THE ARNOLD DYNASTY

FAMILY AND SUCCESSION AT A NASHVILLE ICON.

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AROUND NEW YEAR'S 2023,

news broke that Arnold's Country Kitchen, a legendary Nashville restaurant, would close within the week. In response, the city descended into collective sadness and nostalgia. Here was another example of how we've lost sight of ourselves, people said, another old Nashville spot swallowed up by tall-skinny duplexes and construction cranes. At Arnold's, you slid your tray along a steam table, choosing a protein and three sides to compile your plate. There was something easy to romanticize about Arnold's, something about the great democracy of the meat-and-three that drew people close—judges and singers, accountants and laborers, all shoulder-to-shoulder, all queued up for the same roast beef.

Whether they worked downtown or on Music Row, people who'd left somewhere small for somewhere big could enjoy a plate of familiar food at a place like Arnold's. In the past three decades, as Nashville has exploded, it's welcomed an entirely different group of people, for whom Appalachian hill cuisine means nothing. My parents, who moved here in 1995, were among these transplants. After spending the first forty years of their lives in southern California, eating Thai and Mexican food, they had no interest in Vittles, our local meat-and-three in suburban Brentwood. Instead, we ate at Miyako, the Japanese place next door, one of the only non-Southern options for miles.

While "Arnold's Country Kitchen" might sound like a Southern Mad Lib of a name, the restaurant benefited from a subtle universality. The meats were decidedly Southern in flavor—catfish, chicken livers, sugar-cured ham—but most guests, no matter where they came from, could find a version of their own cuisine in the "and three" offerings. When the chef Maneet Chauhan visited Nashville in the early 2010s, a friend took her to Arnold's. She grew up in east India, and the sights and smells of the steam table reminded her of the chaat she'd loved in the streets and markets of Ranchi, her hometown. The turnip greens reminded her of saag, the fried green tomatoes carried a whiff of pakora, and the black-eyed peas were the same she grew up eating. For the first time since she'd set foot in this unfamiliar city, Chauhan felt comfort.

The Arnold family was also savvy, and over the years, their restaurant labored to serve a new Nashville. A majority of newcomers no longer hailed from the foothills of the Appalachian Mountains, from places like Soddy Daisy, Tennessee. Instead, they moved here from the East and West coasts and from dozens of countries.

From the time family patriarch Jack Arnold bought the restaurant in 1982 until its closure forty years later, the neighborhood surrounding Arnold's transformed from the ghost of a railyard to a glitzy, mixed-use area. But this isn't a gentrification story. It's the story of a smart family who made a bold wager, saw that bet hit, and then danced all the way to the bank. It's a story of succession, inheritance, the weight of a name, and the cost of culinary greatness.

It's a story of what parents want for their children.

IN THE FADING TWENTIETH CENTURY, thirteen-year-old Kahlil Arnold, Jack's second son, was free from Catholic school for the summer. Most mornings, Kahlil hopped on his Diamondback, sped up and down the hills of his neighborhood, and wound up at the West Meade Tennis Club. He and his friends played tennis, then cooled off in the pool, trying to swim from the deep end through the shallows without getting tagged.

In Kahlil's memory, West Meade was faintly but decidedly second-rate: rickety tables, sun-faded clubhouse. Rich people preferred Hillwood Country Club. For all its flaws, the West Meade concession stand knew how to make damn good cinnamon rolls. Curls damp, rosy cheeks flushed, blue eyes rimmed pink from the pool, Kahlil charged three rolls to his father's account at a time. They were the taste of his youth, brushed with butter and sugar and icing.

Early in the summer, Kahlil ran up a tab of more than fifty dollars. One day, when he got home from the pool, Jack waited. "Your ass is gonna get up," he told Kahlil.

The next morning, Jack woke Kahlil at 4:30, and father and son went to work. Arnold's operated out of a concrete building in an area now called The Gulch. The neighborhood used to be Nashville's Valley of the Ashes, built on the remains of a rail- and coalyard. If you looked through the restaurant's parking lot, you might've found traces of the people who slept there. Every now and again, freight trains blew through on the tracks behind the restaurant, debris floating in their wakes like paper lanterns.

Of course, Kahlil had tasted Jack's food before. Now, on the cusp of maturity, he could admit that it was even better than he remembered.

