



From little league to corporate boardrooms, Yukon Trophy has been honoring achievements across Oklahoma, and beyond, for more than five decades.



In 1971, Al & Bea Johnson turned their garage into a workshop, and Yukon Trophy & Awards was born.

For 54 years, we've been helping schools, corporations, churches, nonprofits, and sports teams celebrate success with custom awards and trophies. Whether you are recognizing someone, wanting to advertise your business, or simply buy a gift, we are here to help.

Bring in your own artwork, or let us design it for you. Our dedication to craftsmanship and service makes every recognition unforgettable.

Yukon Trophy
& AWARDS, INC.

Visit us on Route 66 in Yukon or online
YUKONTROPHY.COM
405-354-5184



FROM A PANEL OF EXPERTS ACROSS A RANGE
OF DEEP OKLAHOMA KNOWLEDGE, WE
GATHERED NOMINATIONS, VOTED ON WINNERS,
AND PUT IT OUT TO YOU, OUR READERS, TO
WEIGH IN AS WELL. HERE ARE THE WINNERS OF
THE (INAUGURAL) 2025 OKIE AWARDS.



Before being
drafted by the
Oklahoma City
Thunder in 2021,
shooting guard
Aaron Wiggins played
for the University
of Maryland.

OKIES
of the
YEAR

The Oklahoma City Thunder

A lot happens every year in Oklahoma, but there is one thing that brought more excitement, joy, and unity than anything. The Oklahoma City Thunder are champions, bringing their home city full circle through a journey chairman Clayton I. Bennett helped the team embark on seventeen years ago. Let's hear it one more time for our 2025 (and inaugural) Okies of the Year.

By Ben Luschen • Portraits by Jackson Augustus Adair

THERE ARE TWO THINGS PEOPLE all around the world know about Oklahoma City. The first is a tragic event: the 1995 bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building. The second is the Oklahoma City Thunder, the reigning champions of the National Basketball Association.

This is the strange duality of being from OKC: Famous to outsiders for our individual darkest and brightest days, each entirely out of our control, but in private, defined by all the unseen days in between. It's the same nose-to-the-grindstone mindset that's come to define the Thunder and their chairman, Clayton I. Bennett. This bunch is more than our pride and joy; they're Okie through and through.

"The dream of becoming a Major League City was an organic vision shared by the many who made it happen. It was truly the unified effort of city leadership, the business community, and most importantly, the public—our fans—who were the energy behind it all," says Ben-

nett. "And now, eighteen years into our history, I feel it even more."



WHEN OKLAHOMA CITY FINALLY did join the storied ranks of Big League Cities in 2008, it was supposed to be a move that put the municipality and state on the same map as the other name-brand metropolises known to dot the sports landscape. These cities might all be in the club, but Oklahoma City's eighteen-year journey in the NBA has been something few if any will find relatable.

In less than two decades, the Oklahoma City Thunder has seen three separate stars win the Most Valuable Player award. The Detroit Pistons, who joined the NBA in 1949, have never had an MVP. Six Thunder players have gone on to be named NBA All-Stars—four on multiple occasions. Former players James Harden and Carmelo Anthony have had Hall of Fame-caliber careers outside of OKC. The



↑ Point guard Shai Gilgeous-Alexander was named 2024-2025 Kia NBA MVP. He is the third Thunder player to win the award.

➤ Luguentz Dort, a team guard, began his NBA career with the Thunder in 2019.

→ Chairman Clay Bennett in his downtown Oklahoma City office, overlooking the Paycom Center and the site of the team's new arena, which is expected to open in 2028.



team has won a league championship, played for another, and won more than 58 percent of its games. In fact, OKC has only been left out of postseason play in four seasons. No modern fanbase has seen this high a rate of success.

Yet this current bunch, the one that finally brought home the iconic Larry O'Brien Trophy, is anything but an ensemble of blue-chip, pre-anointed divas. Like most of the fans they represent, these are players who fought to earn their keep. Starting forward Luguentz Dort wasn't selected in the NBA draft. Explosive bench scorer Aaron Wiggins was a second-round pick. Even the reigning MVP Shai Gilgeous-Alexander, arguably the current best basketball player on this planet, was never expected to reach these lofty heights: The first ten teams in the 2018 draft decided they'd rather have someone else.

As Wiggins sees it, players who truly buy in to the team-first Thunder way will have a harder

time failing than succeeding. This is in part due to the tone set by the organization and the support offered to players by team personnel. More than that, there's something intentional about the type of athlete the Thunder brings into its fold.

"I think a lot of us are just dogs," Wiggins says. "We'll go through the mud to find a way to make it work. We found success by having that mentality to just make it happen regardless of what's thrown in front of us."

The current players deserve every accolade, but the foundation was built by those who came before them. Long before Oklahoma City's ring ceremony in October, an extensive list of characters made game nights special. There was Desmond Mason as Oklahoma's homegrown NBA ambassador. There was Russell Westbrook leaving every ounce of effort on the court each game. We all wanted to be friends with Nick

 **Paycom Center**
100 West Reno in
Oklahoma City
paycomcenter.com

[Aaron Wiggins, Shai Gilgeous-Alexander, and Luguentz Dort interview for the Oklahoma Today podcast at Thunder Media Day on September 29, 2025.](#)

Collison and Steven Adams. We all saw the poetry in Chris Paul's return to the capital city. Even Kevin Durant's improbable turn from seemingly infallible fan darling to heel antagonist has become an endearing part of that legacy. With the trophy at home in OKC forever, every loss, every setback, every fallen tear, every salty bead of sweat feels indisputably worth it. At the summit, each step was as necessary as the last.



