

WRITING & PHOTOGRAPHY PORTFOLIO

PUBLISHED WORK
BY EMMA SIMMONS



FOOD & DRINK



ON THE FIG TREE

Don't mind Chef Jon Holland's brazen persona. His memory-infused dishes are nothing short of masterful.

BY EMMA SIMMONS

PHOTOS BY EMMA SIMMONS



Chef Jon Holland
plates his Fig Pig Pork.

He might be a punk rock kid going on 36, but Chef Jon Holland is also the “maw maw” many unenlightened Southern transplants never had. Even for locals, born ‘n’ bred, Southern meals aren’t the painstaking, all-day family affair they used to be. That’s why Holland infuses his memory-inspired dishes with that kind of food-is-love kitchen mentality at Fig Tree Café in Cahaba Heights.

“You’re either bringing those flavors back for people or introducing people who have never seen that food culture to those flavors. We have a very strong backbone on tradition,” Holland maintains.

His delicately plated Southern fare caters to everyday folk who won’t gripe about having to walk through a hair salon to reach his restaurant’s

restroom. He cares more that they savor every succulent slice of their first pasture-raised heritage pork than if the location or lighting suits their fancy. The slow nod and light-bulb eyes that customers get when they’re creating a new food memory is Holland’s driving force.

“I have the opportunity to provide something different for my guests, and it’s not economically friendly for me, but I’m proud to be that collateral damage. I’m not a stuff guy,” says Holland, gesturing to Exhibit A, his “crappy truck.”

Holland’s humbling attitude is ingrained in his DNA. While other youngsters were pushing away peas, his 4-year-old self was relishing every bite of his father’s mock-traditional Pad Thai. Holland enjoyed an anomaly of a childhood, replete with



Fig Tree Cafe's Diver Scallops



“I fell in love with organized chaos, but I knew that no matter what I did, I wanted to be successful. I wanted to be like my grandfather.”

-Chef Jon Holland



off-the-wall food experiences, fitting for a fledgling chef.

“This idealistic notion of what a chef’s childhood should be is what I lived, in just about every aspect,” he says.

The chef idolized his swanky grandfather, a “big Escoffier guy” with a soft spot for martinis, caviar and Julia Child. He raised Holland’s father in Thailand whilst teaching anatomy at a local university. Unsurprisingly, Holland’s father was determined to recreate the ethnic flavors of his childhood for his own son, whom he raised with Holland’s mother, a Delta Mississippi gal who was going to make sure you ate your gizzards whether you liked ‘em or not. Holland’s stepmother was also a fry cook to be reckoned with, but it was her mother, Maw Maw, who kept the family kitchen

running like a well-bacon-greased machine, with the help of Holland, her trusty bean-peeler.

This mélange of characters left behind a legacy that Holland has effortlessly fused into his melting pot of a cooking style. It’s the unexpected happy marriage of flavors that keeps Fig Tree regulars coming back for more.

“We constantly have this identity crisis, but to me, it’s not really a crisis,” Holland says. “We like being weird. We like surprising people. We wanna give you food quality that’s better than some of the nicest restaurants in the country.”

In September, it’ll have been 20 years since this unabashed high school dropout got his humble start, dishing out all-star breakfasts at a Waffle House in Atlanta.

“I was a horrible student, and that’s why I picked

Fig Pig Pork



ON THE MENU

Some Summertime Selections from Fig Tree Cafe

- Fried Green Tomatoes
- Crab Cakes
- Fried Crab Claws
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to be a chef, because I never had to grow up,” Holland admits, half-jokingly.

As the late Anthony Bourdain exposed in his eye-opening documentaries, a chef's life isn't for the faint of heart. It's all been the school of hard knocks for Vestavia Hills' culinary rebel. Holland held his own with the “hardcore hellcats” that prowl steakhouse kitchens, dodging fistfights on his way out the kitchen door and into a managerial role.

“I fell in love with organized chaos, but I knew that no matter what I did, I wanted to be successful. I wanted to be like my grandfather,” Holland reminisces.

Grandpa Holland's “never-correctly-sharpened” kitchen knife, though unused, is a deliberate

fixture in his grandson's kitchen. “It will not leave my kitchen, because it's a piece of him here. And that's important to me.”

