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CELEBRATING NORTH CAROLINA

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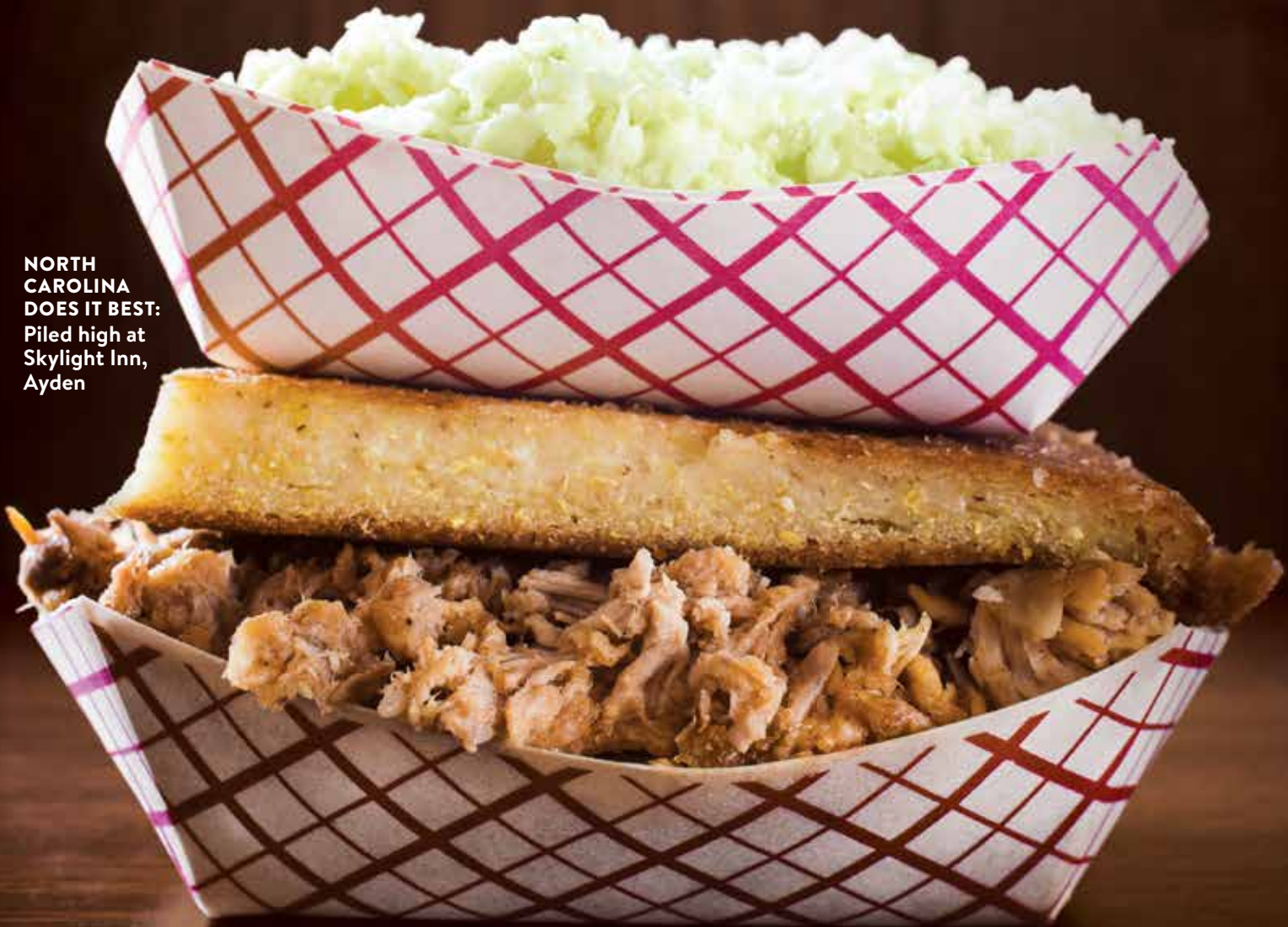
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issue

B'S IN GREENVILLE • LEXINGTON • RED BRIDGES • PLUS! THE HISTORIC BBQ TRAIL

**NORTH
CAROLINA
DOES IT BEST:**
Piled high at
Skylight Inn,
Ayden



CITY PORTRAIT

Southern Pines

Hoof-friendly terrain and residents who love to ride make the landscape of this Sandhills town blue-ribbon horse country.

WRITTEN BY MARIANNE GINGHER / PHOTOGRAPHY BY FAITH TEASLEY



A love of horses starts early at Foxtrack Training Center in Southern Pines.



