



City Guide Atlanta/ Buford Highway

In June of 2010, participants on an SFA Field Trip explored Buford Highway, Atlanta's multicultural corridor.

Immediately below, read a short paper on Buford Highway as idea and reality, given by Tore Olsson of the University of Georgia.

Beginning on page 6 of this document, peruse the roster of Chinese, Korean, Columbian, Mexican and other restaurants we visited on our Sherpa Tours.

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Tore Olsson
A Short History of Buford Highway
Southern Foodways Alliance

Atlanta has always been a city obsessed with image and status, from its founding to the present day, and it has received countless makeovers. At first, Atlanta was a railroad boomtown in the old Indian country of north Georgia. Then, after its destruction in the Civil War and later rebirth, Atlanta's leaders cast the city as the symbolic capital of the "New South" – an industry-minded and forward-looking South that sought cooperation, not conflict, with the North. Then, nearly a century later, in the midst of the black civil rights movement, Atlanta posed as the South's voice of moderation and tolerance – "the city too busy to hate" defined itself in sharp opposition to the Birmingham and Albanys of the South. But then a decade later, as it became apparent that racial inequality and hostility hadn't magically disappeared from Atlanta, city leaders sought a new, more colorblind image: the "international city," or, the "global city." By 1996, when Atlanta hosted the Summer Olympics, it seemed that what were once empty slogans had actually become closer to reality than myth. But what had truly made Atlanta a cosmopolitan, global, international city? If we listen to the boosters, we'll hear about the Olympics, about the airport, about the foreign corporations with offices downtown. But apart from these top-down forms of globalization, a very different sort of change has also come to Atlanta, and the larger South, in the past thirty years – a change symbolized best by the very street we are going to explore today – Buford Highway.

I first visited Buford Highway in 2005, when I came to Georgia to begin work on a history Ph. D. As an immigrant myself, being born and raised in Sweden, I decided to

study migration history first, and was quickly told that if I wanted to understand recent immigration to Georgia, I'd have to visit the Buford Highway Corridor. Now having spent much of my childhood in Boston, an old immigrant city, I assumed that Atlanta must somewhat resemble that model – bounded, ethnic communities segregated from but located close to the city's business center. As you might guess, I was first confused and then surprised by what Buford Highway presented. Instead of seeing Chinatowns and Little Italys, I saw a vast, messy, and hopelessly complex grid of Mexican, Korean, and Vietnamese groceries and restaurants – to only name a few of the nationalities that populate the highway's many strip malls and shopping centers. And not only was everything mixed together, but this epicenter of multicultural Atlanta was nowhere near downtown – this was nearly suburban, more than ten miles away from Five Points. As I first saw, smelled, heard, and of course tasted Buford Highway, I realized I had found a very unique place – a place joining both the past and the future, the South and the globe.

Today, I want to briefly talk about the history of that place, to help you understand how it came to look, smell, sound, and taste as it does today. For if you were to assume that the Buford Highway of today resembled that of thirty years ago, you would be very wrong. After all, it was as recently as 1974 that the local southern rock band Atlanta Rhythm Section recorded their first hit single titled “Doraville” – a somewhat cheesy ode to their hometown of the same name, where we're sitting today, and today also one of the central immigrant hubs along Buford Highway. But not back then. “A touch of country in the city,” they sang of Doraville in 1974, with “red clay hills” and “rednecks drinking wine on Sunday.” It's not that they forgot to mention the Cambodian groceries in town – those places simply didn't exist in 1974. It's how they got there that I want to explore today.

Let me begin with a word or two concerning geography, and explain what I mean when I say “Buford Highway” or the “Buford Highway Corridor.” Buford Highway is actually a very long road, about thirty miles long, beginning near Lindbergh Center in Buckhead and running northeast deep into Gwinnett County. When I discuss Buford Highway today, however, I won't be referring to the entire road but to the section located in northern Dekalb County that became home to the hundreds of immigrant-owned businesses that made it famous – particularly the stretch near Interstate 285, Atlanta's perimeter, running through the key cities of Chamblee and Doraville, in Dekalb County.

Let's begin our story in the years after World War II, when Atlanta began to dramatically expand in size. The Atlanta of 1950 was a profoundly different city from today. While it was certainly a diverse place, it was a city of white folks and black folks – and very few immigrants. Unlike other parts of the northern and western United States, the South had not been a major destination for immigrants arriving to the country in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. While a handful of Greek, Jewish, and Italian immigrants had settled in Atlanta, they lived close to the city's center, and had integrated quickly into the city's white mainstream. Now out in Chamblee and Doraville, many miles from downtown, the population was even more homogenous. Unlike southern Dekalb County, which was home to a growing black middle class, northern Dekalb was a predominantly white, working-class suburb. In fact, much of Atlanta's postwar industrial expansion had been located in this region – General Motors opened its Doraville Assembly plant in 1947, becoming the largest employer in northern Dekalb. For quite some time in the 1950s and '60s, Chamblee and Doraville were thriving cities

that provided decent jobs and affordable housing, far away enough from Atlanta to provide “a touch of country in the city,” as the Atlanta Rhythm Section sang, but close enough to get the higher wages and urban excitement that the city provided.

Much of that would change during the 1970s. As more and more white Atlanta residents fled the city for distant suburbs far outside of the 285 perimeter, northern Dekalb began to look more like a part of Atlanta than ever before. Additionally, as a product of the oil crisis and industrial decline of the 1970s, GM and other large employers in the area began cutting jobs. Many residents responded by leaving northern Dekalb – both Chamblee and Doraville lost nearly twenty percent of their population during the ‘70s. Many houses, apartments, and storefronts were vacant for years, especially along Buford Highway, but soon a small trickle of new residents began to arrive with little fanfare – particularly a new class of professional, middle-class immigrants from Latin America and Asia. If we’re looking for milestones in the making of Buford Highway, 1976 might be one such moment – the year that the Havana Sandwich Shop opened, probably the first “ethnic” restaurant to open its doors on Buford Highway.

But when I say this was a trickle of newcomers in the ‘70s – I really mean it, especially compared to the flood that would come later. The 1980s was truly the turning point in Buford Highway’s history, when a sort of “perfect storm” of both global and very local factors came together to remake northern Dekalb County. Let’s start on the international level. Mexico, for one, underwent a disastrous economic crisis in the early 1980s, as foreign debt and oil speculation shattered the peso and destroyed the livelihoods of millions of Mexicans, many of whom now looked to the United States as the only alternative for survival. In Southeast Asia, on the other side of the globe, repressive regimes spawned millions of refugees, especially in Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam. And then in 1986, the US reformed its immigration and refugee laws, militarizing the border with Mexico to discourage undocumented migration, but in doing so, effectively encouraged permanent settlement in the US rather than the seasonal back-and-forth movement that had been so common before. Finally, the regions where Asian and Latin American immigrants had traditionally settled in the US – in California and Texas – also suffered an economic downturn, so bad that arriving immigrants began to look to new destinations. One such destination was Atlanta, booming once again in the 1980s as northern jobs and industry migrated south to the “Sunbelt.”

When arriving to Atlanta in the 1980s, immigrants quickly sought neighborhoods that offered low-cost housing, access to transportation, and proximity to jobs. The Buford Highway Corridor seemed to offer all of these. In the vacant duplexes and apartments that once housed GM workers, immigrants from all over the globe found new homes. With the extension of MARTA, Atlanta’s rapid transit rail system, into Chamblee and Doraville during the 1980s, residents could now easily and cheaply navigate the central city. But even more important was Buford Highway’s proximity to the booming suburbs of Cobb and Gwinnett County, where most of the construction and landscaping work was located. With the demand for immigrant labor being in the northern suburbs rather than downtown, settling in Chamblee and Doraville made economic sense.