Despite the myriad of influencers along the trajectory of Holland's career, he's not following in anyone's footsteps. He's not afraid to whip up a romesco “the wrong way,” because in his mind there's no such thing. Culinary preconceptions don't cloud this chef's creative process.

“Sometimes a dish is very off-the-beaten path. We never taste it and go, ‘Oh that's dead wrong,’ unless we burn it or over-salt it. It allows you to grow into it,” Holland explains.

When the time comes for the chef to crank out a new menu item, all it takes is about 20 minutes and a little bit of liquid courage, not that he needs



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it. He'll perfect a food concept he's acquainted with by way of tossing the rulebook aside.

"You come up with it, you roll with it, you look at every part of it, and you get it done. If you overthink it, you overcomplicate it," Holland says.

Whatever it is the famous New York chefs are doing, Holland couldn't say. Keeping up with the Joneses has never been his style. "I don't look at other cities, I don't look at other chefs, I don't care. I respect what Frank Stitt's doing, it's legit! But it's what Frank's doing. You do what you do, I'll do what I do."

It may be difficult to pinpoint exactly what it is that Holland's doing, but that's part of the magic, as it's nothing short of masterful.

On a typical summer evening, Holland glides through his domain, mingling with guests, no matter the "sirloin spray" decorating his worn T-shirt. He bears the stain proudly, a token of a bloody kitchen battle.

Fig Tree first-timers would probably raise their eyebrows if they knew the guy chucking limes at rowdy regulars was the owner and executive chef. The refined execution of Holland's dishes is a surprisingly perfect foil to his brazen persona. He's not wrapped up in bougie nonsense. He's preoccupied with mastering comforting concepts.

But that doesn't mean he doesn't have big plans. "Being Fig Tree and being Chef Jon Holland are two totally different things," according to the man himself.

Holland, we're keeping an eye on you. ●

Fig Tree Café is located at 3160 Cahaba Heights Road. To learn more visit thebirminghamfigtree.com.

FIG TREE CAFE'S

HONEYSUCKLE WATERMELON MARTINI

PHOTO AND TEXT BY EMMA SIMMONS

Remember the ole summer days of sweet honeysuckle-licking and watermelon-busting? For the kiddos, harvesting Mother Nature's liquid candy is a rite of passage. But for the grown-up lesson-givers, it's a fleeting excuse to indulge in carefree childhood memories. More than just a nod to flavors redolent of days past, Fig Tree Cafe's Honeysuckle Watermelon Martini will take you there. Just close your eyes and savor a sip.



WHAT'S IN IT

- 2 ounces Cathead Honeysuckle vodka
- 2 ounces homemade watermelon puree
- 1/2 ounce simple syrup
- 1/2 ounce fresh-squeezed lime juice
- Rosemary sprig for garnish

HOW TO MAKE IT

Place all ingredients, in no particular order, into a cocktail shaker with ice. Then, per Chef Jon Holland's instructions, shake the living daylights out of it and strain into a martini glass. Top it off with a rosemary sprig.

Stray BULLEIT

FOODBAR

PHOTO BY EMMA SIMMONS

Luke Hampton's first kumquat encounter left him determined to incorporate the tart and tangy citrus into a signature cocktail. The FoodBar mixologist's experiments yielded positively tropical results. An exotic take on a whiskey sour, the Stray Bulleit is the perfect libation to wind down with on a late summer evening.

WHAT'S IN IT

- 1.5 ounces Bulleit bourbon
- 4 ounces lemon-lime sour mix
- Homemade kumquat syrup
- Splash of cherry juice
- Brandy cherries, for garnish



Thyme WELL SPENT

DYRON'S LOWCOUNTRY

PHOTO BY EMMA SIMMONS

Some of Daniel Holifield's fondest summer memories took place on his grandfather's porch, where the two would share a slice of fresh honeycomb from the family farm. For the Dyron's Lowcountry bartender, honey is sweet reminder of Thyme Well Spent. Combined with the deep flavors of cinnamon and thyme, Daniel's signature cocktail is a refreshingly sweet late summer sipper.