OUR FAVORITE ATHLETES AND entertainers can sometimes feel so distant, but when Shai and other Thunder players chose to get off their shuttles and walk amongst the half-million fans during the Thunder Championship Parade in downtown Oklahoma City on June 24, it broke a fourth wall that finally made the win feel real.

"We're on the court, and it looks like a stage, right?" says Gilgeous-





JIMMY DOCK/THUNDER

WE FEEL THE LOVE WHEN WE'RE PLAYING, BUT TO BE NEXT TO THEM, RUNNING AROUND WITH THEM, BEING ABLE TO INTERACT WITH THEM THAT CLOSELY, YOU FEEL IT IN A DIFFERENT WAY.

—Shai Gilgeous-Alexander

Alexander. "And the fans are watching the game and watching us perform. We feel the love when we're playing, but to be next to them, running around with them, being able to interact with them that closely, you feel it in a different way."

It can be easy to feel, at times, that the differences between people create irreconcilable rifts between factions. But at a parade with half a million people—all races, all ages, all backgrounds, all beliefs—united for a common purpose, joined in shared jubilation without issue, breaking all

historic precedent in this state, the premise that there's no common ground just doesn't hold water. Utopia was here in Oklahoma City, if just for a day.

Thunder fans don't want this feeling to end, and there's reason to believe more days like this could be on the horizon. Every key contributor from last season's dominant team returns this year to defend the title. There has been a lot of talk among basketball fans about the Thunder's ability to financially retain all its players

beyond this season, but the Big Three of Shai, Jalen Williams, and Chet Holmgren are under contract for the team until at least 2030. By then, they will have moved into a new \$900 million arena across the street from their current home, promising both state-of-the-art sports viewing and a full district of ancillary retail, dining, and entertainment.

In a July statement, Bennett described the new arena plans as "unique and transformative," with hopes that the to-be-named,

In June, the Thunder battled it out with the Indiana Pacers, winning four of seven games in the NBA Finals.

 Paycom Center
paycomcenter.com

I THINK A LOT OF US ARE JUST DOGS. WE'LL GO THROUGH THE MUD TO FIND A WAY TO MAKE IT WORK.

—Aaron Wiggins

city-owned Thunder home "elevates the spirit of competition, celebrates the values of our community, and strengthens Oklahoma City's local and global identity."

With all the good news and positive results, it would be tempting for the Thunder to start coasting. We wouldn't bet on that happening, though.

"I don't think that's something that we as a team have to worry or think about," Wiggins says. "I think we have that mentality that you have to earn everything that you want."

It may be our Year of Thunder, but the process never stops.

"The Thunder experience is unique to each of us as we enjoy the games and great players," says Bennett. "What I am most grateful for is how the team brings people together. And much of the time, it is outside of the arena, in our daily lives as we follow the games, see the activities in the communities, and perhaps most important, in our interactions with family and friends as we enjoy the vitality and competition that is professional sports. I have heard from Thunder fans across the state who have never been to a game but are as connected as any season ticket holder in their passion and commitment."

We couldn't have said it better ourselves. 



Curbside Enterprises

In Oklahoma, we know two things: How to care for those in need, and how to work hard to build a future we can be proud of. Our inaugural Oklahoma Standard Award, named for Thunder chairman Clayton I. Bennett, honors an organization that does both of those things very well.

By Nathan Gunter • Portrait by Saxon Smith

WHEN WE PUT OUR HEADS

together to choose a winner for the first-ever Clayton I. Bennett Oklahoma Standard Award, a number of Oklahoma institutions stood out. After all, it's right there in the name: We wanted to recognize and boost something that embodies the Oklahoma Standard—the Oklahoma character, if you will.

Many organizations stood out, but in the end, it was Curbside Enterprises in Oklahoma City that best embodied the spirit of the award. Because the Oklahoma character is not just one of help: It's one of helping people stand up when they've been knocked down, of giving them the dignity, pride, and self-esteem that comes from being a part of their own solution.

Curbside is a part of Oklahoma City's Homeless Alliance providing people struggling with homelessness and poverty with low-barrier job opportunities. The vendors in green vests you see around town are selling the *Curbside Chronicle*, a magazine established in 2013 that features local content—some written by vendors—about goings-on in Oklahoma City and the lives and successes of those in the program. In addition, they get to meet members of the public, putting a face on the issue of homelessness

and allowing the community to be a part of the solution as well.

"We wanted to give people an alternative to panhandling," says Curbside Chief Programs Officer Ranya Forgotson. "We wanted to give them a product that they could sell that would help educate the public on who homelessness affects in Oklahoma City."

The magazine is engaging and beautiful—it's been named Best Magazine many times by the Oklahoma Society of Professional Journalists (not that we're jealous). And around half the time, there's an exciting freebie: tickets to the Oklahoma City Zoo, for instance, or an Oklahoma City Blue game.

"Every issue is a real mixed bag," says editor-in-chief Nathan Poppe. "We're always just trying to capture a slice of our world and what it's like for our vendors out there."

