

# Returning to the Smokies after a deadly wildfire

By KRISTIN M. HALL  
Associated Press

GATLINBURG, Tennessee — When Dolly Parton dreamed up the idea of an amusement park in East Tennessee, she said it would be “a fantasy city, a Smoky Mountain fairyland.”

Over the next three decades, Dollywood became the state’s biggest ticketed attraction, with nearly 2.5 million visitors annually. Tourism in Pigeon Forge, where Dollywood is located, regularly brings in \$1 billion a year in revenue. Nearby Great Smoky Mountains National Park is a massive draw, too, with a record 11.3 million visitors last year.

But a deadly wildfire last November scorched a path through the park and surrounding Sevier County, threatening to disrupt the only industry the region has: tourism. Gale force winds spread the fire in a wild, erratic path for 24 hours. Fourteen people died. More than 2,400 structures were damaged or destroyed.

Images and news of families fleeing the wildfires were terrifying. Growing up in Tennessee, I was one of those millions who’d vacationed all my life in the Smokies and at Dollywood. When I was sent to Gatlinburg last year to report on the aftermath of the fire, I worried that many of the sites of my favorite childhood memories had gone up in smoke.

But while tourism took a hit, Dollywood and Pigeon Forge, along with most of downtown Gatlinburg, were mostly unaffected. And in late May, six months after the fire and just before the start of the busy summer season, I returned for another visit.

This time, I went as a parent, bringing my own daughter to make new memories.

My family rode the same roller coasters and water rides my brother and I rode as kids. We saw cowboys and cowgirls at Dollywood’s Dixie Stampede show perform the same amazing tricks on their horses. Three generations of my family including my parents, my brother and his wife and his daughter, climbed aboard



In this May 20 photo, a new chairlift attraction is under construction in downtown Gatlinburg, Tenn. A deadly wildfire in November 2016 put a dent in the tourism industry there, but signs of growth are returning.



In this May 20 photo, a handmade sign stands in front of the fire-damaged Mountain Laurel Chalets.

Dollywood’s old steam train.

My 2-year-old daughter laid her head down on my lap as we chugged along slowly and I felt like time was standing still. My memories were merging with the ones forming in her young mind of a special moment we could share forever.

All around us there was music. Often it was Parton’s signature high-pitched voice warbling through the Dollywood sound system, or bluegrass or gospel from a stage. The whole region peddles

nostalgia, which felt both delightful and a bit staged — Dollywood workers dressed in plain gingham dresses or dirty coveralls, for example, the ostensible uniforms of mountain folk.

In many ways, the Smokies tourism industry goes hand-in-hand with Parton’s famous brand of folksy charm and family friendly entertainment. I was heartened to see so much of what I remembered from my childhood 20 years ago. And I was also glad to see that despite the fire,



In this May 20 photo, Joe Guenther, owner of the Day Hiker store, checks out a customer in Gatlinburg, Tenn.

Gatlinburg was busy with tourists window shopping for T-shirts and hats, handmade candy, artwork and knick-knacks, like carved figurines of black bears.

But tourism officials say the blaze has created a perception problem. Tourism over the winter and spring was abnormally slow. At Aunt Mahalia’s candy store in Gatlinburg, for example, business is down about 30 percent, with noticeably fewer weekend customers, according to assistant

manager Scott Rowe.

Tourists “see those images, which are devastating and they think the whole mountains, Pigeon Forge and Gatlinburg are gone,” said Pigeon Forge tourism director Leon Downey.

The reality is that many tourist businesses, from go-kart parks and mini-golf to restaurants and theaters, were unscathed. And while hundreds of rental properties were damaged, plenty of cabins, hotels and other lodging are available.

Donna Schuster, visiting from Ashburn, Virginia, in late May, worried about what she’d find after seeing coverage of the fire, but was pleasantly surprised. “I really questioned whether we should come because of how devastating it looked on TV,” she said. “But they have really done a great job.”

Much of the burned debris has been removed, leaving only concrete pads where houses or buildings once stood. Foliage is returning to the trees. New construction is ongoing in downtown Gatlinburg, where a seven-story Margaritaville resort is rising and a new attraction called Anakeesta is being built to give tourists an aerial view as they climb into the mountains.