WHAT'S IN IT

- 2 sprigs thyme, Michael Dean's Terra Preta Farm
- 2 oz. Elijah Craig Small Batch bourbon
- 1/2 lemon, juiced
- 1 tablespoon wildflower honey
- 1 tablespoon cinnamon simple syrup
- 1 cinnamon stick
- 1 lemon twist

HOW TO MAKE IT

Muddle 1 sprig thyme and the bourbon together. Add lemon juice, honey and cinnamon syrup. Shake vigorously. Strain into a collins glass and garnish with a sprig of thyme, a cinnamon stick and a lemon twist.



Col. Lawson GOES SOUTH



REAL & ROSEMARY

PHOTO BY EMMA SIMMONS

The story behind this cocktail's focal flavor dates back to 1783, when an American Revolutionary soldier named John Franklin Lawson savored a watermelon wedge aboard a British Army prison ship en route to the West Indies. Enamored with the fruit's exceptional sweetness, Lawson guarded every seed until he returned home to Georgia to plant what would become one of the country's most coveted heirloom varieties. With every sip of the Col. Lawson Goes South, you'll taste a sweet slice of history.

WHAT'S IN IT

2 ounces blanco tequila
1/4 ounce Cointreau
1 1/2 ounces Lawson
watermelon juice
3/4 ounce lime juice
1/4 ounce agave

HOW TO MAKE IT

Combine all ingredients in a shaker. Add ice, shake and pour into your glass of choice.

OLE, May's

BY MIXOLOGIST JONATHAN GRAVITT
PHOTO BY EMMA SIMMONS

WHAT'S IN IT

2 ounces Clyde May's
Alabama Style Whiskey

1/2 ounce Cinnamon
Syrup*

3 dashes Angostura bitters

1 dash Mole bitters

HOW TO MAKE IT

Add all ingredients to a mixing glass, add ice, and stir until chilled. Strain into a rocks glass over ice and garnish with a cinnamon stick and orange peel, expressing the oils into the glass and rubbing the peel around the rim.

OCTANE

I first became aware of Clyde May's when I was bartending in Dallas. The name itself struck me as being uniquely Alabamian. Simply by substituting a regular whiskey with one with hints of green apple and adding cinnamon to our simple syrup, we have created a cocktail that is unmistakably suited for autumn. Having moved back to Alabama after being away for seven years, I continue to be amazed by how much has changed, and Clyde May's has announced this month that our official state spirit is coming home, too, and will finally be distilled exclusively in Alabama.

*To make Cinnamon Syrup, add equal parts of granulated sugar and water to a saucepan along with four to six cinnamon sticks. Bring to a boil, and then reduce heat and simmer for 5-10 minutes until the sugar is dissolved and you begin to see the cinnamon color in the mixture. Remove from heat and allow to cool, and then strain out the solids and store in the refrigerator.





Fall Mojito

VINO'S GALLERY BAR

PHOTO BY EMMA SIMMONS

A cult classic and fabled cure-all, Fernet Branca is bitter, mentholated digestif that's a favorite among local mixologists. It's something Gallery

Bar's Chris Moore says your 100-year-old Italian grandmother would sling back three times a day—for good health, of course. Despite its unique flavor profile, the herbal liqueur blends beautifully with the bar's homemade Demerara simple syrup and Cruzan's Blackstrap molasses rum. With a robust, refined sweetness that's anything but sugary,

Gallery Bar's Fall Mojito is a tempting, tropical invention that's right at home in sweater weather.

WHAT'S IN IT

- 1 ounce Cruzan Blackstrap rum
- 1 ounce Fernet Branca
- 6 mint leaves
- 3/4 ounce lime
- 3/4 ounce Demerara simple syrup
- Soda, for garnish
- Mint, for garnish

THE *Bosc*



FIG TREE CAFÉ

PHOTO BY EMMA SIMMONS

With about a million bourbon-pear combinations, it took only a dozen attempts for Fig Tree Café's Brandon Wright to dial in on the perfect fusion for his winter-ready signature martini. The Bosc's earthy sweetness strikes a smooth balance with the crisp, dry notes in the Bulleit rye—it's what we're calling a match made in cocktail heaven.