But the arriving immigrants were much more than just workers, of course – they were human beings who brought with them new languages, cultures, and maybe most

interesting to us - foodways to the region. To ease the painful transition of settling in a city that had no established ethnic communities, immigrants sought familiar foods and environments, trying to recreate the worlds they had known. For many immigrant entrepreneurs, this became a thriving business, and the once bleak and vacant strip malls along Buford Highway underwent a sort of renaissance in the 1980s. Slowly at first, but more and more commonly, native-born landlords and developers began leasing and even selling store space to immigrant grocers and restaurateurs. For the first time in nearly twenty years, the Buford Highway corridor was thriving and bustling with new life. But this was no traditional, ethnically insular immigrant neighborhood – this chaotic, semi-urban, multicultural strip mall explosion was in its own strange way unique to the South.

What had begun as a quiet revolution earlier in the decade was by 1990 simply impossible to ignore – and this is especially clear in quickly looking at some census figures. In Chamblee, for example, the city's population had been 92% white in 1980. Ten years later, that number had plunged to 56%, while the city's Latino population had increased from 3 to 23% in the same time period. But while landlords and many employers celebrated the revitalization of northern Dekalb, other, older residents were more hesitant to embrace the change. Chamblee mayor Johnson Brown, for example, explained to the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* in 1992 that he understood why his grown children had decided to move away from Chamblee – “I don't think they will find here what they grew up with – it's not like what Chamblee used to be.” Tensions flared again in 1992 when a homeowners' association near Buford Highway demanded that immigrant day labor pools be banned, arguing that “this is our city, not theirs and the City [Government] of Chamblee has surrendered this part of town to them.” But perhaps most galling to many newcomers, the local government and administration in Chamblee and Doraville had changed little to reflect the new population, and bilingual teachers, clerks, or police officers were almost nonexistent.

The 1996 Olympics would represent a major turning point in Atlanta's globalization, both in its massive demand for labor and resulting migration surge, but also in how native residents came to view their newest neighbors. With the eyes of the world on Atlanta in the mid-90s, progressive voices across the city began to drown out conservative laments over a lost past. After its debacles in 1992 and 1993, Chamblee actually recovered to become the most aggressive city in seeking compromises and resolutions between its new and old residents. Chamblee planners proposed the “International Village,” a massive development project that would beautify Buford Highway and celebrate, rather than vilify, its newly multicultural status. The project garnered lots of support in Chamblee, but its planners ran aground when they proposed its extension into neighboring Doraville – where a more conservative city council stopped the plan in its tracks. “Why would we want to attract more immigrants when we got all we want?” asked Doraville mayor Lamar Lang to the press. “That's just not our way of life here,” agreed the city council. “We're basically Baptists and Methodists and Presbyterians.”

But despite their posturing, Doraville, just like Chamblee and other surrounding cities, continued its demographic transformation throughout the 1990s and into the new century. By 2000, nearly 65% of Chamblee's population was foreign-born, and 45% of Doraville's. Hundreds of immigrant-owned businesses lined Buford Highway, catering both to recent arrivals and native black and white southerners. Of course, Buford today is

not exactly what it was ten years ago – some things have changed. The xenophobia that followed the September 11th attacks has fueled hostility towards newcomers, as did the economic downturn of 2007 & 8. Housing speculation and gentrification projects also drove up prices in some areas of Buford Highway, forcing out many working-class immigrants. And many successful immigrant entrepreneurs also left the area after establishing themselves, moving out to Gwinnett, Cobb, Cherokee and surrounding counties, hoping to own their own homes and escape Buford’s chaotic bustle, often taking their businesses with them into the suburbs.

But Buford Highway remains, thankfully. Its continued existence is a testament to a transformed Atlanta, a living, breathing museum whose admission fee is affordably low, but whose gift shop and food court are the real attractions. To me, Buford Highway is reminiscent of Sweet Auburn, the historic black business district of central Atlanta, at the peak of its importance and vitality. Buford Highway also reminds me that Atlanta’s historic success has always laid in its adaptability, and of its citizens’ ability to humanize the often hollow and empty slogans dreamed up by its boosters and politicians. Atlanta the “international city” was not born in a corporate boardroom or public relations office downtown, but in a kitchen on Buford Highway, in a Mexican, Korean, or Vietnamese restaurant built on those same “red clay hills” that the Atlanta Rhythm Section memorialized in their 1974 ode to Doraville. When we taste Buford Highway this weekend, I’m hoping that some of that history, a history both difficult and optimistic, will emerge in its many flavors.

