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## TABLE

A GATHERING OF GOOD TASTE

81  
FIRST TASTE  
86  
CRAVINGS  
88  
THE FEED



CHEF MATT COOPER PUTS THE FINISHING TOUCHES ON A BRINED-AND-BRAISED PORK SHANK. REVERENTLY.

FIRST TASTE  
THE  
PREACHER'S  
SON

It's not just easy on the eyes (but damn, it's easy on the eyes)

BY BONNIE BAUMAN  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY ARSHIA KHAN

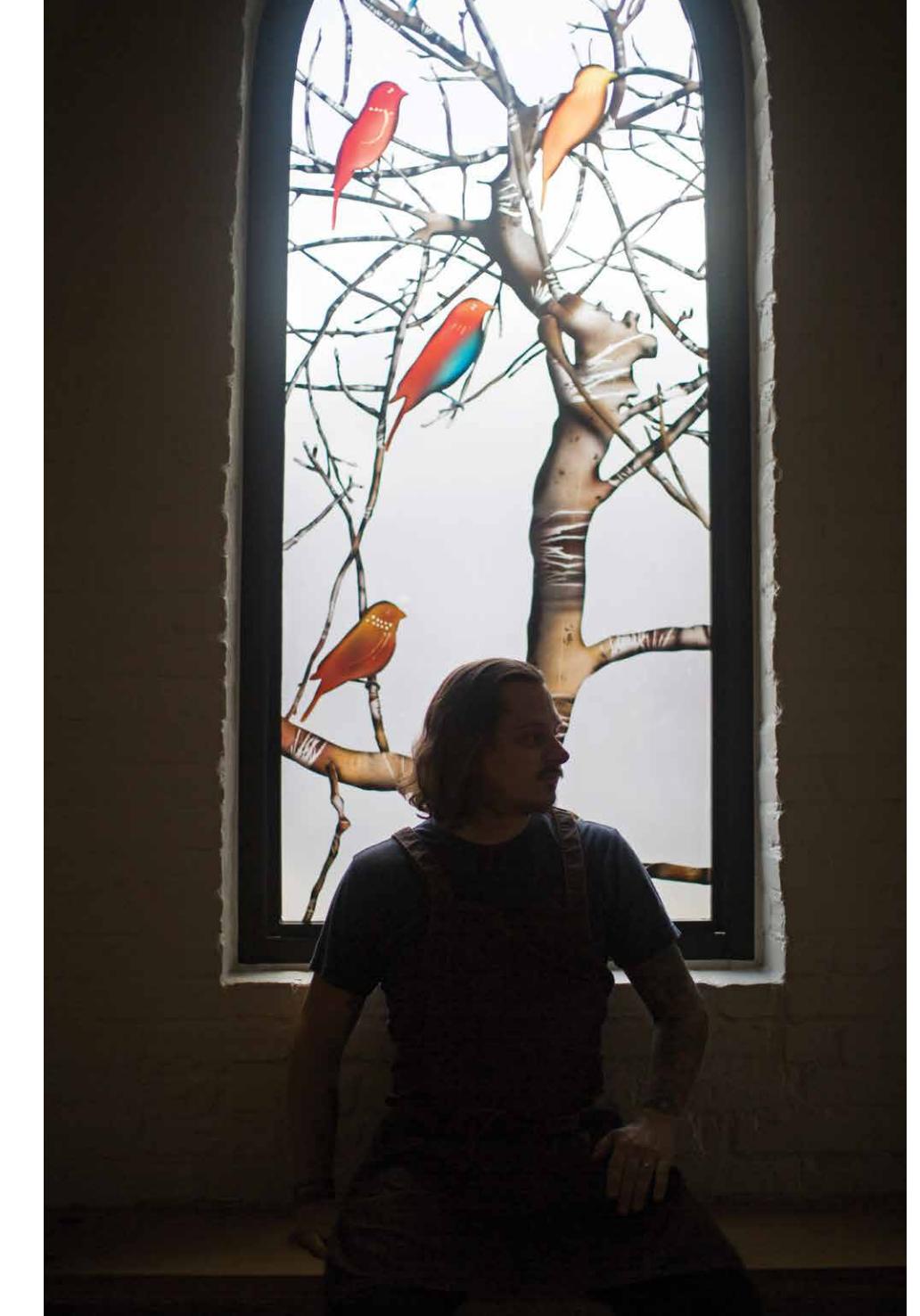
**I**t's quite the night-to-day experience, climbing the stairs from the craft cocktail bar in the basement of The Preacher's Son, a Gothic church turned restaurant in Bentonville, to its main dining room. The former is dark, cozy and speakeasylike; the latter is all height and honey tones and architectural marvel.