The *Chronicle* is one of the organization's four employment programs: Curbside Flowers, Curbside Apparel, and Sasquatch Shaved Ice in Oklahoma City's Plaza District. Vendors work with the Homeless Alliance's Support Services program, which helps them secure and maintain housing, address the issues that led to their homelessness, develop budgets and basic life skills, and more.

"I know that I have a set schedule each week to keep busy and work," says one vendor. "This helps me not run around. Curbside helps with my sobriety."

In 2024, Curbside programs provided income and employment to more than 450 people, generated more than 73,000 hours of work, and put more than a million dollars in the pockets of people in its programs. More than 80 percent of adult clients live with a long-term physical or mental health condition or disability, making many types of employment a challenge.

But two-thirds of Curbside vendors say their mental health has improved since joining the program. Half report that Curbside has reduced their need for support from social services or charities, and 85 percent say it has helped them better care for themselves.

"I believe everyday Oklahomans want to be a part of solutions, especially to homelessness," says Forgotson. "And we give really tangible ways for everyday citizens to make a difference in someone's life."

So for offering a chance for struggling Oklahomans to stand on their own and build a better life, Curbside Enterprises is our inaugural recipient of the Clayton I. Bennett Oklahoma Standard Award.

Ranya Forgotson, →
chief programs
officer for the
Homeless Alliance,
and Nathan Poppe,
editor-in-chief of the
Curbside Chronicle,
at Curbside Flowers
in Oklahoma City.

Curbside Enterprises
Curbside Chronicle
vendors are
located throughout
Oklahoma City.
thecurbsidechronicle.org

**Curbside Flowers and
Curbside Apparel**
522 North Classen
Boulevard in
Oklahoma City
(405) 219-0890
(Flowers)
(405) 822-9037
(Apparel)
curbsideflowers.com
curbsideapparel.com

Sasquatch Shaved Ice
Northwest 16th
Street and Indiana in
Oklahoma City
Mobile unit available
for events
sasquatchshavedice.org





OKIE MUSIC VENUE OF THE YEAR

PEOPLE'S CHOICE

Cain's Ballroom

YOU CAN FEEL THE HISTORY THE moment you step through the doors at 423 North Main Street in downtown Tulsa.

Everywhere you turn inside the 1,800-capacity Cain's Ballroom, which first opened its doors in 1924 and began hosting concerts six years later, it seems as if you can hear echoes of the past: Bob Wills, Leon Russell, The Sex Pistols, U2, Chris Stapleton—just about any artist of consequence from the last century has stepped upon the Cain's stage at some point in its existence.

Added to the National Register of Historic Places in 2003, Cain's could easily rest on its laurels, serve as a museum of sorts for live music fans—it does sit directly across the street from the future home of OKPOP and less

than a half mile from both the Bob Dylan and Woody Guthrie Centers—and remain a brick-and-mortar connection to the state's eclectic artistic past.

But rather than coasting, Cain's Ballroom is cruising, serving as a nerve center for the next generation of Oklahoma musicians—everyone from Wyatt Flores to Evan Felker to Wilderado has graced the Cain's stage multiple times in the last five years alone—while also consistently landing the caliber of artist you might more commonly see headlining the arena just three minutes away (Green Day, Jack White, Wilco).

"I don't want to say we've reached the gold at the end of the rainbow, but we're feeling pretty close," co-owner Chad Rodgers told *Rolling Stone* in 2024. "We're

Cain's Ballroom in Tulsa is a longstanding icon among the city's music venues.

Cain's Ballroom
423 North Main Street in Tulsa
(918) 584-2306
cainsballroom.com

always going to strive to make it bigger and better, because I want Cain's to be known as the flagship live music venue in the state of Oklahoma. I'd like it to be that for all of North America, too. We can always strive for that."

Balancing such ambitions against the preservation of so much history could potentially be a very tricky balancing act. However, if the current stewards of Cain's Ballroom are sweating it, it is not apparent. There are a multitude of music spaces within the state boasting a rich history—Oklahoma City's Civic Center Music Hall and Tower Theatre, for example, or The Tulsa Theater and The Colony in Tulsa—but few have the longevity and visibility of Cain's Ballroom.

It feels fitting that such a room so easily straddles the past, the present, and the future, ensuring Cain's Ballroom will continue to be a vibrant, essential part of Oklahoma's creative culture for another hundred years. —Preston Jones

OKIE CULTURAL AMBASSADOR OF THE YEAR

PEOPLE'S CHOICE

Sterlin Harjo

IF A CULTURAL AMBASSADOR IS someone who's representing the state to the larger world, Holdenville native Sterlin Harjo is it. He has shown the world a side of life in Oklahoma it's never seen, and we are all richer for it.

In the first season of *Reservation Dogs*, three of the four young protagonists—Willie Jack, Elora, and Bear—trek to Uncle Brownie's home outside of town to ask him to teach them how to fight. The elder explains that he's quite proud of his self-sufficiency—he only drives into town to get flour.

"I live off the land, mainly," he says.

Willie Jack glances around the room, which is littered with Styrofoam cups and cardboard fry sleeves.

"Looks like you go to Sonics a lot," she says.

As co-creator and showrunner on *Reservation Dogs*, which ran on FX for three seasons starting in 2021, Harjo—now a resident of Tulsa—was responsible for bringing realistic depictions of rural Native Oklahomans to the small screen for the first time.