At Saint Henry School, Kahlil spent his days with the children of doctors at Vanderbilt University Medical Center and lawyers at downtown firms. Then there was Jack, chef and proprietor of Arnold's Country Kitchen. Jack had once been a premed student at Vanderbilt, a peer of those fancy parents, but he'd chosen a different path.

That morning, after they set up for the day, Jack made Kahlil a breakfast of biscuits, gravy, home fries, and eggs. *Wow,* Kahlil thought, a little begrudgingly, as he took his first bite. *This is really good.* As a kid, he avoided reminders of his dad's vocation. Of course, he'd tasted Jack's food before. Now, on the cusp of maturity, he could admit that it was even better than he remembered.

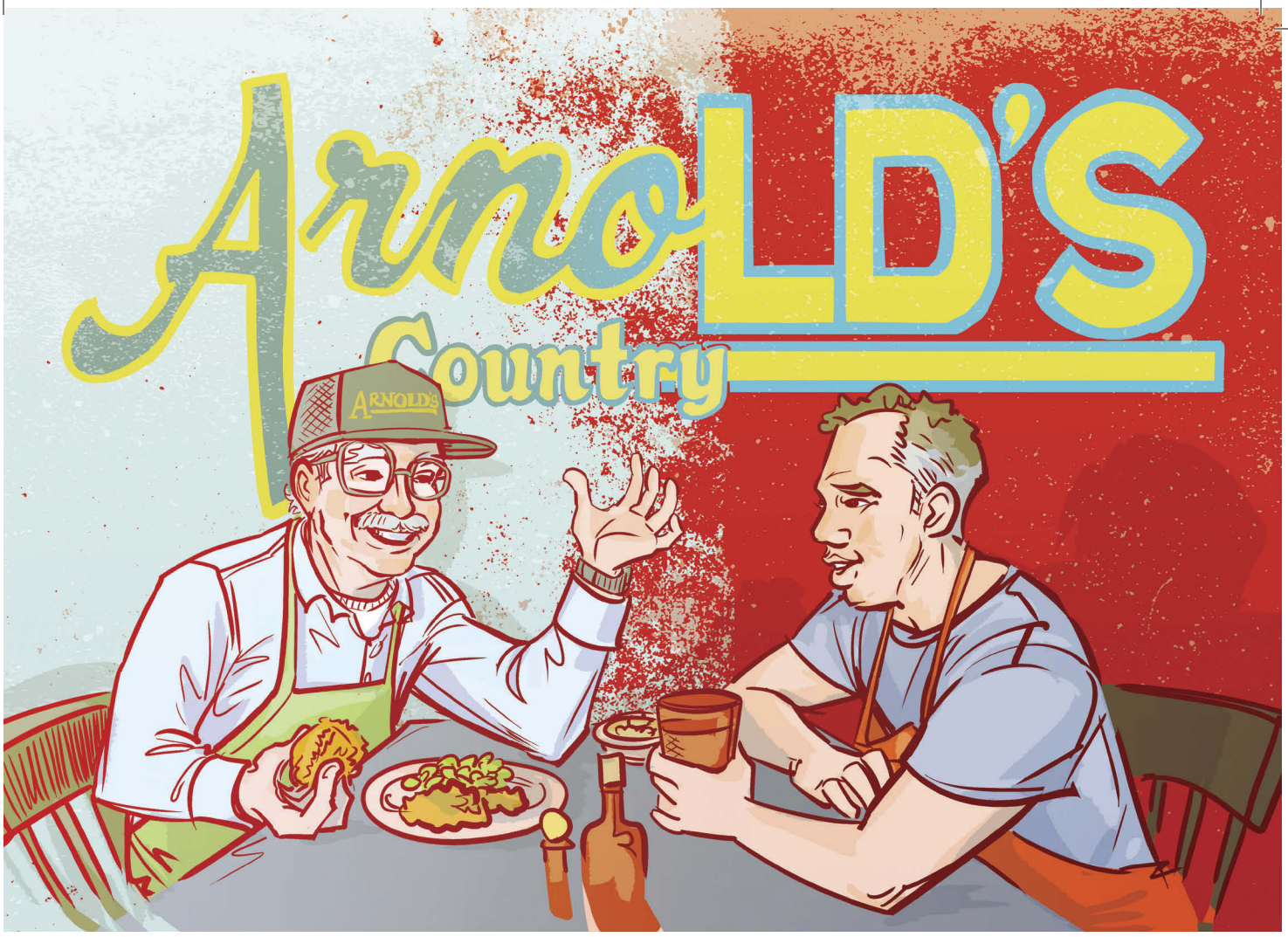
Throughout the workday, Kahlil bussed tables, rang up customers, picked greens, ran food, and washed dishes. He saw his dad serve construction workers, firefighters, doctors, and lawyers. In each customer's expression, he saw something he didn't expect: respect for his father's work.