Buford Highway Sherpa Tours

Chinese

Royal China

3295 Chamblee Dunwoody Rd. Chamblee, GA 30341 770-216-9933 At this dim sum house, just off Buford Highway, SFA likes the Peking duck buns made with hoisin-slicked duck.

Canton House

4825 Buford Hwy. Chamblee, GA 30341 770-936-9030 Dim sum all day every day plus a Cantonese menu. Sea cucumbers have their own section. When you see the enormous chandelier, you'll think Liberace was an investor.

Wan Lai

4897 Buford Hwy., Ste.104 Chamblee, GA 30341 678-530-0633 Cantonese standouts include garlic fried chicken, three-dumpling soup, and a casserole of preserved bacon and mustard greens.

Northern China Eatery

5141 Buford Hwy., Ste. C Doraville, GA 30340 770-458-2282 At this basement Beijing clubhouse, fennel dumplings, pickled seaweed, rou jia mo, also known as hot meat sandwich, and cha siu bao will make you very happy.

Korean

Han Il Kwan

5458 Buford Hwy. Doraville, GA 30340 770-457-3217 A broad spectrum of impeccable traditional dishes, including crisp seafood pancakes and Korean barbecue, particularly a thinly sliced brisket called "bread skin."

Chosun Ok

5865 Buford Hwy. NE Doraville, GA 30340 770-452-1821 The barbecue here is charcoal-fired. And it's served with a generous assortment of banchan, those small saucers of pickles and such that make Korean dining so cool.

Cho Dang Tofu House

5907 Buford Hwy. NE Doraville, GA 30340 770-220-0667 Eleven of the 13 menu items are tofu stew. They vary only by their add-ins and by the level of spiciness you desire, ranging from chili-free "white" to thermonuclear.

Woo Nam Jeong Stone Bowl House

Seoul Plaza 5953 Buford Hwy. #107 Doraville, GA 30340 678-530-0844 Scrape the bottom of the bibimbap bowl to get the crunchy rice bits. Finish with soonjungwa, a cold tea with ginger, cinnamon, honey, pine nuts, and dried persimmon.

Vietnamese

Lee's Bakery

4005 Buford Hwy. NW Atlanta, GA 30345 404-728-1008 Get a bowl of pho, the famed beef noodle soup. Douse it with Sriracha. For dessert, a Vietnamese po-boy with everything, including fried egg.

Château de Saigòn

4300 Buford Hwy. Atlanta, GA 30341 404-929-0034 Beef rolled in betel leaves, grilled on charcoal, and presented with translucent rounds of rice paper, a bunch of fresh herbs, lettuce, and a dipping sauce with crushed peanuts.

Crawfish Shack

4337 Buford Hwy. Ste. 170 Atlanta, GA 30341 404-929-6789 Vietnamese seafood by way of

Louisiana. Or Louisiana seafood by way of Vietnam. You decide, while eating lemongrass-boiled shrimp.

Quoc Huong Banh Mi Fast Food

5150 Buford Hwy. NE Atlanta, GA 30340 770-936-0605 Grab and go Vietnamese po-boys. Standouts are the barbecue pork, bahn mi thit heo nuong (regular ol' pork) and bahn mi ga (chicken).

Hispanic

La Casona Taqueria Y Billares

3820 Stewart Rd. Doraville, GA 30340 770-458-6657 Bandeja, a thinly sliced steak, topped with pork skin, fried egg, beans, rice, an avocado wedge, and yucca. Juices and shakes to drink. And, yes, pool tables.

Rincon Latino

5055 Buford Hwy. Doraville, GA 30340 770-936-8181 Think fried chicken and cornbread. Eat Salvadoran fried chicken and papusas revueltas, stuffed with white cheese and pork.

Supermercado Chicago

5263 Buford Hwy. NW Doraville, GA 30340 770-452-1361 The dining counter is in rear of the store. There's no menu, but you can view your meat choices from the counter. The name references Chicago as a Mexican center in America.

La Churreria

5730 Buford Hwy. Norcross, GA 30071 678-646-0421 At this Columbian bakery, try puffy pan de bono, beef and tater empanadas, and churros rellenos. The latter, in case you're wondering, translate as stick donuts.

BBQ

El Norteño Mexican Restaurant

4929 Buford Hwy. Atlanta, GA 30341 678-209-4601 The smokehouse is out back. You'll smell the place before you see it. We mean that in the best way. Smoky grilled chicken is the thing. Rice and beans to round out the plate.

Ming's BBQ

5150 Buford Hwy. NE Doraville, GA 30340 770-451-6985 They leave their bbq hanging for all to see. That's Chinese bbq, as in lacquered pork roast, soy sauce chicken, mahogany roast duck. Try a cruller bun too.

Hae Woon Dae

5805 Buford Hwy. Doraville, GA 30340 770-458-6999 Try bites of bulgogi (wafer-thin rib eye), kalbi (short ribs), or spicy squid, all grilled table top. To cleanse your palate, we eat pickles and salads and such.

Chosun Ok

5865 Buford Hwy. NE Doraville, GA 30340 770-452-1821 As traditional as Korean bbq gets. And then there's the haemul (seafood) paejon (pancake), and banchan (side veggie dishes.)

Soups

Machu Picchu

Northeast Plaza 3375-1130 Buford Hwy. Atlanta, GA 30329 404-320-3226 Best bets include sopa de choros, a warm mussel broth, or sopa minuta, homemade soup with noodles, milk and egg, and a side of papa a la huancaína.

Pho Dai Loi Restaurant II

4186 Buford Hwy NE # G, Atlanta, GA 30345 404-633-2111 They make stellar pho. Ditto the beef stew in a broth flavored with cinnamon, lemongrass and curry. To drink, bubble tea.

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Penang

4897 Buford Hwy. Ste. 113 Chamblee, GA 30341 770-220-0308 Malaysian cuisine is a faux-village setting. Try the roti, flat-bread with curry soup dipping sauce, and rending, beef stewed in coconut milk.

So Kong Dong

5280 Buford Hwy. NE Doraville, GA 30340 678-205-0555 Know for soondubu, a Korean tofu hot soup into which you crack a raw egg. Might as well try the kalbi, grilled beef short ribs, too.

Rice and Noodles**Tempo Doeloe Indonesian Food**

5090 Buford Hwy. NW Doraville, GA 30340 770-455-4067 Expect rendang, rice, noodles, and other Indonesian favorites. Did we mention the Javanese fried chicken? We know that's not a noodle dish, but we can't help ourselves.

Chef Liu

5221 Buford Hwy. Doraville, GA 30340 770-936-0532 Shanghainese soup dumplings that burst with broth when you bite. And cool sesame noodles, slick and oily and calming, the perfect bite on a hot June afternoon.

Man Chun Hong

5953 Buford Hwy. NE Doraville, GA 30340 770-454-5640 The staff speaks Mandarin, Cantonese, Korean, and Southern. Try the peppercorn grouper with noodles or the spicy Szechuan noodles.

The Nasty Bits**Carnitas Michoacan**

4166 Buford Hwy. Atlanta, GA 30345 404-389-0928 Pig's head meat. Stewed beef cheeks. Pig uterus rolled into a taco or burrito. Not willing to go that far? They stir a fine horchata, too.

Bo Bo Garden

5181 Buford Hwy., Pinetree Plaza Doraville, GA 30340 678-547-1881 Spleen, beef tendon, and tripe in a brown sauce in a clay casserole. Jellied pig's foot. Fish, scooped from the tank, clobbered, and sautéed tableside with tofu and brown sauce.

Taqueria El Rey Del Taco

5288 Buford Hwy. NE Doraville, GA 30340 770-986-0032 A 24-hour palace of a taco joint, serving tongue tacos, beef cheek tacos, pork stomach tacos, and lots of other stuff that's less challenging. The smoked chipotle salsa rocks.

Mirak

7130 Buford Hwy. Ste. B-150 Doraville, GA 30340 770-807-7249 Korean food for the most adventuresome palate. Try the sundae, a Korean blood and rice sausage that's comparable to Cajun Country's boudin noir.