WHAT'S IN IT

- 2 ounces Bulleit rye whiskey
- 2 ounces freshly juiced Bosc pears
- 1/2 ounce freshly squeezed lemon juice
- 1/2 ounce simple syrup (equal parts sugar and water)
- 1 egg white
- Bosc pear, sliced, garnish

HOW TO MAKE IT

Pour all the ingredients in a shaker over ice. Shake vigorously for 1 minute to emulsify the egg. Strain into a martini glass. Garnish with fresh Bosc pear.

Jemison Old Fashioned

BRICK & TIN

PHOTO BY EMMA SIMMONS

Widely known for its seasonal offerings, Brick & Tin's penchant for farm-to-table doesn't stop short of the cocktail menu. Local kumquats sourced from Jemison's Petals from the Past impart the focal floral flavor in this wintry citrus sipper. In keeping with the cocktail's traditional complex richness, the Jemison Old Fashioned boasts a delicate, herbal acidity—and just the right amount of sweet.

WHAT'S IN IT

- 1 1/2 ounces Bulleit Rye
- 1/2 ounce Lairds Apple Brandy
- 1/2 ounce Jemison County Citrus Syrup
- 2 dashes house cinnamon bitters
- 2 dashes orange bitters
- Candied kumquats, for garnish



Creme de Menthe & Chocolate Chip CUSTARD SHAKE



TWISTED ROOT BURGER CO.

PHOTO BY EMMA SIMMONS

Twisted Root Burger Co.'s homemade shakes are so darn good, you might just skip the burger. The chain's mint chocolate chip-inspired custard shake tastes just like you'll remember, but it ain't for the kiddos. Deceivingly boozy, this adults-only frozen treat is just as thick and velvety as they come.

WHAT'S IN IT

5 ounces vanilla custard
 $\frac{3}{4}$ ounce creme de menthe
 $\frac{3}{4}$ ounce chocolate vodka
Chocolate syrup drizzle
Dash of chocolate chips

WRITING PORTFOLIO

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BY EMMA SIMMONS



ALABAMA BISCUIT ABC'S

The whole grain goodness is all about experimentation.

BY EMMA SIMMONS
PHOTOS BY MARY FEHR



FOOD & DRINK

THE FRESHEST CATCH

Snapper Grabber's has long drawn straight from the sea. Now it's into land and vineyards too.

BY EMMA SIMMONS
PHOTOS BY MARY FEHR

Snapper Grabber's may be a four-hour drive from the ocean, but you wouldn't know it from their seafood.

Every day begins with barren cases of ice, evidencing a good yesterday. "We can order something from Hawaii or Alaska and have it in here the next day, it's that fresh," says Pam Scott, who owns the market on Highway 31 with her husband, Kent.

Early each morning Kent, chief quality control inspector and gumbo chef extraordinaire, meticulously examines overnighted shipments to make sure there's nothing too fishy going on.

"We look at everything the moment it comes in the door. If it doesn't pass my husband's test, then he'll send it right back. This happens daily," Pam says.

Pam likens her husband's methodical routine

to a doctor making a diagnosis, except it takes a well-trained eye—and nose.

"It doesn't even take him two seconds, because he's done it for so long. Are the eyes cloudy on the fish? Has the meat started to turn soft? How does the gill smell?" Pam says.

Kent's early immersion in the seafood industry heralded his lifelong fascination and undeniable astuteness in the field. In 1956, he was just a toddler when his father took over Birmingham's oldest seafood business, River Fish Market, situated on the north side of town. By the age of 14, Kent began learning the tricks of the trade, and he eventually inherited the market when his father retired in 1993.



Snapper Grabber's
owner Kent Scott

A chef with glasses and a grey uniform is cooking on a grill. He is looking down at the food on the grill. The background is a kitchen with stainless steel walls and a large vent hood.

CAFÉ MENU PREVIEW

"ALMOST FAMOUS SEAFOOD GUMBO" – Kent's labor of love

BUTCHER BURGER – Made from scraps of high-end meat

SHRIMP TACOS – Grilled Gulf shrimp, served Mexican style

BLACKENED SHRIMP SALAD
– Full of Gulf Coast shrimp and local organic greens

THE DAILY HOOK – Flat-top grilled fish of the day, served on a brioche bun

Kent sold the Birmingham fish market in 2001 to enjoy his own retirement, spent traveling with Pam. But when Vestavia Hills' premiere seafood shop opened up for grabs a quick decade later, the couple found themselves at the helm of a new adventure.