Once inside, the space's simple tables and banquets serve to focus your attention on a trinity of details: the massive king post looming overhead. The vibrant glass-window installations by Fayetteville artist George Dombek. The gold-bricked bar, tucked into what was once the church's apse, aka the inset alcove where the altar once stood. It's an extraordinary space, one that evokes reverence and serenity while at the same time feeling downright luxurious.

Gorgeous as the dining room may be, the restaurant's inner sanctum is the kitchen, where I'm headed on a Tuesday afternoon to chat with executive chef Matt Cooper, an actual preacher's son. Today his dark brown Prince Caspian waves are pulled back from his boyish face. He greets me with one of his big warm smiles, then quickly ushers me into the kitchen.

The first thing I notice is that it's much smaller than I expected. Its diminutive size, Matt says, was by design. "Having a smaller kitchen makes for better communication and efficiency," he says. "It's a well-oiled machine back here."

Today that well-oiled machine is buzzing. Tuesdays are a major prep day after the busy weekend. His team of cooks—Zane, London, Josh and Caleb, all of whom have been with the restaurant since its doors opened some seven months back—are chopping, stirring and whisking around us like whirling dervishes.



**Matt Cooper pauses in front of one of 11 art-glass windows Fayetteville artist George Dombek designed for The Preacher's Son.**

An earthy herbal smell fills the air. I instinctively wander off to find its source: a large pot of simmering purplish-brown liquid. Nuggets of pearly white onion and translucent celery bob across the surface.

"That's the beginnings of the braise for the pork shanks," Matt says, holding up a stainless-steel pan crammed with herb-dusted

shanks just sprung from a two-day citrus brine. One shank is a glistening reddish-pink. "This one's been smoked," he explains, holding up the odd man out for my inspection. "It'll act like a ham hock, giving the braise a smoky flavor."

Matt then points out that the shanks are from responsibly raised pigs. He's a chef who thinks an awful lot about how his ingredients wound up in his kitchen, aiming for a target of 90 percent local, he tells me. When local isn't an option, he focuses on sustainability. And he attempts to use as many parts of a vegetable or protein as possible. Curtailing food waste is a bit of an obsession with him.

At one point, we take a break from the shanks to dip into the cooler, where he enthusiastically shows me components of his waste-management system: the buckets of veggie scraps reserved for the vegetable farmer's compost heap, and the bins of chicken scraps that'll feed the pig farmer's pigs. "It makes for a more chaotic walk-in," he



#### THE PREACHER'S SON

201 NW A ST., BENTONVILLE  
(479) 445-6065; THEPREACHERSSON.COM

#### BEST DISHES

Crab fritter; spaetzle mac and cheese; tuna tacos; shaved Brussels sprout salad; pork shank with watermelon mostarda; grilled lamb with pistachio pesto; schnitzel; clams and mussels with chorizo in a tomato-saffron broth; gnocchi with carrots and honeycomb (shown here).