Was this what it felt like, Kahlil wondered. *To be proud of your dad?*

JACK ARNOLD WAS BORN ON A KITCHEN table in 1937, and in many ways, he never left it. He grew up in a three-room house at the foot of the Blue Ridge Parkway in Virginia, with what he described as "God's creation" beyond his back door. A friend's father owned a local diner—vinyl-topped stools around a high counter, a Wurlitzer jukebox setting the mood. In his early teens, Jack started washing dishes there. One day, the fry cook didn't show up, and Jack took his place. Soon after, he began to prepare the vegetables and bread the veal cutlets.

Jack, a bright student, earned a partial scholarship to Vanderbilt. To pay the rest of his tuition, he pulled shifts in Rand Hall, the college cafeteria, as a line supervisor. After a stint at Belle Meade Buffet, he found a job working for Lynn Chandler, whom he called the "kingpin of the meat-and-three." Chandler ran the Elliston Place Soda Shop, a celebrated local spot, and hired Jack at one of his restaurants on Eighth Avenue. Chandler was a businessman more than a chef, and from him Jack learned how to be the face of a restaurant. This resonated with Jack, who described himself as "more personality than chef."

Jack is a man who uses words like "mulatto" in conversation without batting an eyelash. To cope with the breakneck pace of the restaurant industry, he turned to alcohol. To cope with its loneliness, he turned to waitresses. "Women have been my nemesis, to say the least," he once admitted in an oral history interview with the Southern Foodways Alliance.



In 1974, he married a woman two decades his junior named Rose Arrieta, who had immigrated to the United States from Colombia when she was five. The two operated a food truck. Rose, pregnant with Kahlil, started dropping chicken in the fryer at four in the morning. In 1982, they bought Lynn Chandler's meat-and-three on Eighth Avenue and renamed it Arnold's Country Kitchen.

On different mornings across the decades, Jack woke one or more of his five kids—Manuelito ("Mon"), Kahlil, Rose Emily, Savannah, and Franz—at 4:30 and brought them to work at the restaurant. During Kahlil's teenage years, father and son cussed and threw things across the kitchen. Kahlil can't recall a time when his father praised him. When he made a subpar dish, Jack let him know.

"This is shit, son," he'd say, tossing Kahlil's creations in the trash. "This isn't any good."

Yet almost paradoxically, Jack often reminded Kahlil that mistakes had their own value. "When you screw up, you remember. That leaves more of a memory than when you do something well."

ROSE ALWAYS HOPED KAHLIL WOULD leave the restaurant business. She wanted him to go to college, to do something more glamorous and less grueling, to become a doctor or a lawyer like his friends' parents. And yet he always returned to Arnold's, to Jack and Rose. If Kahlil was to live in the world of restaurants—an industry that, as the family knew, tended to fuel addictions—Rose appreciated that he worked in her kitchen, where she could keep an eye on him.

Kahlil briefly left Nashville for college at Tennessee Tech in Cookeville, an hour and a half away. He called home all the time. He always worried that Arnold's, which only accepted cash and checks, would get robbed; or that his dad would shoot someone with his AR-15. He only saw Jack fire his gun once at the restaurant. One Saturday when he was nineteen, he and Jack prepped food. The restaurant was closed, and the neighborhood—its industrial churn, its strip club and adult bookstore—was dead quiet. From the kitchen, Kahlil heard a tap at the back screen door, where he saw some men who slept at the local shelter.

"Hey, dad," he said. "Let's give them a little food."

Jack peered through the screen. "Son," he said. "They're gonna jump you if you open that door."

"No way!"

"Watch." Jack pushed open the door. One man stood directly in front of him. