

If you spend enough time eating your way through a good Southern restaurant, you start to notice something simple and reliable: the starters often tell you more about the kitchen than the entrées do. Anybody can plate a handsome main course. Appetizers have less room to hide. They arrive first, when everyone is hungry, alert, and ready to judge. If the fried green tomatoes are limp, if the pimento cheese tastes like it came out of a tub, if the deviled eggs are sweating under a heavy garnish, you know what kind of evening lies ahead.

The reverse is also true. When the first plates land and the table goes quiet for a moment, that is usually a strong sign. A crisp hush puppy with a tender center, a skillet of bubbling crab dip, a basket of just-fried okra with the cornmeal still fragrant, these things set a tone. They encourage people to lean in, trade bites, and order one more round than they planned. At a Southern restaurant, that communal energy matters. Southern food is deeply social food. It is built for passing, scooping, tearing, dipping, and reaching across the table for “just one more.”

Choosing the best starters to share takes a little judgment. Not every delicious appetizer works for a group. Some dishes are too rich to order alongside three other fried items. Some fall apart after a few minutes and should be eaten immediately. Some look generous but disappear in four bites. The strongest table, in my experience,

balances texture, temperature, and appetite. You want a mix that opens the meal rather than ending it before the mains even arrive.

What makes a Southern starter worth sharing

The best shareable appetizers do three things at once. First, they create abundance. Even if the portion is modest, they should feel easy to divide. Nobody wants to perform delicate surgery on one oversized biscuit while six people wait politely. Second, they hold up on the table for a few minutes. A good shared starter tolerates conversation. Third, it delivers a concentrated version of what people came for in the first place, whether that means smoke, crunch, tang, heat, creaminess, or a little sweetness against salt.

That is why some classics remain undefeated. Fried pickles are not profound food, but they are excellent table food. The same goes for hush puppies. They are hot, savory, comforting, and sturdy enough to survive a few rounds of passing. By contrast, an elegant composed salad with a fragile garnish may be delicious, but it is rarely the first thing that gets a group excited.

There is also the matter of rhythm. At a Southern restaurant, starters should wake up the palate without exhausting it. Richness is welcome, but too much of it too early can flatten the rest of the meal. I have seen tables order cheese dip, fried shrimp, loaded potato skins, and bacon-wrapped something before a heavy dinner. The first ten minutes are joyful. The next hour feels like work. The best opening spread has contrast built into it.

Fried green tomatoes still earn their place

There is a reason fried green tomatoes appear on so many Southern menus, and it is not nostalgia alone. They offer nearly everything you want from a shared appetizer. The green tomato itself brings acidity and structure. The coating provides crunch. Most kitchens pair them with a remoulade, comeback sauce, pimento cheese, goat cheese, or a drizzle of hot honey, each one adding richness that the tomato can stand up to.

When this dish is done well, the slices are thick enough to stay juicy but not so thick that the center turns watery. The breading should cling closely instead of shattering off in sheets. That sounds like a small point, but it matters at the table. A loose crust leaves crumbs everywhere and separates from the tomato after the first cut. You want a bite that holds together on a fork.

The strongest versions also resist the temptation to bury the tomatoes under too many toppings. A little crab salad or a spoonful of pimento cheese can be excellent. A tower of greens, bacon jam, and three sauces usually turns a straightforward appetizer into a balancing act. Shared starters need some restraint. They should invite the second and third bite, not demand strategic planning.

Pimento cheese belongs near the top of the order

Few starters announce “Southern restaurant” more clearly than pimento cheese, and few are as reliable for groups. It is familiar enough for cautious eaters, satisfying enough for serious appetites, and versatile enough to show a kitchen’s personality. Some houses keep it classic, with sharp cheddar, mayonnaise, pimentos, and a restrained hand with seasoning. Others push it toward heat with jalapeño or toward depth with smoked gouda, paprika, or roasted garlic.

The vessel matters as much as the spread. Pimento cheese served with saltines can be charming if the cheese is exceptional. Served with warm benne crackers, toasted baguette, celery, pickled vegetables, or grilled bread, it becomes a more complete first course. At one restaurant, I was served pimento cheese with fried saltines, still

blistered from the fryer and dusted lightly with cayenne. That one small choice made the dish feel far more thoughtful.

For sharing, pimento cheese works because people can approach it at their own pace. It fills the gap while everyone settles in and studies the menu. It also pairs well with nearly every other starter on the table. Fried okra, deviled eggs, smoked fish dip, and country ham biscuits all make sense next to it. That flexibility is valuable, especially with larger groups where you need one dependable crowd-pleaser.

Deviled eggs reveal the kitchen's discipline

Deviled eggs are easy to underestimate. They seem simple, almost too simple, but they expose technique fast. Overcooked whites turn rubbery. Underseasoned yolk filling tastes flat. Overloaded toppings can make the whole thing messy and one-note. Yet when a Southern restaurant gets deviled eggs right, they are one of the smartest starters on the menu.

A proper deviled egg should be cool, creamy, and bright, with enough acid to keep the richness in check. Mustard helps. Pickle brine can help. A little hot sauce often does more than people expect. Toppings should sharpen the egg, not dominate it. Crispy country ham, smoked trout, fried oyster crumbs, chives, or paprika all make sense. A mountain of sweet relish usually does not.

There is one practical caveat. Deviled eggs are best for small to medium groups unless the portion is generous. Four halves vanish quickly among five or six people. If you are ordering for a larger table, either double up or treat them as a specialty item rather than the anchor of the spread. They are a complement, not always the main attraction.

Hush puppies and biscuits, the warm welcome

Bread starters can be either a generous opener or a trap. The difference comes down to quality and timing. Hush puppies and biscuits are among the best Southern starters to share because they offer immediate comfort and encourage everyone to settle in. They also carry house-made butters, jams, pepper jelly, whipped honey, or cane syrup beautifully.

Hush puppies should have a crisp shell and a moist interior with some corn flavor still intact. Too many versions rely on sweetness to create personality. A better hush puppy tastes like cornmeal first, then onion, pepper, buttermilk, or seasoning. If the restaurant serves them with whipped sorghum butter or a tart remoulade, even better. That sweet-savory contrast is exactly what keeps the basket moving around the table.

Biscuits are trickier. Great biscuits are wonderful to share, but mediocre biscuits can take up too much stomach space too early. A dry biscuit with a cold pat of butter is just ballast. A properly made biscuit, though, with flaky layers and a soft interior, can be one of the meal's highlights. I tend to favor biscuits as a shared starter when the table is ordering lighter mains, such as fish, salad, or vegetables. If everyone is headed toward fried chicken and mac and cheese, a full bread service may be too much of a good thing.

Fried okra, fried pickles, and the case for snackable starters

Some appetizers perform best because they are easy to eat in motion, almost absentmindedly, while conversation flows. Fried okra and fried pickles sit firmly in that category. They may not seem glamorous, but they are often among the smartest orders for a mixed group. They satisfy quickly, they pair with drinks, and they do not monopolize the table.

Fried okra should be dry and crisp rather than greasy or clumpy. Whole pods can be excellent if cooked carefully, though sliced rounds often share more easily. The seasoning matters here. Salt alone is fine, but a little cayenne, black pepper, or garlic can lift the whole dish. I have had fried okra with lemon aioli that felt out of place, and I have had it with a simple buttermilk ranch that made perfect sense. Southern food does not always need reinventing. Sometimes it just needs accuracy.

Fried pickles have a narrower lane. Their acidity makes them especially useful when the rest of the table is ordering rich food. They cut through creamy dips, barbecue glazes, and anything cheese-heavy. Spears can be fun, but chips usually work better for groups because the ratio of coating to pickle is more consistent and they cool more evenly. A good ranch or comeback sauce on the side is enough. This is not a dish improved by five condiments.