Brake for horses:
In Southern Pines,
you'll know the
town's favorite
animal before you
see one in person.

I set off for the Sandhills and Southern Pines horse country on a brisk day, beneath a champion sky of blue-ribbon blue.

As a girl, such days were always my favorite for riding. Cooler weather turned all of us frisky. I wahooped up and down the pasture, stopping under the persimmon tree to let my horse, Goldy, graze the fallen fruits, reins slack, me happy just listening to her chew. That was the best part, really, just being with her. Inside the barn, the dark air filled

with the cidery smell of the fresh hay I pushed into the manger. I never wanted to leave, but the stars would come out and I'd remember that I had schoolwork.

Owning a horse was the beginning of my real life. Up until then, it felt as if I'd been pretending to be alive. Living is *doing*, and boy oh boy did I *do* when I rode.

TIME WITH HORSES GAVE ME THE unrushed sensation of being absolutely present and content, and that feeling returns the closer I get to Southern Pines.

As dense pine forests thin, farmlands sprawl, crisscrossed with fences. Barns spring up, and pastures as green as the Emerald City unfurl. I whiz past riding



The Southern Pines station still sees a lot of trains roll through. This one's carrying freight, but visitors can catch the Amtrak *Silver Star* and step off the train right downtown.

rings and fields bedecked with cross-country training jumps. There's a sign for Mile-Away Farms, and, sure enough, Southern Pines and its rural outskirts merge seamlessly, their boundaries blurred by the casual beauty inherent in both.

In Southern Pines, my room at the Weymouth Center overlooks the lush

estate that Pennsylvania steel and railroad magnate James Boyd bought to preserve against the ravages of the turpentine industry. One of his grandsons, also named James, inherited the property. The younger James was a writer, and, in 1914, he and his brother Jackson founded Moore County Hounds, which is still active today. Weymouth in its

heyday became an equestrian hub, and there's a stable within a stone's throw of the main house. Soon I'm ambling down a corridor of trees to take a pear to Emmett, the pony who lives there.

From Weymouth, it's a short walk down Connecticut Avenue to the historic town center, and although village charms are plentiful — I stop and watch



Cheese sure to please at Southern Whey.

Tour along the tracks

In Southern Pines, railroad tracks bisect the town's main drag, Broad Street. This side, find wine, cheese, and more.

SOUTHERN WHEY

Here, find a world of gourmet meats and cheeses from NC and beyond: cured sausages made from black-hoof pigs from Spain and Portugal, Carolina bacon, Goudas shipped from Holland, smoky blues, and cheeses made from sheep's milk. 205 NE Broad Street.

GRACEFULLY RUSTIC

The Danish word *hygge* (pronounced "hooga") translates to "homey" and "cozy." The word will come in handy when you see this shop's selection of folk art and home decor, including Mason jar lanterns, beeswax candles, and birdhouses. 223 NE Broad Street.

THE WINE CELLAR & TASTING ROOM

Owner Robyn James knows wine — she worked as a wine-list consultant for restaurants in the Piedmont before opening her popular shop. She'll recommend a perfect bottle to take home or to open during live music nights. 241 NE Broad Street.

A staple of downtown Southern Pines, The Country Bookshop draws two-legged readers and four-legged friends.



a freight train glide importantly past the beautifully restored Sunrise Theater on Broad Street, the corner ice cream parlor, The Country Bookshop, and Sweet Basil Café — I make a beeline for Cabin Branch Tack Shop, which is bustling with horse lovers.

There, you can buy everything from bitless bridles to a baby's bib that reads "Born to Ride." The place smells deliciously of leather. I browse at least 15 brands of fly spray, high-luster shampoos and conditioners for manes and tails, hoof disinfectants, and liniments advertised to "help relieve minor stiffness, soreness, inflammation," and feel

a little bit tempted to buy a bottle of Sore-No-More for myself. If you want second-hand deals on horse gear, try "A Bit Used," on U.S. Highway 1.

DRIVE DOWN YOUNGS ROAD, AND you'll see horse farms galore: manicured estates with white fences, as well as more laid-back-looking parcels with friendly names like "Little Acres" and "Economy Farm." I discover Den Road, a one-lane trail of soft white sand that meanders its hill-and-dale way between Youngs and Connecticut. A sign reads HORSES HAVE RIGHT OF WAY. Not since I visited my son in Zambian bush

Track tour, take two

Ready to explore the other side of Broad? Circle around, and you'll find a slew of boutiques and gift shops.

DENKER SUNDRY & GIFTS

A combination clothing boutique and soda fountain, featuring fresh-squeezed orangeades. So sweet. 150 NW Broad Street.