"Some of the shows that had been set in the middle of America or flyover states, like *Yellowstone*, I didn't think reflected our reality here in Oklahoma," he says.

Though the filmmaker's career seems to have been rocket-launched in the last few years, he's been in the industry for decades. His first feature-length film, *Four Sheets to the Wind*, was nominated for nine awards including Sundance's Grand Jury Prize in 2007.

His newest project—*The Lowdown*, starring Ethan Hawke, which premiered on FX and Hulu in September—brings Harjo's brand of Okie truth-

telling in a not-too-serious package to Tulsa, but this time, the wrapping is noir mystery. It's loosely based on the life of Lee Roy Chapman, founder of the independent archive Center for Public Secrets in Tulsa.

"We like a good lie, we like a good cover-up, and we like to rewrite history," Harjo says.

The *Lowdown* season one is on FX and Hulu, and all seasons of *Reservation Dogs* are available to stream on Hulu.

Sterlin Harjo's newest series *The Lowdown* premiered on FX in September 2025.

"This show is the antithesis of all that—it's about finding out the truth."

While Harjo's films and shows are filled with imperfect characters and portrayals of the state not everyone would love, they are suffused with his own brand of affection for the place where he grew up—and its people.

"Oklahoma's a beautiful, unique place with a magical history that I love exploring and showing to the world," he says. —Karlie Ybarra





VALERIE WEI-HAAS

OKIE CHEF OF THE YEAR

Lisa Becklund

IF YOU'VE LIVED IN TULSA FOR some time, you've likely seen chef Lisa Becklund riding around town on her bicycle, perhaps toting her latest farmers market find which, in her capable hands, is just waiting to be made into something delectable. These excursions help the four-time James Beard Award-nominated chef stay sane. That alone is quite a feat considering she now owns Living Kitchen Farm & Dairy in Depew and FarmBar, il seme, and Cow & Cabbage Grocer & Restaurant in Tulsa with her wife and business partner Linda Ford.

↑
Lisa Becklund
co-owns four
restaurants in Tulsa
and Depew.

🌐
**Living Kitchen
Farm & Dairy**
livingkitchenfarm.com

il seme
15 West 5th
Street in Tulsa
(539) 525-0265
ilsemetulsa.com

FarmBar
1740 South
Boston Avenue
in Tulsa
(918) 576-6967
farmbartulsa.com

**Cow & Cabbage
Grocer &
Restaurant**
1325 East 15th
Street in Tulsa
(918) 600-1860
cowandcabbage.com

It's not uncommon for Becklund to work eighty-hour weeks. But she's happy to put the time in, because she isn't just feeding hungry patrons with food. Her tables are set with stories—of the people who plant and harvest, of the land, and of time itself.

"Storytelling is part of my purpose," Becklund says. "My story, why the farmers decided to grow a certain variety. Ultimately, I'm trying to bring our

guests to that place and time in Oklahoma. Every season is different, every year is different, so every menu I have is different."

Though she's originally from Seattle, Becklund now considers Oklahoma home. When she arrived more than twenty years ago, she only planned to stay a year to learn the art of farming. That proved fickle, so she hosted her first farm dinner in 2006 to help offset the cost of goat feed. Becklund eventually shifted her focus from growing food to preparing it—after all, she had been the chef at an Italian restaurant in Washington.

For years, Becklund and Ford hosted a limited number of seasonal multicourse dinners, which would usually sell out immediately. In 2020, Tulsa's FarmBar began offering more opportunities for diners to try hyperlocal cuisine—most of the ingredients come from growers around the state—without driving to the country. Two years later, Becklund returned to the food of "the beautiful country" with *il seme*, an Italian concept that's seasonal but without the surprise menu. Earlier this year, she and Ford opened *Cow & Cabbage*, with both sit-down service and a take-home market.

Becklund credits her amazing staff and a network of farmers in and around Oklahoma with her restaurants' growth, but her work reaches well beyond the Tulsa area. She's raising Oklahoma's reputation as a community working to grow together.—*Karlie Ybarra*

PEOPLE'S
CHOICE

TABB SINGLETON



SAXON SMITH

Beard nomination. phattabbsbbq.com

Idabel's king of 'cue, he cut his teeth at Emeril's NOLA Restaurant, and his smoked meats—some of the state's best—earned him a James Beard nomination. phattabbsbbq.com



Watch our
interview with Tabb
Singleton here!



SAXON SMITH

OKIE NEW DESTINATION OF THE YEAR

OKANA RESORT & INDOOR WATERPARK

OKLAHOMA CITY

COMBINE ALL THE FUN AND ADVENTURE OF A WATERPARK with the comfort and simple pleasures of a resort—with a boatload of the Chickasaw Nation's know-how for hospitality—and you've got Oklahoma City's OKANA Resort & Indoor Waterpark, our Okie New Destination of the Year for 2025.



SAXON SMITH

↑
The outdoor water
park at OKANA
features the fourth-
largest pool in the
entire country.

✓
The 100,000-
square-foot indoor
water park at
OKANA is open
year-round.