#### KID-FRIENDLY?

*It could be. But it's an even better leave-the-kids-at-home place. Both the rooftop bar and basement bar are fab.*

#### RESERVATIONS?

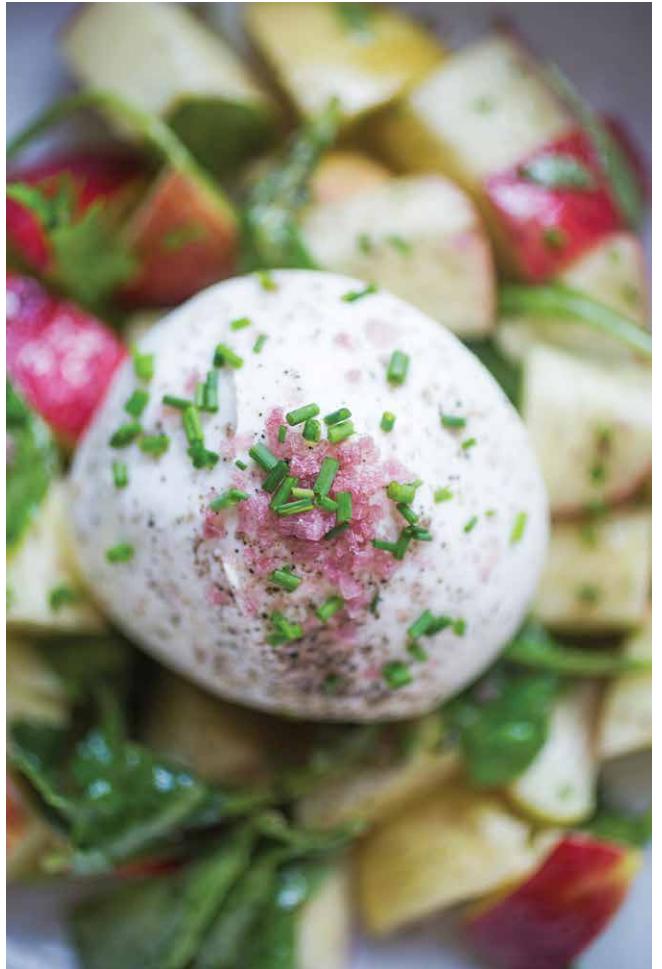
*YES. And call way ahead of time—this place is in demand.*

#### PRICE RANGE

\$11-\$28

#### HOURS

Tues.-Sat., 5 p.m. to 10 p.m.



**Chef Matt Cooper's inventive takes on "rustic, traditional" fare, as he calls it, are as refined and elegant as the space they're served in. Ropeswing Hospitality Group transformed this 113-year-old Gothic church in downtown Bentonville into an airy, almost ethereal eatery; two bars—one on the rooftop and one in the basement—complete the space.**



admits as we make our way back to the stove. “But I can’t not think about how something was grown or raised. Once you understand that process, it’s so hard to stomach throwing anything away.”

Matt’s environmentalist bent was likely influenced by his time living in Portland, Oregon, where he trained in kitchens along the South Waterfront and in the Pearl District. (Not to mention his stint as a sous chef at the legendary—and recently shuttered—Der Rheinlander.) He brought his environmental awareness back with him to Little Rock, not just into the kitchens of Lulav and Cache, where he served as the latter’s original executive chef, but also to Dandelion, a tea-herb-spice shop he opened downtown. In its day, it was the go-to spot for ashwagandha root, nettle leaf, milk thistle seed and the like.

I’m hardly surprised when he starts rooting around for rose hip and hibiscus for the pork shanks. “Rose hip has a lot of really positive medicinal properties,” he explains as he measures out a pile of dried flowers. “It also has a really nice fragrance. And hibiscus—not only does it add a bit of tartness; it’s good for heart health.”

Pork shanks have been a menu staple of his since his time at Cache. “Even though we’re vegetable and fish-driven here at Preacher’s Son,” he says, “you have to think about your diners, and in Arkansas, we love our pigs.” Serving pork shank is a way for him to get that pork on the menu while at the same time adhering to his sustainable cooking philosophy, he explains. After all, pork shanks are a cut of meat some view as a throwaway. “Pigs aren’t raised for their shanks,” he points out.