"You don't just wake up one day and say, 'I think I'll open up a restaurant,' or I think 'I'll open up a seafood market.' It's a progression," Pam says.

Pam, also a native Birminghamian, grew up slurping down Grapico in her daddy's hamburger stand, which he opened in the '50s after leaving his job as an Air Force mess hall chef. She says her mother, like Martha Stewart, was also a force to be reckoned with in the kitchen.

The couple's common backgrounds didn't lead them to each other—they met at the swimming pool—but they helped forge a family-friendly, customer-oriented business model with which the couple accredits their success.

A little over a year ago, Snapper Grabber's took a new step its progression to become Snapper Grabber's Land & Sea. The new café and butcher shop addition, both operated by Pam's brother, seasoned chef Patrick McCown, formerly of Chez Lulu, was the answer to customers' calls for an expansion beyond fruits de



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mer. “We let our customers tell us what their need is, and we do our best to meet it,” Pam says.

Pam isn’t afraid to admit they’re still learning when it comes to the ‘land’ aspect of the protein world, as farming complicates matters a bit.

“You can’t tweak seafood,” she says. “There’s no control over the ocean or what comes out of it, except for how fresh it is, and that’s it. But with cattle, hogs, pigs, chickens, we control what they eat and if they’re cage-fed.”

In addition to farm-raised chicken, pork and beef, the team caters to adventurous palates through more exotic offerings like wild boar, bison, rabbit and ostrich.

The Scotts may still be getting their toes wet in the world of ‘land’ proteins, but they’re honing their craft the same way they turned thousands of Vestavians into fish fiends—by making it approachable.

“People are afraid of it! We hear many say, ‘Oh I don’t cook seafood because I don’t know how. I go out to eat it.’ So we’ve broadened locals’ knowledge of seafood. That’s what we like to do,” Pam explains.

Any day someone could walk into Snapper Grabber’s with zero seafood experience and confidently prepare a perfectly seared fish filet later at home—no Googling necessary.

At Snapper Grabber’s, the chefs aren’t stingy with their secrets. Chef de Cuisine and wine aficionado Tim Hughes, formerly of Hot & Hot Fish Club, has more than 16 years of knowledge he’s more than happy to pass on.

“He’ll get a call from someone who’s making a certain dish or needs help with a wine pairing, and he’ll spend 45 minutes with a customer. He puts a lot into it,” Pam says.

Contrary to its original namesake, Snapper Grabber’s now operates at a level beyond a simple ‘grab-n-go’ fish market. Café, meat, seafood, wine—customers can, and do, get it all at this one-stop shop.

The couple’s top-selling product is the result of a grueling labor of love, perfected over the course of 30 years. Enter Kent’s “Almost Famous” gumbo. Folks from Louisiana may hate to admit it, but Kent’s gumbo (pictured on page 3) is just as good as any they’ve had





Snapper Grabber's cafe
serves up summer
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back home.

“He’ll be here at 5:30 a.m. until the evening. It’s rare that we haven’t sold out. He’s established a little following,” Pam says, smiling.

Still, the Scotts are working to introduce more grab-n-go prepared items, as customers are raving over the shrimp salad and various smoked fish dips.

“We have people who come here to buy seafood, and carry it to the beach with them. That amazes me. It’s the highest compliment, that someone would buy our seafood and take it back to where it came from.”

To the many calling for a Snapper Grabber’s 2, Pam says, sorry y’all. “Unless my husband could clone himself, he would probably never consider opening a second location, because he is so hands-on. He rarely leaves.”

In fact, the shop functions like a second home for Snapper Grabber regulars, who will inadvertently hook up with family and friends while stocking up on seafood.

“Sometimes it can feel like a huge homecoming because surprise reunions are always happening. It’s just a fun business. We love our customers, and they seem to love us. We just really try to cater to them and help them enjoy good food,” Pam says.