LOVE'S PLANETARIUM AT SCIENCE MUSEUM OKLAHOMA, Oklahoma City

PEOPLE'S
CHOICE

It's time for the next generation of space explorers to boldly go in this cutting-edge facility, viewings of which are available with museum admission.
sciencemuseumok.org



SCIENCE MUSEUM OKLAHOMA

🌐
**OKANA Resort &
Indoor Waterpark**
639 First
Americans
Boulevard in
Oklahoma City
(572) 228-4001
okanaresort.com



THOMAS CRABTREE

OKIE MUSICIAN OF THE YEAR

Kaitlin Butts

“THERE IS A DIFFERENCE IN AN OKIE songwriter,” Kaitlin Butts told *Oklahoma Today* earlier this year. “There’s definitely a nuance to it.”

Although Butts was speaking about her contemporaries, that observation absolutely applies to the music she has made on her three albums to date. Wise, funny, lyrical, and breezily melodic, she has spent much of the past year riding the long tail of her breakthrough third album, *Roadrunner!*

While other Oklahomans have had runs of regional and national attention, none have embraced the state’s rich artistic legacy while raising its profile as a wellspring of head-turning talent as deftly as Kaitlin Butts.

A seventeen-track tour de force fusing sharp-eyed whimsy, musical

theater, and Red Dirt realness, *Roadrunner!* recasts the 1943 musical *Oklahoma!* for the twenty-first century. While it’s not an exact remake, each song on the record corresponds with a plot point from Rodgers and Hammerstein’s piece.

“It was a hard thing to sell in the beginning stages,” Butts told the *Nashville Scene* in 2024. “I’m like, ‘I have this idea; no one’s really done this before.’ It’s hard to imagine what it can be. It had to have that same feel. You hope it turns out the way you have it in your head.”

Butts was bolstered by support from fellow Oklahoman Vince Gill (who sings harmonies on “Come Rest Your Head (On My Pillow)”) as well as her husband, Flatland Cavalry’s Cleto Cordero. In the course of supporting the project,

Tulsa-born Kaitlin Butts is a fast-rising national star in the Red Dirt and country music scenes.

Kaitlin Butts’ music is available to stream on Apple Music, Spotify, and Amazon Music. kaitlinbutts.com

she has leaned into her theater-kid roots and crafted a series of visually arresting, social media-ready videos for many songs on *Roadrunner!*, including “You Ain’t Gotta Die (To Be Dead to Me),” which set TikTok ablaze earlier this year, accumulating more than 120 million views.

It all adds up to an artist who understands the value of staking out new territory—taking a leap into the unknown to translate what feels like a wild, left-field idea into thrilling reality.

“Luck is when hard work meets opportunity,” as the old saw goes, but in the case of Kaitlin Butts, our Okie Musician of the Year, there is the firm sense this incandescently talented singer-songwriter is only just beginning to make her own luck.—Preston Jones

PEOPLE’S CHOICE

CROSS CANADIAN RAGWEED

Red Dirt fans, rejoice: Your favorites have returned! Read more in Preston Jones’ “Red Dirt Comes of Age” on page 64 of this issue.



JOHN JERNIGAN

OKIE ARTS DESTINATION OF THE YEAR

PEOPLE’S CHOICE

PHILBROOK MUSEUM OF ART

TULSA

TUCKED INTO A QUIET NEIGHBORHOOD IN

Tulsa, one of America’s greatest art treasures attracts visitors from around the world. And with works spanning the ancient world to Kehinde Wiley and the modern masters, Tulsa’s Philbrook Museum of Art isn’t just any day in the galleries: With world-class permanent and temporary exhibitions, an expansive set of gardens overseen by the resident cat, Cleome, and regular programming to spark any creative impulse, Philbrook must be near the top of every Oklahoman’s bucket list.



Philbrook Museum of Art
2727 South Rockford Road in Tulsa
(918) 749-7941
philbrook.org

Visitors can peruse more than 8,500 works at the Philbrook Museum of Art in Tulsa. →

Philbrook’s annual Festival of Lights features an elaborate holiday display beginning in November. ↓



PHILBROOK MUSEUM OF ART



LORD DICKWORTH

OKIE RESTAURANT
OF THE YEARMa Der Lao
Kitchen

WHEN JEFF CHANCHALEUNE, chef and owner of Okie Restaurant of the Year Ma Der Lao Kitchen, told his father he was switching from Japanese cuisine to cooking authentic Laotian food, his reply was, “Why? Who’s going to eat it?”

Four years later, the answer is clear: lots of people. And not just Oklahomans are dining at the Plaza District hot spot, either: With write-ups in *Bon Appetit*, *USA Today*, and *The New York Times*, Ma Der has become a must-visit for foodies coming through Oklahoma City.

Chanchaleune says he has been pleasantly surprised by Oklahomans’ embrace of Lao cuisine.

“It’s so wild to see Lao food anywhere, so to see it become popular in Oklahoma City has been crazy to witness,” he says. “For the first eleven months, I just wanted the restaurant to survive. We really didn’t turn a corner until right before our first anniversary.”

Often when restaurants struggle to find an audience, menus are shredded and concepts are changed, but Ma Der has remained defiantly loyal to its traditional Lao dishes. Rather than becoming something else, the restaurant focused on nailing its dishes, dialing in the flavors, and training the staff. The result of that work shows as diners line up for *Seen Hang* (lemongrass-marinated beef jerky), *Chuen Muu* (deep-fried pork riblets), *Moek Paa* (steamed catfish in a banana leaf), and more every day.