While the shanks sizzle in the pan, London offers me a taste of the

gnocchi he’s been working on. It’s pillow-y and fluffy and tastes every bit the way gnocchi is supposed to taste, even though Matt’s is a 100-percent gluten-free kitchen due to the fact that he suffers from celiac disease, an autoimmune disorder that leaves him unable to eat wheat, rye or barley.

“How on earth do you make gluten-free gnocchi taste this good?” I ask.

“London and I just toyed with alternative flours until we came up with the best combination,” he says. Rice, sorghum, tapioca and corn flour are all part of that winning combo. Same deal with the spaetzle mac and cheese and the schnitzel, Matt says. (It’s a rice panko that enables him to pull off the schnitzel, one of the most popular items on the menu.) “It’s important to me to show that a gluten-free menu item doesn’t have to mean lesser than or subordinate to its counterpart,” he says. “But it’s hard. It takes a whole ‘nother level of thoughtfulness and care.”

As we begin to chat about other menu items, I begin to better understand how Matt’s chef brain works. Take the eggplant hushpuppies Josh is mixing up in a gigantic bowl across from me. The genesis for those, Matt explains, was his desire to help out a farmer who had an overabundance of eggplant. At the time, Matt had been chewing on the idea of adding a hushpuppy to the menu, so why not kill two birds with one Ethiopian-spiced fritter, he thought.

That same level of thoughtfulness and ingenuity is evident throughout his menu. It’s in the gnocchi tossed with roasted carrots, brown butter and bits of actual honeycomb, and in the shaved Brussels sprout salad served atop a Gorgonzola dolce mousse. Thing is, while it’s true that Matt is indeed serving up casual “rustic, traditional” fare, as he describes it, the amount of thought and care he puts into each dish ultimately serves to elevate it. He succeeds in giving even the simplest dish a specialness that mirrors the grandeur of its surroundings, as I discover when I dig into my burrata-and-peaches starter a few nights later.

After the starter, I’m presented with a plate of those eggplant hushpuppies served with warm honey drizzled over zesty tzatziki sauce. The Ethiopian berbere spice is a revelation. And then the gnocchi, which is one of the highlights of the meal (not to mention my eating career in general); crunchy roasted carrots provide the perfect contrast to the dumplings’ fluff. Sage and parsley, along with a bright honeycomb nugget, take the dish to another level.

And then, finally, it’s time to try those pork shanks. “Praise the braise!” I think to myself as I take my first bite. The meat is melt-in-your-mouth tender; the sauce is as rich and layered as you’d expect given all that went into the brine and the braise. But it’s that special Matt Cooper touch—a watermelon mostarda—that brings it all together, balancing out the richness with a fruity zip.

After I’ve cleaned my plate, I sit back and take in the golden glow of the crowded dining room. As I wait for dessert, I think back to something Matt had told me when he was giving me a tour of the space. “If the food doesn’t measure up, no matter how amazing a space is, you’re not going to come back,” he’d said. I start to wonder, *Does the food measure up?*

As if I needed any more proof on the plate, dessert arrives—a cloud of peanut butter mousse atop a silky layer of blackberry cheesecake topped off with crispy wisps of peanut brittle—and gives me my answer.

