



# LAUREL MISSISSIPPI

*By Caroline Eubanks*

**B**efore the 2016 premiere of HGTV's *Home Town*, much of America had never heard of Laurel, Mississippi in the southeastern part of the Magnolia State. It had thrived under its pine lumber, railroad and oil industries until the economy changed in the 20th century. The town was like so many others in the country, suffering from an economic downturn with storefronts and businesses shuttering and population loss.

While the intention of Ben and Erin Napier's show was to restore the charming houses around their hometown, the show had another effect: it brought business and people back to downtown. Locals supported small businesses, as did the visitors that have flocked to Laurel in the past few years. On any given day, you can see tourists snapping photos of where the Napiers have been. The couple has since done a "takeover" of another small town, revitalizing Wetumpka, Alabama, a river town near Montgomery.

## **Must-See Attractions**

If you only have time for one stop, make it Laurel Mercantile, the Napier's storefront that sells curated goods like Ben's own line of coffee, Erin's candles and copies of their book. It's the perfect spot for a souvenir!





A few blocks away is The Scotsman General Store, which is attached to Ben's workshop in the old train depot. The store is stocked with snacks like popsicles along with gifts like bandanas for your four-legged friends. There's also a glass window into the workshop where you might see the show being filmed! Lott Furniture Company is another local merchant, open since 1917.

Erin finds inspiration at the Lauren Rogers Museum of Art, which opened in 1923 in a Georgian Revival building with metal columns forged locally. The collection includes works from all over the globe, including rare Native American baskets and first edition books by Mississippi native William Faulkner. But that's not the only place to see Laurel's artists. Murals can be found throughout downtown, including the "Welcome to Laurel" mural designed by Erin Napier and another proclaiming "Laurel Looks Good on You."

Another spot to visit is Landrum's Homestead & Village, a preserved 1800s farm, set on 30 acres with

over 85 intact buildings. The living history museum has been open since 1984, where visitors can learn about early life in Jones County. The homestead also hosts seasonal events and a holiday market.

### Where to Eat

In the South, you're never far from a good meal and that certainly applies to Laurel. Despite its relatively small size, with under 20,000 residents, Laurel has a number of locally-owned restaurants. Bird Dog Cafe is a favorite of residents and visitors, featured as a design project in the fourth season of *Home Town*. By day, enjoy coffee and sandwiches in the cozy space filled with reclaimed wood and local artwork. By night, the cafe serves cocktails and hosts live music.

Pearl's Diner is another spot featured on the show. The old-school eatery is open on weekdays for lunch, including hearty meat-and-three options. Fried chicken and collard greens are popular options, finished with the signature Kool Aid Pie for dessert.

Open since 1948, Phillips Drive-In claims to have one of America's best burgers. Decide for yourself at this popular spot, which originated as a Dairy Queen before it was taken over by a local family. If you want a taste of New Orleans, visit Cafe la Fleur. The Cajun-inspired menu includes dishes like boudin balls, seafood gumbo and po boys. They also have pasta and burgers.

### Nearby Shopping

If you haven't yet gotten your fill of shopping in Laurel, the towns nearby have even more to choose from. Hattiesburg is a 30-minute drive south and is home to The Lucky Rabbit, a quirky shop featured on the show.







You'll find salvaged signs from restaurants, offbeat gifts, antiques and pop culture pop-up rooms. They've previously transformed spaces modeled after *Schitt's Creek*, *Stranger Things* and *Home Alone*.

Also in Hattiesburg is T-Bones Records & Café where you can find students from the University of Southern Mississippi doing homework over coffee as well as a selection of new and used vinyl and CDs.

The Carpenter Bros Emporium of Wonderful Whatnots & Hole In The Wall Food Joint in Ellisville is equal parts flea market and restaurant, with everything from clothing to books to kitschy artwork. Laurel, and its neighboring towns, is the perfect place to discover the appeals of small-town life and what can happen when communities come together.

#### Local Campgrounds

- Sleepy Hollow RV Park, Laurel (RV and tent sites, cabins) [rvparklaurel.com](http://rvparklaurel.com)
- Big Creek Park, Soso (RV and tent campsites, cabins) [phwd.netl](http://phwd.netl)
- Hattiesburg KOA, Hattiesburg (RV and tent campsites, cabins) [koa.com/campgrounds](http://koa.com/campgrounds)
- Turkey Fork RMA, Richton (RV and tent sites) [fs.usda.gov](http://fs.usda.gov)