More than building a customer base, Ma Der has been vital in building a food movement in



Jeff Chanchaleune, ↑ owner and chef at Ma Der Lao Kitchen in Oklahoma City’s Plaza District, is a multiple James Beard Award nominee.



Ma Der Lao Kitchen
1634 North Blackwelder Avenue in Oklahoma City
(405) 900-5503
maderlaoakitchen.com

Oklahoma City. Chanchaleune uses the restaurant as a staging ground for frequent collaborations with guest chefs from across the country. He pays up front for them to visit, both to broaden the experiences of customers and to further magnify his and the staff’s skill, creativity, and enthusiasm.

“We all gain from this in knowledge and experience. I’ve continued to make more connections through Ma Der and Bar Sen [Ma Der’s neighbor and sister concept], but we want a new chef in every month,” he says. “We want people all over to know how awesome OKC is. If we can get them in and talking about us, our city is going to grow.” —Greg Elwell

NOCHE
WOODFIRED
GRILL & AGAVE
BAR, TulsaPEOPLE’S
CHOICE

One of Oklahoma’s—and the country’s—hottest new restaurants, this Greenwood spot brings the tastes of Mexico City to Tulsa. eatdrinknoche.com



VALERIE WEI-HAAS

OKIE MUSEUM
OF THE YEAROklahoma
City National
Memorial &
Museum

THERE ARE SOME MUSEUMS we wish didn’t have to exist.

Who wouldn’t trade the Oklahoma City National Memorial & Museum to rewind to April 19, 1995, and prevent the 168 deaths, hundreds of injuries, and destruction of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building? Who wouldn’t want to erase that stain in our history?

The Memorial Museum takes visitors through those mundane early hours of April 19, into a meeting of the Oklahoma Water Resources Board, the terrifying sounds and scenes of 9:02 a.m., and everything that came after.

Thirty years later, the site still exacts a heavy emotional toll. The weight of that day hangs on visitors as they “meet” the victims and their families and view the aftermath of the bombing. There’s nothing lighthearted about this place, yet it is somehow uplifting. It is a testament to the power of hope and the unbreakable spirit of Oklahoma.

The museum also is a repository of artifacts from the bombing and the reckoning that came after—not all of which are on display. Shattered glass dyed gray with smoke. Toys salvaged from the daycare. Notes written by heartbroken families desperate to hold on and let go in equal measure.

After the tumult of the museum exhibits, including the trial of the extremists who planned and

carried out the bombing, the tranquility of the Memorial is a respite. Many shed tears over the Field of Empty Chairs or take time to reflect beneath the shade of the Survivor Tree. The inside of the museum isn’t claustrophobic, but stepping outside into the Outdoor Symbolic Memorial feels like exhaling the deep breath you didn’t know you were holding.

Since it opened to the public in February 2001, the Oklahoma City National Memorial & Museum has become an ever more vital source of community and healing for the state, the country, and the world as people try to reckon with the tumult surrounding us.

It’s a museum we wish didn’t have to exist—and we are so grateful that it does.—Greg Elwell

The Field of Empty Chairs, honoring the 168 victims of the bombing, is decorated for the holidays each year at the Oklahoma City National Memorial & Museum.

U.S. NATIONAL PARK SERVICE



FIRST AMERICANS MUSEUM, OKC

This tour through Oklahoma’s current thirty-nine tribes, their cultures, and their history continues to be one of the state’s must-visit attractions. famok.org

PEOPLE’S
CHOICE

LORD DUCKWORTH



Oklahoma City National Memorial & Museum
620 North Harvey Avenue in Oklahoma City
(405) 235-3313
memorialmuseum.com



