentally wrap my head around not wanting to eat. I would force myself to eat and was still quite repulsed by a lot of food.

**ANY PAUSES?** I stopped taking it to climb a mountain—I needed to be able to process as much food as possible for energy—and to freeze my eggs. It continues to work in terms of maintenance, but I could definitely tell that my eating habits were coming back.

**TELL OR DON’T TELL?** There are people who I was honest with because they knew my struggle, like my boyfriend and best friends. I got a couple of comments like, ‘Oh my gosh, she looks so great. What’d you do to lose weight?’ I would say I stopped drinking and trained to climb a mountain. I wasn’t *not* telling the truth, I just wasn’t telling the *full* truth.

**SIDE EFFECTS?** I would say the biggest one was probably the fatigue. When I first started on the higher doses I had to force myself to eat. That’s not the case anymore on the maintenance dose—I can eat a whole plate of food now.

**“I was never not trying to lose weight, and I tried pretty much everything—it seeped into every aspect of my life.”**

## Thinking of Trying GLP-1s?

*Here’s what you need to know.*

### MOST PATIENTS REGAIN THE WEIGHT IF THEY STOP.

For this reason, doctors generally don’t recommend stopping the treatment, confirms Dr. Carter—meaning once you’re on it, you’re on it for good.

### YOU MAY HAVE TO FORCE YOURSELF TO EAT.

“I could hardly eat a bite,” Dr. David A. Kessler writes in his book *Diet, Drugs, and Dopamine: The New Science of Achieving a Healthy Weight*. “I almost had to fake eating altogether.” Echoing that sentiment, the local 34-year-old consultant manager who’s found success on GLP-1s went as far as to say she never thought she’d reach a point where food would repulse her. “I would get physically sick and just couldn’t mentally wrap my head around never wanting to eat.”

### THEY’RE SAFER THAN PREVIOUS GENERATIONS OF WEIGHT-LOSS DRUGS—BUT NOT RISK-FREE.

Common side effects run the gamut from nausea and diarrhea to other digestive issues—and researchers are also eyeing rare but serious complications like acute pancreatitis and musculoskeletal disorders.

### THEY’RE NOT MEANT FOR EVERYONE.

Initially, when shortages dominated the headlines, access was limited. Today, online providers and wellness brands make the Rx easier to obtain than ever: no insurance or in-person visits required.

### LOSING WEIGHT DOESN’T GUARANTEE SATISFACTION.

“People who’ve been on Wegovy for a year or so will come to me and say, ‘Well, now I’m plateauing. What else can we do?’” says Dr. Diana Thiara. “But for some people, there’s this idea of how they want to look. They’re disappointed.” On top of that, GLP-1s can cause gauntness, sunken cheeks and wrinkles—or as the internet dubs it, “Ozempic face.”

### IT’S NOT JUST A WEIGHT-LOSS DRUG.

Originally developed as a diabetes-turned-weight-loss drug, GLP-1s are now being studied for benefits that extend well beyond the scale. Research has shown reductions in heart attacks, strokes and cardiovascular disease, while emerging data points to potential improvements in everything from sleep apnea and kidney disease to inflammation and autoimmune conditions. In other words: What started as a weight-loss craze may ultimately be remembered as something much bigger. <sup>(RM)</sup>