Loyal customers know they’re the luckiest landlocked seafoodies around, because when it comes to enjoying fresh-caught fish in town, there’s no catch. ●

FISHING FOR SOMETHING TO DO?

Snapper Grabbers offers more than just a market and menu.

COOKING CLASSES- For more information call the market at (205)824-9799.

WINE WALKABOUTS- Wine tastings where boutique wines are paired with small plates at different culinary stations.

CUSTOMIZED IN-HOUSE EVENTS- Shoot the team a message and they'll cook up something just for you. They can hold more than 25 people.



Jonathan Burch has his wife's experiments in bread-making to thank for the droves of regulars that file into Alabama Biscuit Company each morning.

"It's crazy. My wife made these biscuits out of spelt flour one time, and they were the ugliest things I've ever seen. But the flavor of the flour was intense," he recalls.

After she left town one weekend, Jonathan decided to conduct some experiments of his own. "I just stayed home all day making biscuits, testing out different proportions and such, and that's when the biscuit was developed."

There's no secret recipe behind Burch's nutty, buttery biscuits. In fact, there's no recipe at all. "It's an artistic

process; it's not the same every time."

This is, in part, due to the trickiness in working with whole grain. Jonathan's homemade biscuits are 100 percent spelt flour, an ancient grain unaffected by modern wheat processing. "If the grain is browner, or the buttermilk is too thin, or the humidity is too high, we make certain adjustments."

When it comes to ingredients, he settles for nothing less than the finest. He sources all of his spelt flour locally from Montgomery's To Your Health Sprouted Flour Co.

Their product is a huge part of the ABC's business plan, he says. Not interested in the nutritional



• • •

When he was young, he stayed at his grandfather's home after school, where they'd spend the afternoons flipping through various cooking channels. At only 8 years old he put his newly learned skills to the test in

“It’s my passion and drive to provide something excellent. You don’t have to know how awesome it is; you just have to know that it tastes good. And that’s the main thing: it’s hospitality.”

- Jonathan Burch

Biscuit with sweet
potatoes and pecans





Jonathan Burch

what became a yearly tradition of cooking his parents' anniversary dinners.

Growing up around his grandmother's scrumptious Southern cuisine was equally formative for the budding gastronaut.

"The memories I have of my grandma's cooking are powerful because those foods were really humble. They weren't like fine-latticed pies; they were just really flavorful."

While cooking has always been second nature for Jonathan,

BISCUIT FAN FAVORITES

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1. **Croque Madame:** Smoked ham, House Lemon + Fines Herbes Aioli, Soft Fried Farm Egg, Grassfed Cheddar
2. **Goat Cheese, Pecan & Honey:** Soaked and Roasted Pecans, Stone Hollow Goat Cheese, Local Honey
3. **Blueberry Biscake (seasonal):** Blueberries, Vanilla Mascarpone Cream, Spiced Maple Syrup



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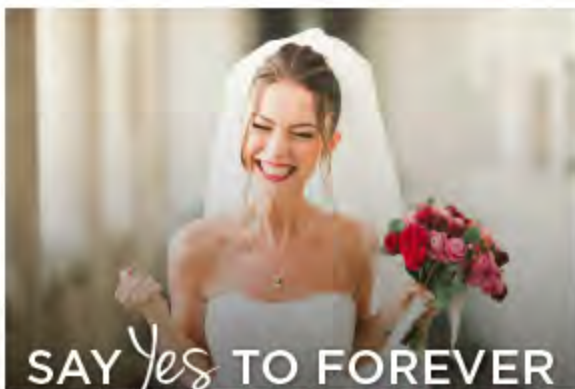


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Croque Madame
biscuit

SEASON BY SEASON

...

These bis-cakes are topped with seasonal fruit, vanilla mascarpone cream and spiced maple syrup.

DECEMBER - JANUARY: Apple

FEBRUARY: Carrot Cake

MARCH/APRIL: Rhubarb and Strawberries

MAY-JUNE: Blueberry

JULY-AUGUST: Blackberry, Peach

SEPTEMBER-DECEMBER: Pear

it wasn't until his landscaping company took off that he found time to indulge his culinary curiosities.