FRAMER'S COTTAGE

Jewelry, home decor, and accessories, plus a nice selection of artwork. 162 NW Broad Street.

LIVING ON THE BLISS

Mom-and-daughter team Cindy Miller and Cassie White started by selling vintage furniture they refurbished themselves. Now, they offer women's clothing, jewelry, and accessories. 168 NW Broad Street.

OPULENCE OF SOUTHERN PINES

The bedding-and-fine-linens store is one of only a handful of retailers in the world allowed to carry a particular line of Italian sheets. Even if you don't choose those, you'll find something to lend luxury to your life. 280 NW Broad Street.



Trendy boutiques, like Living on the Bliss, line both sides of Broad Street.



Melanie Wyatt, owner of Foxtrack Training Center, is passionate about riding, and about teaching others to ride.

country have I traveled such a road, and I worry that my lowly sedan will get stuck, but, by *Equus*, it doesn't! Soon I find Greenore Farm, a pretty little property belonging to Róisín O'Rahilly, who's thinning the mane of a glossy black horse named Echo. He eyes me like a suitor, licks my palm, and I'm a goner. I have not been licked by a horse in forever, and the wet, broad lap of his tongue, his muzzle nudged eagerly into my hand like a velvet purse, and his oaty, huffy breath are rapturous reminders of every horse I have ever loved.

"I used to ride, until my horse ran away with me during a foxhunt," I confess to Róisín. This breach of protocol — rushing past the hunt master — was signaled by embarrassing bleats from a bugle. But tell horse people that you *used* to ride, and they merely shrug. Everybody has a story about why they gave up this sort of riding or that, switched to English tack from riding

Western, or stopped performing dressage in favor of jumping competitions. Róisín stopped foxhunting, she tells me. (The sport was too tame around Southern Pines, compared with her native Ireland.) But to give up being around horses on a daily basis? No way.

Some of the people I meet are close to being centaurs in their identification with the animals they care for.

AT FOXTRACK TRAINING CENTER, I watch little girls in pink and turquoise riding breeches stand on tiptoe to groom their ponies. Owner and trainer Melanie Wyatt, who has been teaching young riders for decades, points to a 6-year-old who is using a tail comb instead of a proper curry brush. "She's *allergic* to horses, but there's no stopping her — hey, put your bandana on while you brush him," she calls to the child.

I follow Melanie to a big sandy ring overhung with old gnarly pecan trees,

where she conducts class. The white sand you find everywhere in Southern Pines provides excellent footing for horses, she tells me, and because sand never freezes, you ride easily year-round.

“How can you tell when your pony isn’t happy?” Melanie asks the class. “His ears will flatten back and he’ll wring his tail,” she answers, grabbing a nearby palomino’s tail and spinning it clockwise to demonstrate. The pony merely stands there, indulgent in the way school horses are. I ask Melanie if she foxhunts. “Yes,” she says, grinning. “I’m a ‘whipper-in.’ I watch out for the hounds who stray. By the way, in case you’re worried, hounds never catch the fox.”

Foxhunting is big sport in Southern Pines. I’d rank it alongside steeplechasing and competitive jumping as one of the most thrilling and risky things to do on horseback. Western riders might claim barrel racing or bronco busting. Anything to do with speed and jumping

a horse over hurdles takes nerve.

But at Prancing Horse Center for Therapeutic Horsemanship, put on the brakes. I watch special-needs riders as young as 3 and 4 steer horses (with the aid of volunteers) around the ring. Prancing Horse is a member of the Professional Association of Therapeutic Horsemanship International. Because the motion of a horse closely simulates how humans walk, says Claire Pollard, the program director, “not only does riding help improve posture, balance, strength, and range of motion,” but its rhythms are familiar and comforting. There is even a rehabilitative program for veterans — Southern Pines is near Fort Bragg — called “Freedom Reins.”

MY TRIP TO SOUTHERN PINES HAS gotten me thinking about retiring there. Why oh why did I ever quit riding? Let’s just say that when the road forked, I didn’t choose the bridle path. I bought

a watch, took a job, and that’s been its own wild ride.

“Still riding?” I’m occasionally asked by folks who knew me in my youth.

“*Writing?* Yes, of course I’m still writing,” I tell them. It’s an interesting coincidence how similar the two words sound. Riding and writing. I can’t think of any two personal endeavors that have raised more goose bumps in the doing, or have made me feel quite so exhilarated, airborne even when sitting still. **Os**

Marianne Gingher is the author of four books and the editor of Amazing Place, published last year by UNC Press. She teaches English and comparative literature at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.



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