In a word: YES. ▲

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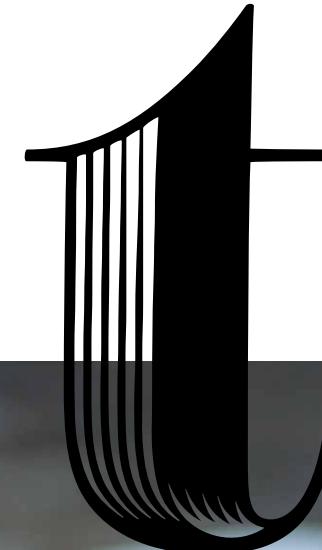
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TAILGATING & WATCH PARTIES

HALLOWEEN PARTIES



## TABLE

A GATHERING OF GOOD TASTE

### FIRST TASTE PETIT & KEET

A history lesson with Little Rock's kings of culinary reinvention

BY SETH ELI BARLOW  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY ARSHIA KHAN



NO NEED TO CAUSE A ROE.  
THIS CHARRED MISO SALMON  
CAN BE ALL YOURS

**A**s a child I, like many kids my age, found church services more than a little tedious. I wasn't good at sitting through an episode of after-school TV, much less an early-morning sermon. Often enough, I would find myself flipping through the Bible, skimming the pages and looking for familiar names. It was then that I found what came to be one of my favorite parts of the book: the begats.

These are the verses or chapters near the beginning of each book that serve as family tree, a genealogy spanning millennia, because apparently it was nothing to live for 800 years. My fascination with these verses was in part the names, the unusual coupling of consonants and vowels. Enos and Enoc. Mahaleel and Methuselah. Herzon and Ram, who, for good measure, begat Amminadab, who begat Nahshon, who begat Salmon, of course.

But more than just the names, I was fascinated by the tangible link between generations, the untold decisions and experiences that each father had left for his son, the way you see one man's effect on history. It's a similar feeling I have at 9 a.m. on a bright Friday morning standing in the west Little Rock parking lot of Petit & Keet, the

restaurant's name emblazoned in red across the front. If ever there were two names who begat the Little Rock restaurant scene as we know it, surely it's those.

I find Jim Keet, the man I'm there to meet, in the main dining room. He moved to Arkansas in 1975 to open the first Wendy's franchise, though to most, he's known for opening Taziki's Mediterranean Cafe with his two sons. What started in 2008 with a single restaurant grew to more than 70 locations by the time Jim stepped down as CEO in 2016.

In the soft golden light of morning, the dining room seems almost gilded, like a massive machine waiting to be switched on. What at first appear to be large-windowed walls reveal themselves to be full-length garage doors waiting to be rolled up on a Friday night. "We wanted to do something really special for the state," Jim says. It's a phrase he'll say several times throughout our conversation. It's clear that for him and his business partner, Louis Petit, Petit & Keet is not just a restaurant but a love letter to a state and a city that have given them so much.

But to really understand how Petit & Keet came to be, you have to look all the way back to 1970s Little Rock. While the '70s represented a decade of change across the country, for Little Rock, they marked the fastest increase in population the city had ever known. With a new influx of residents, local diners began to ask for more from the local dining scene. In 1975, they got their answer in the form of Jacques and Suzanne, a fine-dining restaurant located at the top of what is now Regions Bank tower in downtown Little Rock. When the restaurant opened, Louis Petit was hired from



Look familiar? Perhaps a small bit? The west Little Rock property was once home to Louis Petit's Maison Louis.

his native Belgium to train the service staff and act as maître d'. When the restaurant closed in 1986, Louis went on to open his own restaurant, Maison Louis, on the same property where Petit & Keet now stands. Eventually, Louis would retire and leave Little Rock for Santa Rosa Beach, Florida, where he'd open up several successful restaurants with his sons.

Though they had never worked together, in recent years, a friendship had developed between Louis and Jim, one that was bolstered when Jim and his family bought a home in nearby Destin. "I had asked Louis over to have a glass of wine one night, and he brought a bottle," Jim tells me. "Four or five bottles later, I just asked, *Why don't we do a restaurant together?*" That was four years ago. What took them so long? "We looked at so many locations, but when this became available," he waves his hands around the room, "it was perfect."