Joe Guenther, owner of the Day Hiker, a hiking supply store in Gatlinburg, estimates his business is down about 20 percent, but said the city’s tourism has dipped before in recession years or when gas prices were high. Day Hiker was closed for several days after the fire and some inventory had to be replaced because of smoke.

Many of Guenther’s customers ask about the status of the hiking trails in the Smokies or whether the fire has ruined the mountains’ scenic vistas. “Less than 10 percent of the park was affected, so there’s 900 miles of trails that are all there,” Guenther said.

An ad campaign has the tag line: “The place you love is still standing strong.”

Still, full economic recovery could take 18 months, according to Mark Adams, CEO of the Gatlinburg Convention and Visitors Bureau.

Meanwhile the region has one of pop culture’s best-known voices as its most prominent supporter. Parton has raised millions of dollars for fire victims through a star-studded telethon, as well as her own donations, and handed out monthly checks to people who lost their homes in the fire.

“We thank her daily for her support, because there’s definitely a halo effect,” Adams said. “Without Dolly, we would have an even tougher battle in recovery.”

## Keep cool with fresh fruit blended with ice

By MELISSA D’ARABIAN  
Associated Press

Balmy weather calls for ice-cold sweet treats; fruity drinks are a natural part of the summertime poolside landscape. But those drinks are often loaded with sugar, boasting 40 or more grams in even a reasonably-sized drink.

Worse, the “fruitiness” is often from flavored syrup instead of the actual fruit, which likely translates into high-fructose corn syrup and food dyes. Even “natural” frozen fruit drinks often have a bunch of added sugars. (Remember: White sugar is natural. It doesn’t mean your body needs a ton extra.)

The good news is that making your own fruity drinks is incredibly easy. I grew up in Tucson, Arizona, drinking “aguas frescas,” which translates into “fresh waters.” Mexican aguas frescas are made from fresh fruit blended or mashed into cold water and ice.

Living near the border, we would peel fragrant mangoes, and scoop the chunky sweet flesh into a blender with a cup of water, ice, a splash of lime juice and (yep!) a little sugar and we’d blend into a slushy treat that defined hot Arizona summers for me.

Now that I have four daughters of my own, I whip up my updated version of the agua fresca of my childhood. I blend up a cup of almost any summer fruit cut into cubes — I love cantaloupe, mango or strawberries — with a cup of cold water, a cup of ice, and the secret to a great icy texture: a cup of frozen watermelon cubes.

The frozen watermelon blends up icy and thick, and gives the drink body that doesn’t melt away as quickly as ice. And, the blended frozen watermelon



Icy agua fresca.

Melissa d’Arabian via AP

### ICY AGUA FRESCA

**Servings:** 4  
**Start to finish:** 5 minutes

- 1 cup frozen seedless watermelon cubes (about 1-inch each)
- 1 cup strawberries, stemmed and halved (or other summer fruit, like mango or cantaloupe cubes)
- 1 cup ice-cold water
- 1 cup ice cubes
- ¼ cup freshly squeezed orange juice
- 2 tablespoons chopped fresh mint leaves (or other contrasting ingredient like blueberries, chopped cucumber, or basil)

Place the frozen watermelon, the strawberries, water, ice and orange juice in the blender and blend until almost smooth. Add the chopped mint leaves and blend just until mixed in, with visible flecks, about 10 seconds.

*Nutrition information per serving: 32 calories; 2 calories from fat; 0 g fat (0 g saturated; 0 g trans fats); 0 mg cholesterol; 1 mg sodium; 8 g carbohydrate; 1 g*

helps keep the agua fresca from separating while you sip. Plus, watermelon is refreshing, and mixes easily with all the other summer fruits, allowing them actually to be the star of the drink.

I skip the white sugar altogether, squeezing in a little orange juice instead of the traditional lime juice — it gives the drink just enough tang and a tiny touch of sweetness. (But, if you want to add a spoonful of sugar or

agave, you’ll still come out ahead of most overly-sweet prepared drink mixes.) My last agua fresca trick: Pick a contrasting-colored ingredient to add in the last 10 seconds of blending, so you get pretty flecks of color (and flavor), such as blueberries, mint or basil leaves or even chopped cucumber.

**Chef’s Note:** For a creamy treat, add a tablespoon of vanilla yogurt before blending.

## Salad that looks as good as it tastes

By KATIE WORKMAN  
Associated Press

There’s always a green salad with dinner in our house, usually the crunchier the better. If I told you how many hearts of romaine we go through in a week, you’d be unsettled.

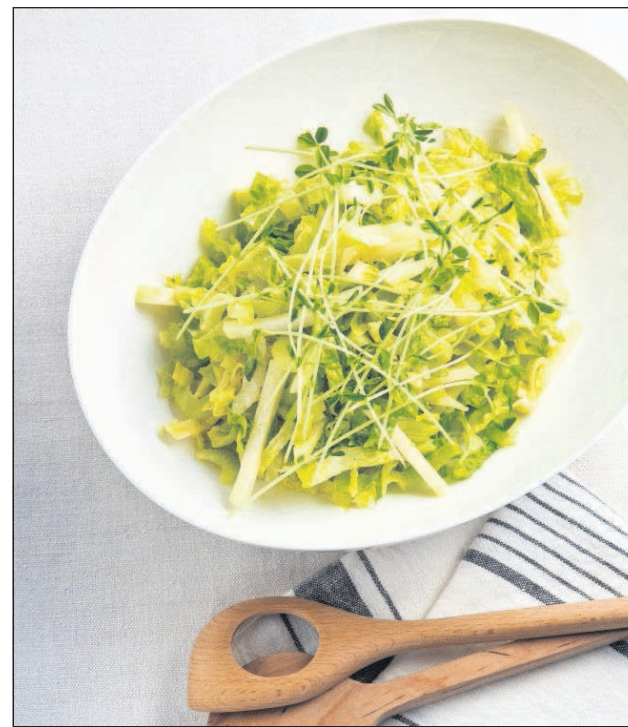
This salad, originally published in “Dinner Solved!”, is so heartbreakingly pretty that I always want people to come over just to admire it. And it’s not just easy on the eyes. It’s clean and vibrant and refreshing, and we can plow through the hugest bowl in a matter of minutes.

It came about because a few years back, I was writing an article about surprising salad add-ins, and I decided to list shredded or slivered raw kohlrabi as one of the possibilities. Then I said to myself, “You are so full of it; you’ve never done that in your whole life.” So I bought myself a kohlrabi and sliced it up, and really fell head over heels. It kind of reminded me of a daikon radish, crisp with just a hint of spiciness.

Peel the kohlrabi thoroughly with a sharp knife — the skin is too thick for a vegetable peeler to have much effect.

A handful of pea shoots on top of the salad adds a fresh sweet-pea-ness that’s lovely, but don’t skip the salad if pea shoots aren’t available.

*Katie Workman has written two cookbooks focused on easy, family-friendly cooking, “Dinner Solved!” and “The Mom 100 Cookbook.” She blogs at <http://www.themom100.com/about-katie-workman>*



Light green crunchy salad.

Todd Coleman via AP

### LIGHT GREEN CRUNCHY SALAD

**Serves** 6 as a side dish  
**Start to finish:** 15 minutes

- 1 small kohlrabi, trimmed and peeled (optional)
- 10 ribs celery
- 3 hearts romaine lettuce
- 3 tablespoons unseasoned rice vinegar
- 3 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil
- 2 tablespoons Dijon mustard
- Kosher or coarse salt and freshly ground black pepper, to taste
- 1 cup pea shoots (optional)

If using the kohlrabi, cut it into manageable chunks and then cut those chunks into thick planks, about ¼-inch thick. Then sliver up those planks into ¼-inch-thick matchsticks (known as a julienne cut). Don’t worry if the slivers aren’t neat and tidy.

Slice the celery crosswise very thinly, and then do the same with the hearts of romaine so that you have thin ribbons of lettuce. Place it all in a serving bowl, along with the kohlrabi.

Whisk together the rice vinegar, olive oil, mustard, and salt and pepper in a small bowl (or shake it in a small container with a lid). Toss the vegetables with the dressing and serve, topped with the pea shoots, if desired.

*Nutrition information per serving: 95 calories; 64 calories from fat; 7 g fat (1 g saturated; 0 g trans fats); 0 mg cholesterol; 301 mg sodium; 7 g carbohydrate; 3 g fiber; 3g sugar; 1 g protein.*