ZACH BECKER/OKC THUNDER/GETTY IMAGES

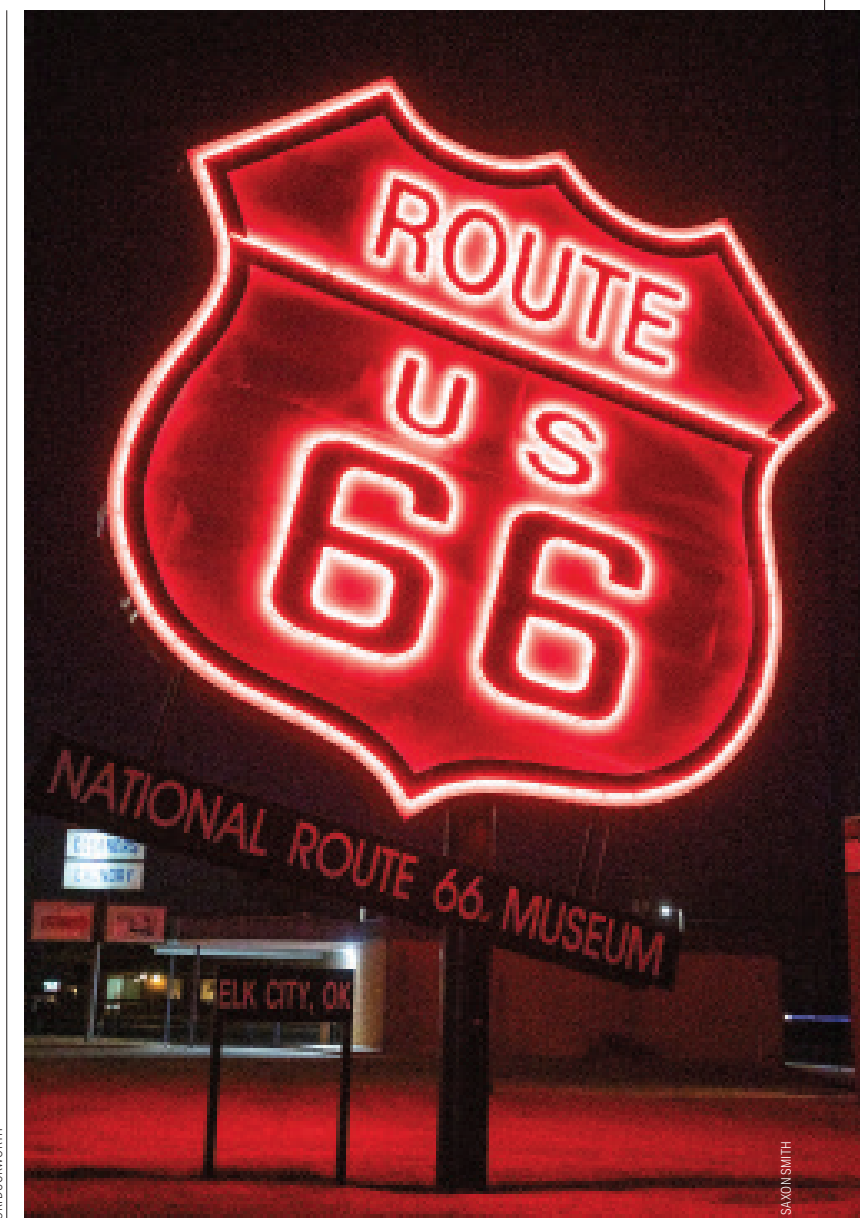
OKIE HISTORIC DESTINATION
OF THE YEARPEOPLE'S
CHOICE

ROUTE 66

OKLAHOMANS LOVE A GOOD HISTORIC road trip, and the state's full of historic destinations—so many it would take a lifetime to visit. But as 2026 dawns, there's no time travel like the Greatest American Road Trip: The Mother Road, of which Oklahoma boasts more than four hundred driveable miles—the most of any state. And with celebrations of the Route's Centennial planned all year from Miami to Texola, Route 66 isn't just a historic destination: It's a year-long party, and you don't want to miss the fun.



LORI DUCKWORTH



SAXON SMITH

OKIE EVENT OF THE YEAR

PEOPLE'S
CHOICETHUNDER
NBA CHAMPIONSHIP
PARADE

June 24, 2025, in Oklahoma City

The state had never seen anything like it: On June 24, more than half a million people—an eighth of Oklahoma's entire population—crowded into downtown to scream, to cheer, to cry tears of joy, and to get a glimpse of the state's newest heroes, the NBA Champions, the Oklahoma City Thunder.



JIMMY DOOKIC/THUNDER

↑ Players from the Oklahoma City Thunder take the stage with the Larry O'Brien Championship Trophy.

← On June 24, the team rode on double-decker buses throughout downtown Oklahoma City in a parade that drew hundreds of thousands of fans.



nba.com/thunder

↑ Diners enjoy burgers under displays of soda bottles at Pops 66 in Arcadia.