The restaurant's location, though seemingly out of the way, actually holds a significant place in Little Rock dining history. Not only had the site once been home to Maison Louis; it had previously been home to 1620 Restaurant (eventually renamed 1620 Savoy), an award-winning restaurant that first opened in 1990. As is so often the case in the restaurant world, what was initially planned as a simple renovation quickly turned into a massive retrofitting of the existing building, with massive outdoor patios, a sidewalk patio and game courts figuring into the restaurant's final design.

I'd eaten dinner there the night before, not knowing what to expect. There's always a giddiness to visiting new restaurants. It's almost like a blind date, not knowing what you're in for, what to expect, how the restaurant's personality will mesh with your own. Petit & Keet, however, is full of surprises. Walking through the restaurant, at every turn you're met with a different ambiance and atmosphere. While the main dining room is chic and upscale, the bar is raucous and casual. Activity on the patio revolves around a central fire pit, ringed with oversized lounge furniture where guests can watch games of Baggo being played on the restaurant's outdoor court. "A lot of this," Jim says of the design, "came from us just wanting to give Little Rock a totally new experience. We started with a totally blank slate and thought about what we really wanted to accomplish."

Where we're seated looks down on the dining room's wine bar, a smaller, more private area where I'd been seated during my visit the night before. It's the purview of Susie Long, Petit & Keet's in-house wine guru and one of the few certified sommeliers working in the state. During my dinner, I'd put myself in her hands, letting her steer me where she wanted, letting her navigate the restaurant's wine list. We'd given her a bit of an unexpected challenge: to pair six of the eight entrees with a single bottle. She didn't hesitate. "You've ordered everything but beef," she said as she refilled our water glasses, but you could tell that mentally she was scrolling through the dozens of wines she had on offer. "It's an unusual pairing, but I've got a Napa Valley rosé that's going to be perfect with your pork chop." Not being one to challenge an expert, I said yes.

The dinner was, in no uncertain terms, excellent. The menu is a contemporary blend of Southern-tinged staples, like a pork chop



**PETIT & KEET**

1620 MARKET ST., LITTLE ROCK  
(501) 319-7675; PETITANDKEET.COM

**BEST DISHES**

*Beer-steamed chorizo mussels, charred miso salmon, bone-in Berkshire pork chop, rice hoecakes with summer corn succotash*

**KID-FRIENDLY?**

*It certainly could be, but that bottle of wine will taste better with a babysitter at home with the little ones.*

**RESERVATIONS?**

*Yes*

**PRICE RANGE**

*\$17-\$32*

**HOURS**

*Mon-Thurs: 4-10 p.m.;  
Fri-Sat, 4-11 p.m.*



cooked pearly white and served on a bed of sweet potato and broccolini, or rice hoecakes served with a sweet corn succotash and banana-pepper butter. These are the recipes of Arkansas, flavors familiar to us from our heritage. But for every Southern staple, there is a dish that bears the hallmarks of modern fusion cuisine: fresh salmon is marinated in miso and a seafood pasta is bathed in a tomato beurre blanc and shavings of pecorino. One of the most surprising entrees, a seemingly out-of-place lobster roll, demands attention, promising the allure of oceanside summers that even Arkansas' most beautiful lakes can't fulfill. And of course, it all worked perfectly with the rosé.

Back in the dining room, the restaurant is beginning to come alive around us. Floors are being mopped, and delivery trucks are arriving outside. Before I leave, I ask Jim if he thinks he'll end up franchising Petit & Keet. "Perhaps," he says. "This is my 149th restaurant, and it's the first one I've ever chosen to put my name on. I want this to stay iconic. ... I don't think there will ever be another Petit & Keet."

In a city the size of Little Rock, and in a restaurant culture as insular as Little Rock's, I often think about the ways in which local chefs and restaurateurs and even their dishes are all related. So much of Little Rock's culinary history can be traced back to Jacque and Suzanne's, and the chefs that Louis Petit worked with there and in his later restaurants. In many cases, it was those chefs who trained the current crop of leading culinary trendsetters, a lineage of taste that has shaped the city's palate in a way most will never know. In a way, eating at Petit & Keet, opened by some of Little Rock's original food masterminds, is like eating a history that is only just now beginning to repeat itself. ♦



Though it comprises clusters of smaller, more intimate spaces, Jim Keet and Louis Petit's new restaurant feels seamless. Also, delicious.



# CELEBRATE PLENTY

## PAUSING. TAKING STOCK. BEING THANKFUL.

Sounds relaxing, but hosting a big gathering can make it a challenge—especially with wine choices. Relax and try these suggestions.

### TURKEY OR CHICKEN:

- Barth Rene Pinot Blanc Alsace
- Presqu'ile Santa Barbara Chardonnay

### HAM, BEEF, OR PORK:

- Kenwood Russian River Pinot Noir
- Chateau de Beaucastel Cotes du Rhone Coudoulet de Beaucastel

### PECAN OR PUMPKIN PIE:

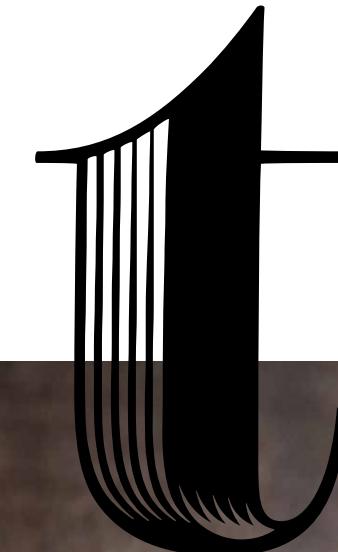
- Kermit Lynch Moscato d'Asti
- Taylor Fladgate 10 Year Tawny Port

Visit [ColonialWineShop.com/Thanksgiving](http://ColonialWineShop.com/Thanksgiving) for more help with your celebration, including cocktail recipes, a guide to calculating how much you need, and more.

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## TABLE

A GATHERING OF GOOD TASTE

81	FIRST TASTE
86	STATE DISH
88	THE FEED

**FIRST TASTE**  
**PERSPHONE ON WHEELS**  
You had us at “falafel waffle”  
BY BONNIE BAUMAN  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY ARSHIA KHAN

CHEF MIKE ROBERTSHAW KNOWS HOW TO MAKE SIMPLE INGREDIENTS SING.



Vegetarians, rejoice: Persephone's got you covered with dishes like this cauliflower shawarma.



**H**ave you been to Mike Robertshaw's new food truck in downtown Rogers yet?"

It was third time I'd been asked that question in as many days. I understood what all the excitement was about. I felt it, too.

It'd been roughly two and a half years since I'd first gotten a taste of what Chef Mike Robertshaw could do. At The Pressroom in downtown Bentonville, the Seattle transplant had developed a reputation for serving up bold, adventurous food. He'd been gone from The Pressroom since April, but I was still pining for his cooking, daydreaming regularly about his octopus Bolognese and that maple-lacquered quail dish he'd pulled off last fall. (To this day, I can still taste the foie gras and cherry stuffing.)

But mixed in with my frisson of anticipation was a pang of frustration. It wasn't just "Mike Robertshaw's new food truck." It was actually a joint venture with his significant other of a decade, Meredith Butler, a culinary creative in her own right. She had been supporting Mike's culinary endeavors behind the scenes for years, posting photos and descriptions of his dishes on social media. And from what I could tell from Meredith's latest social media posts about Persephone on Wheels, Mediterranean was on the menu at the truck. For what felt like weeks,

I'd been drooling over snaps of dishes like falafel cones, "hummus and stuff" and pork-belly gyros, as well as breakfast-y things like matcha smoothies, pomegranate-seed-scattered fruit bowls and, most intriguing of all, a "falafel waffle." I couldn't wait to get a taste.