"There would be days I'd be done and home around lunchtime, so I'd text my wife and say, 'Want to go by Whole Foods? I don't cook a lot of lamb, so I want to give it a shot.'"

In his quest to become a better chef, Jonathan realized he could forgo a formal culinary education with a little self-discipline—and help from the internet. A lust for learning fueled his independent study of culinary 'greats' like renowned chef Thomas Keller and Cajun TV cook Justin Wilson.

"I think the people who can really cook are those who can take everything they've learned from others, take a step, and create something that's totally unique but also connected to the past."

...

As Jonathan continues to tweak his ever-evolving product, his customers know one thing for certain: it's only getting better.

"The biscuit is still being perfected. What we have now is better than what we had when we opened—it's a natural product."

Since setting up shop in Cahaba Heights four years ago, the Alabama Biscuit Company has nestled into its second location at the Pizitz Food Hall downtown. But the ABC's newest venture is the one with the most potential, Jonathan says.

Housed in the former Serendipity Sweets building on Rocky Ridge Road, the third location will boast grit bowls and fried chicken, in addition to its classic offerings. "I can see our new location at Rocky Ridge becoming our home base."

Juggling parenthood, lawn emergencies and three restaurants, the Burches are a busy bunch. But they're determined to make their mark in the Hills—one biscuit at a time. ●

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By Emma Simmons | Photos by Mary Fehr



Lindy Cleveland, right, founded Unless U. Her husband, Mitch, left, is an inclusion specialist at Liberty Park Middle School.



In typical younger-brother fashion, Jordan Decker wanted to follow in the footsteps of his role model and older brother, Josh. Eighteen-year-old Jordan would tell everyone he was going to college, just like Josh. Several years later, as his parents moved his younger sister Lindy into her Samford University dorm room, Jordan, then 24, again announced his plans to attend college.

"It broke my heart," Lindy says. "I knew that Jordan and his many friends all wanted to experience the 'next steps' in life, just like everyone else."

Today, though, Jordan attends Unless U—whose name is a collegiate spin on a quote from Doctor Seuss' *The Lorax*: "Unless someone like you cares a whole awful lot, nothing is going to get better. It's not." And its founder and executive director? That would be his sister, Lindy Cleveland.

FOR WHAT THEY DO FOR THE COMMUNITY

Unless U serves adults with developmental disabilities like Jordan, and their families, through continuing education curriculum centered on academics, life and social skills, and ministry. "Unless U envisions a world where adults with developmental disabilities are not seen

through the lens of their disability, but rather through what they offer the community," the organization's vision statement reads.

Likewise, its students beam with admiration for their teachers, viewing them more as friends than instructors. But there's something else about the school environment that students appreciate the most.

"Unless U provides [my son] Malone the opportunity to develop relationships with old friends and make new ones," parent Becky Morgan says. "He also enjoys learning about current events, life skills and education.... Malone considers his Unless U attendance as his own personal 'college experience.'"

Unlike workforce readiness or recreational-based programs for people with special needs, the Unless U curriculum caters to the "whole person" through an equal focus on students' academic, social and spiritual well being. Unless U's spiritual component, low student-teacher ratio (1:5) and lack of graduation date are uncommon among similar programs.

Lindy's husband, Mitch, an inclusion specialist at Liberty Park Middle School says he's "extremely proud" of his wife for continuing the efforts of special educators post high school. "As a special educator, this is really exciting to have for students after high school," says Mitch. "She's



GET INVOLVED WITH UNLESS U

VOLUNTEER

Email Lindy Cleveland at director@unlessu.org to see how you can help.

SHOP

Shop 'til you drop at the nonprofit's main fundraiser, the Unless U Shop, held right before Mother's Day in the Vestavia Hills Civic Center.

APPLY

Unless U is hiring in the fall. Contact Lindy Cleveland for more details.

INTERN

College students can partner with Unless U to earn school credit.

STAY TUNED

Follow Unless U on Facebook and Instagram @unless_u to see what the students are up to.

assembled a phenomenal staff here."

Unless U occupies four classrooms at Shades Mountain Baptist, each specific to a different subject: life skills, social skills, math, reading and Bible study. Lead instructors teach one subject four times each day, modifying the lesson to meet the needs of individuals in each particular group.

