

How to find a good place to eat in Maryland and still enjoy your trip

Even if you know the difference between an acorn squash and a spaghetti squash, it's still a challenge to find good restaurants while traveling through unfamiliar territory.

You can also expect that your degree of selectivity will rise in relation to the extent of your cuisine-related knowledge. Such is the burden of a food enthusiast, known these days as a foodie.

So how do you as a foodie find a place to eat at during a road trip in Maryland? For starters, you could try one of three approaches: research, local opinion or karma.

Research requires effort, usually in anticipation of your trip, or at least, on your way. Look at a guidebook, like the *Zagat* guide for the Baltimore and Washington, D.C., areas, or find a local newspaper's online review. You can also stop by or call a Maryland Welcome Center for information and suggestions. Check VisitMaryland.org for center locations.

Spontaneous research – an “in the moment” method – means taking a glance inside the restaurant. If the doors are locked, it could be Monday. Perhaps, the restaurant has abbreviated hours, or worse: the place is scheduled for auction. None of these possibilities bode well for your visit.

Let's be positive and assume the restaurant is open. First, look for customers. Going into a restaurant that has no other patrons is risky business. If you do see several diners, be sure they're not just members of the wait staff killing time. Several bored-looking twenty-somethings, all wearing white shirts and black pants, smoking cigarettes at the table – that's a giveaway.

You can also scan the menu. Beware of menus with items that are scratched out or that have prices covered with little adhesive squares. And, take caution when you see menus with more than six pages – unless it's a diner offering two-dozen options for serving eggs. Can one kitchen really prepare 175 different entrees well?

Getting opinions from local residents and friends who are familiar with the area's dining establishments is another option. Of course, you have to share the standards of your source. This is no time to go along with someone

else's opinion just to be nice. If you are likely to gasp or feel anxious when your friend describes "a great meal," you certainly don't want to take his or her suggestion.

Another option is to rely on karma. It's Zen-speak for intuition. You drive up to a place and you get a feeling: it's a good place to be at – at this moment in the universe – or the vibes are just not right. This works for a limited number of stops when other people are with you. If you're by yourself, this approach will tend to keep you driving. You'll see more sights, but you'll be too hungry to appreciate them.

Just remember: When karma kicks in and you have a great experience, be humble and call it serendipity. If the experience is a disaster, pray you don't get food poisoning.

All of this is great if you're looking for restaurants en route to a specific destination. But what if you as an adventurous foodie want to make the places where you eat the guiding factor in your trip? This, as they say, is another kettle of fish or barrel of pickles.

Consider this approach: You like seafood and Maryland seafood has an excellent reputation. It wouldn't be a stretch to think that some great seafood places are on the Eastern

Shore and along the water in Southern Maryland – both places that (in this example) you rarely visit. What next? Since you've asked, here's a suggestion.

Take a look at the Maryland State Arts Council web site – msac.org – and navigate to the section for arts and entertainment (A&E) districts. You'll see a list of 18 districts scattered across the state. That's it. Really. It's a simple premise: When you find art galleries, performance venues or other cultural attractions in any given community, odds are you'll run into some pretty good eateries there, too.

With the above scenario, you would take note of any A&E district that's near the Bay or one of its tributaries. For the record, those waterways – 3,000 miles of routes up and down the Bay – make up the Captain John Smith Historic National Trail – the nation's first water-based historic trail. Captain Smith was obviously an early 17th-century foodie in search of dining adventures beyond Jamestown.

Now, back to A&E's. Cambridge, a town on the Choptank River in Dorchester County is one of the designated districts. Another is Havre de Grace, located on the edge of the Susquehanna River in Harford County. Both, it turns out, have choices for

fresh-seafood dining by the waterfront.

Once you get the swing of this flexible approach, you could end up in the mountains of Western Maryland – having dinner in Cumberland or Frostburg where you’ll see an impressive display of fall foliage along the way. Or, maybe you’ll have lunch in Maryland’s Capital Region, in Frederick – a town immersed in history and art, which happens to be close to the six Maryland wineries on the Frederick Wine Trail. That is pure serendipity.

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