That curiosity led me to the parking lot of the Phat Tire bike shop in downtown Rogers, where I'm standing in front of a small trailer strung up with outdoor party lights and flanked by a couple of lush potted plants. A bouquet of flowers set in an aluminum olive can cheers up the order window. An older couple occupies one of the wrought-iron tables in front of the truck while a party of 20-somethings has nabbed the one under a massive sycamore tree. Otis Redding's "Dock of the Bay" lilt through the air.

I sidle up to the window and place my order for loukoumades, aka Greek donuts. I have high hopes for the exclusive-to-Saturday-morning donuts, knowing as I do that Mike and Meredith are fellow donut enthusiasts. (Case in point: Their dog's name is Donuts.)



Lunch and dinner at the truck mean falafel and pork-belly gyros; breakfast features goodness-smothered fruit bowls and matcha smoothies.

## PERSEPHONE ON WHEELS

321 S. ARKANSAS ST., ROGERS  
(479) 715-9032 | FACEBOOK.COM/  
PERSEPHONEONWHEELS

### BEST DISHES

*Matcha smoothie, Greek omelette pita, falafel waffle, shakshuka, "Honey Bee" bowl, "Little Stickies," "Hummus & Stuff," pork belly gyro, sprouted falafel, rosemary lamb pita, cauliflower shawarma, Aphrodite fries, loukoumades and (shhhh, secret menu item) "Greek Tater Tot Poutine."*

KID-FRIENDLY?  
*Yes! Fresh air!*

PRICE RANGE  
*\$5 to \$10*

HOURS  
*Check Facebook or Instagram as hours change.*

Before long, Meredith comes tripping down the stairs of the food truck accompanied by the heady smell of sweet, fried dough. "It's impossible not to think of beignets when you eat these," she says as she hands me my box of donuts and takes a seat. "It's like a donut made love to a beignet and this is their lil' baby."

Wasting no time, I take a bite. The still-warm crunchy outer layer gives way to a pillow-y puff on the inside and subtle hits of nutmeg, lemon and cinnamon. As I devour the little donuts, Meredith keeps me somewhat grounded by telling me their back story, explaining that they're a Greek treat that dates back to the first Olympic games.

Soon, we relocate to the recently vacated table under the sycamore, which quickly overflows with my lunch order, delivered by the chef himself. Covering the table are warm Medjool dates called "Little Stickies," a rosemary lamb pita, a sprouted falafel and a "Honey Bee" bowl. As I stare at the spread, I can't help but wonder where all this is coming from. How in the heck did Mike go from Bolognese to baba ganoush in just a matter of months?

As I tuck into my lunch, Mike explains the leap. Turns out his stepfather was Greek, and his mom, Susan, who was of Italian descent, fully embraced the culinary traditions of the big,



Arkansas Life

NOVEMBER 2017



Meredith.

The falafel is also all Mike. A medley of pickled veggies, umami tomatoes, tzatziki sauce and baba ganoush balance and brighten the earthy fritters.

But there is more to the menu than Chef Mike Robertshaw. A food writer, food photographer and masterful home cook, Meredith brings her storytelling and creativity to dishes like the falafel cone, a paper cone stacked with chickpea fritters, fries and tzatziki sauce (and an olive "cherry" on top), "Greek Tater Tot Poutine" and the handful of luscious fruit bowls on offer. But Meredith's mark isn't just on the menu. The lights, the flowers, the charming wrought-iron tables, that giant jar of dog treats—that's all

It's then that the couple breaks the news that Persephone is just the beginning of their culinary partnership. In the works is a brick-and-mortar restaurant concept that's sure to join other soon-to-open businesses like Heirloom and Onyx Coffee Lab in upping downtown Rogers' culinary game.

As I sit back, full of good food, Mike and Meredith regale me with the story of how they first met. It's a classic. An Irish pub, "car bombs" and a trail of hot dog stands are involved. Thank goodness the universe saw fit to bring these two together, I think, already hungry for what they'll cook up next. ♦