Most of Unless U's educators are retired special education teachers, stay-at-home moms with teaching degrees who are looking for something part-time, or people with lots of personal experience with special education.

THE ROAD TO THE U

Lindy's path to form Unless U started back at Samford University. As a teenager, she'd worked as a peer helper in special needs classrooms and with Camp Briarwood's Special Connections Division and Down Syndrome Alabama.

During her sophomore year of college, Lindy started Dance 4 Down Syndrome (D4D), a fundraising event for the UAB Down Syndrome Clinic. Through it, young adults with special needs got a taste of the college experience during a night of dancing with their peers on Samford's

college campus. This event, which is now held annually, elicited a strong response from the participants, eager for more chances to socialize in a college atmosphere.

"The whole reason I started Dance 4 Down Syndrome is to bring awareness to the fact that these are just people," Lindy says. "It's a night for people to interact with those who are different from them."

Soon after creating D4D, Lindy began to reevaluate her decision to major in elementary education/special education as she brainstormed ways to recreate the success of the event.

"I knew that I wanted to work in the nonprofit world, and so when I changed my major I had this realization: I want to start a continuing education program for families [with children with special needs] when their students age out of high school. What's the best route to get me there?"

Through her new major in human development and family life education, Lindy was able to customize her studies, focusing her research on the special needs population. Her senior project required her to build a mock nonprofit, complete with a funding plan. "I told my professor, 'This isn't just a project for me. I really want to do this.'"

During her time at Samford, Lindy worked relentlessly with her family and professors to bring her vision to life.



PHOTO BY ELIZABETH NANCE

“The community is backing this, and parents are giving too. That’s why it was so successful, so clearly, it’s for the cause.”
- Mitch Cleveland

The pilot program operated out of her parents’ Vestavia Hills home, starting off with four students she tenderly branded her “founding fathers.” Lindy realized the organization would require more community support before finding a more permanent home. After months of fine-tuning the curriculum and hunting for a more permanent location, Lindy took a gamble by asking her church, Shades Mountain Baptist, if it would consider leasing space to the new nonprofit.

“What the church did for us, providing the space, is the only way we could be where we are today,” she says. “They’ve been incredibly gracious and supportive, and there’s no way we could have done this without their help.”

Agreeing to host the nonprofit for as long as necessary, Shades Mountain Baptist laid the foundation for its opening day and ribbon cutting ceremony in November 2014. “In that moment I realized that all the years of praying, planning and preparing had materialized into this

victorious moment in time, and Unless U became a reality that day,” Lindy recalls.

SWEET HOME VESTAVIA HILLS

In just two years, Unless U grew from a small group of 10 to four classrooms full of nearly 50 students total. Lindy doesn’t want to have to turn anyone away, but she says soon, she’ll have to.

“We’re at the point where we’re capping our growth if we stay here much longer, and we want to continue to be able to meet this need,” she says.

Where will the organization go as they outgrow their space at Shades Mountain? They’d certainly like to stay nearby. “We feel like Vestavia really adopted us in this season and made our cause their cause,” Lindy says.

The support that validates their desire to stay in the area comes from local high school students. In fall of 2016, the



● Lindy Cleveland started Unless U as a part of her studies at Samford University.

Vestavia Hills High School SGA selected Unless U as the beneficiary of the school's fall fundraisers like BBQ the Bucs and the Homecoming King contest.

In just one semester, the students raised over \$50,000, more than twice the amount raised the previous year. Mitch says he's never been more proud to call Vestavia Hills High School his alma mater. "The community is backing this, and parents are giving too," Mitch says. "That's why it was so successful, so clearly, it's for the cause."

Lindy says they've never felt more welcomed in the city than when the high school presented the nonprofit with its largest donation to date. "There are no words for all that Vestavia did for us. They have set us up for success in a way that we never dreamed possible."

Though her ultimate vision for Unless U extends beyond Vestavia Hills, Lindy believes the nonprofit should remain a homegrown venture given the city's enthusiastic support from the start.

Unless U is working to find its next home, but the first chapters of its story will remain the same—a sister who cared a whole awful lot bringing a vision to life amongst the hills. ●

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- C.S. LEWIS

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