Seafood starters often give you the clearest sense of place

At a coastal or Gulf-influenced Southern restaurant, seafood appetizers deserve special attention. They often reflect regional habits more closely than the mains do. Smoked fish dip, crab cakes, peel-and-eat shrimp, oyster stew shooters, and fried shrimp baskets all say something specific about where you are and what the kitchen values.

Crab cakes can be an excellent shared starter if they are crab-forward and lightly bound. The best ones break apart into chunks rather than mashing into a dense puck. If a restaurant serves two small crab cakes with a sharp rémoulade and a simple slaw, that is often enough for four people to sample before dinner. When they arrive buried under sweet sauce or heavy corn salsa, the crab tends to get lost.

Peel-and-eat shrimp may seem casual compared with composed starters, but they are one of the most convivial things you can order. People slow down, talk more, and engage with the food in a tactile way. The downside is practical. They require space, napkins, and a group willing to get a little messy. For a business dinner, maybe not. For friends on a weekend, absolutely.

Smoked fish dip is one of the more underrated options on Southern menus. Good versions are creamy without becoming paste-like, smoky without tasting harsh, and brightened with lemon, herbs, or hot sauce. Served with crackers, celery, pickles, or toast points, it offers richness with enough lift to keep the appetite alive. That balance is harder to achieve than it looks.

Why one cold item helps the whole table

When people think of Southern starters, they often gravitate to fried and baked dishes first. Fair enough. Southern food does those beautifully. But the smartest shared order is often a cold or acidic dish tucked among the heavier plates. Pickled shrimp, a plate of chow-chow and crackers, marinated vegetables, or a crisp wedge with buttermilk dressing can keep the meal from turning monotonous.

This is less about health than about pacing. If your table starts with pimento cheese, biscuits, and fried green tomatoes, a pickled or chilled item gives everyone relief between bites. It resets the palate. That is particularly important when cocktails are in the mix, since sweetness and alcohol can magnify richness.

One of the best appetizer combinations I have seen at a Southern restaurant paired hot crab dip with pickled shrimp and benne crackers. On paper it looked uneven. At the table it made complete sense. The creaminess of the dip needed the snap and brightness of the shrimp. People alternated between them without ever getting tired.

A few starters that are better than they sound

Certain menu items suffer from plain wording. “Cheese grits” or “corn dip” does not always excite people scanning a menu. But plain names can hide serious strengths. A skillet of baked grits with sausage and cheese, if served in a shareable format, can be deeply comforting and ideal for colder months. Corn dip, especially when charred corn brings sweetness and texture, can be more interesting than yet another generic queso.

Likewise, country ham biscuits may sound too small or too salty to justify ordering, but they often make excellent shared bites. The trick is proportion. Thick-cut salty ham inside a tender biscuit with a touch of pepper jelly or honey mustard creates one of the cleanest, most satisfying first bites in Southern cooking. If the kitchen cuts them into halves, they become even easier to pass around.

This is where local knowledge helps. At a neighborhood Southern restaurant, the item that sounds least flashy may be the one regulars order every time. Menus do not always advertise confidence. Sometimes the kitchen’s pride sits quietly between the headline dishes.

How to build a starter spread that actually works

If you are ordering for a group and want the table to feel generous rather than chaotic, a little structure helps.

- Start with one rich anchor, such as pimento cheese, crab dip, or biscuits with whipped butter.
- Add one fried favorite, often fried green tomatoes, okra, or pickles.
- Include one bright or chilled dish if the menu offers it, such as pickled shrimp or a crisp salad.
- Match quantity to the group, not to your enthusiasm. Two or three starters usually suit four people.
- Think past the appetizers. If entrées are heavy, keep the opening round lighter.

That pattern avoids the common mistake of ordering three versions of the same sensation. Crunchy and creamy are excellent, but not if every plate lands in the same register.

Drinks matter more than people think

The best starters at a Southern restaurant often become even better when matched to the right drink. This is not about fussy pairing language. It is about managing richness and heat. Fried foods love bubbles and acid. Pimento cheese welcomes a crisp beer, a dry sparkling wine, or a tart cocktail. Spicy deviled eggs do well with something cold and simple rather than sweet.

Sweet tea, for all its charm, can sometimes be too sugary with a full appetizer spread. If the table is starting with salty country ham biscuits and fried green tomatoes with hot honey, unsweet tea or sparkling water may actually do a better job. Likewise, a bourbon-forward cocktail before a heavy Southern meal can be lovely, but it may overwhelm delicate starters like smoked fish dip or pickled shrimp.

The best pairings are usually practical ones. A lager with fried okra. A gin and tonic with crab cake. Sparkling water with a lemon wedge beside a basket of hush puppies and a rich dip. No drama required.

Ordering with the table in mind

Every group has its own habits. Some tables attack appetizers the second they arrive. Others nibble politely until someone breaks the Southern restaurant tension. That affects what you should order. Messy, tactile starters work best with relaxed company. Delicate, plated items make more sense for quieter meals. Portion size also varies

wildly by restaurant. A “starter” at one place may feed two, while the same category at another can cover six people comfortably.

When I am unfamiliar with a Southern restaurant, I look for clues in the menu language and the room itself. If there are several biscuit options, the bread program is probably serious. If the server mentions that the smoked trout dip is made in-house, I pay attention. If every table seems to have fried green tomatoes, that may be popularity, or it may simply be the safest bet. Either way, it is useful information.

Here are a few signs that a starter deserves your attention:

- It highlights one ingredient clearly rather than stacking on distractions.
- The server describes it with confidence and specifics.
- It is easy to divide without losing its character.
- It balances the rest of what your group plans to eat.
- It reflects something regional or house-made.

None of this guarantees a perfect order, of course. Menus are full of surprises. But these cues improve the odds.

The starters people remember

Ask diners what they remember from a satisfying meal at a Southern restaurant, and they often mention the first things that hit the table. Not the technically hardest dish, not the most expensive entrée, but the biscuits that arrived steaming in a cloth-lined basket, or the deviled eggs topped with crisp ham, or the fried green tomatoes everyone kept reaching for after insisting they were full.

That makes sense. Starters set memory in motion. They create the first shared reaction and the first comparison, the first “you need to try this.” Southern food thrives in that exchange. The best appetizers are not just tasty, they are generous in spirit. They invite participation. They make a table feel like a table rather than a collection of separate orders.

So if you are deciding what to share, lean toward dishes with texture, balance, and a sense of place. Trust the classics when the kitchen treats them seriously. Give yourself one indulgent choice, one bright counterpoint, and enough room for the meal ahead. At a good Southern restaurant, the opening plates should sharpen your appetite, not finish the job. When they do that well, the rest of dinner tends to follow.

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FAQ About southern restaurant

Where to eat in downtown Pittsburgh?

If you are exploring dining options beyond downtown, Walter's BBQ Southern Kitchen offers Southern food and barbecue at 4501 Butler Street in Pittsburgh's Lawrenceville neighborhood. It is outside downtown, so allow travel time when planning your visit.

What is a must eat in Pittsburgh?

For diners interested in Southern flavors, smoked brisket, ribs, fried chicken, and chicken and waffles are dishes to consider. Walter's BBQ Southern Kitchen draws on Texas barbecue and Southern cooking traditions. Check the current menu for the dishes available during your visit.

What are some of Pittsburgh's unique restaurants?

Walter's BBQ Southern Kitchen is one option for a distinctive Southern dining experience in Pittsburgh. Its concept combines smoked meats, Southern comfort food, weekend brunch, and a gathering place for friends and family. The restaurant is located on Butler Street in Lawrenceville.