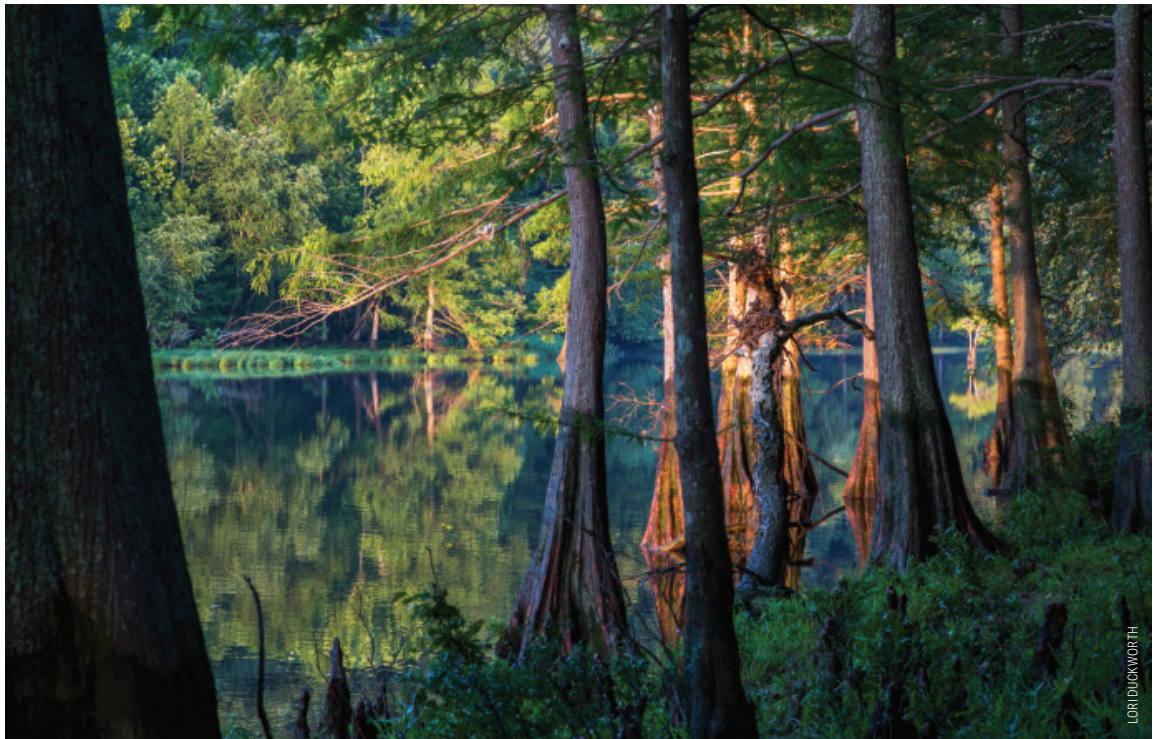
SAXON SMITH

↑ The outdoor sign glows bright at the National Route 66 Museum in Elk City.

← The 123-foot Pryor Creek Bridge in Chelsea is part of the Mother Road's historic alignment.



oklahomaroute66.com



← Cypress trees stand sentry at the Mountain Fork River at Beavers Bend State Park near Broken Bow.

PEOPLE'S CHOICE

OKIE STATE PARK OF THE YEAR

Beavers Bend State Park

THE GORGEOUS SCENERY. THE ENDLESS activities. And all varieties of fun with Hochatown, Broken Bow Lake, and the Mountain Fork River at your fingertips. What could be better than a long weekend at Beavers Bend State Park?

PEOPLE'S CHOICE

TALIMENA STATE PARK

Marking the entrance to the Talimena National Scenic Drive, Talimena State Park has wowed generations of visitors with its incredible views and forested beauty. Pitch a tent or bring an RV and find yourself a slice of Ouachita paradise.



Talimena State Park

KIMBAKER



SAXON SMITH

OKIE STATE PARK LODGE OF THE YEAR

PEOPLE'S CHOICE

Beavers Bend State Park Lodge

IF YOU'VE NEVER STOOD ON THE BALCONY of a room at Beavers Bend State Park Lodge and watched the wildlife come up to the edge of the lake, you're missing an essential Oklahoma experience.

← Every room at Beavers Bend State Park Lodge overlooks scenic Broken Bow Lake.



TravelOK.com/
BeaversBend

TravelOK.com/
Talimena



SAXON SMITH

OUR SPONSORS AND TROPHIES

YOU'VE GOT YOUR OSCAR, YOUR EMMY, your Grammy, your O'Brien Trophy, and to a lesser extent, your Golden Globe: Every award deserves a great trophy, and when we wanted to honor our Okie Awards winners in style—and thanks to a generous sponsorship by **Visit Yukon**—we turned to **Yukon Trophy & Awards, Inc.** This family-owned business has been making gorgeous trophies, plaques, awards, and more since 1971, when they started as an at-home business. Today, they not only create works for clients nationwide, they are paragons of community support, including sponsoring an August 2025 fundraising banquet for the Canadian County Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA).

SAXON SMITH



visityukonok.com
yukontrophy.com

← The folks at Yukon Trophy created two pieces for the Okie Awards—a larger one for Okie of the Year and the Clayton I. Bennett Oklahoma Standard Award, and a smaller one with blue, orange, and yellow in glass to reflect Oklahoma sunsets and the Oklahoma City Thunder.

OUR PROCESS

WHEN WE CREATED THE OKIE AWARDS, WE KNEW we'd need some help. We had Okies of the Year and the Clayton I. Bennett Oklahoma Standard Award handled, but we reached out to a number of experts for the rest—music writers and historians; community, state, and business leaders; tourism sector folks; and *Oklahoma Today* contributors who are in the know—and we asked them to submit nominees in their subjects of expertise. Once all nominations were in, we compiled a secret ballot and asked our panelists and our staff to vote. The top vote-getters in each category became our Okie Awards winners, and the top five were our People's Choice Award nominees.

OUR PANELISTS

Bryce Bandy and Chris Branson, OKLAHOMA CITY
Keep It Local OK

Becky Carman, TULSA
Oklahoma Today copyeditor and contributing editor

Greg Elwell, OKLAHOMA CITY
IAteOklahoma.com,
Oklahoma Today contributing editor

Marnie Fernandez, TULSA
Contributing editor, *Oklahoma Today*

Jonathan Fowler, NORMAN
President, Fowler Holding Co.

Brenda Granger, EDMOND
Executive Director, Oklahoma Museums Association

Preston Jones, FORT WORTH / BROKEN ARROW
Music writer, *Oklahoma Today*, *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, *Rolling Stone*, and more

Jake Krumwiede, TULSA
Executive Director, OKPOP Museum

Ryan LaCroix, BLANCHARD
Director of Content and Audience Development, KOSU

Adam Lynn, EUFAULA
History teacher, Eufaula High School; former director, Honey Springs Battlefield in Checotah

Nathan Poppe, OKLAHOMA CITY
Editor-in-Chief, *Curbside Chronicle*

Kenny Sivard, IDABEL
Board Member, Oklahoma Historical Society

Trait Thompson, OKLAHOMA CITY
Executive Director, Oklahoma Historical Society

Krystal Yoseph, OKLAHOMA CITY
Owner, Konjo Concepts and Konjo Concierge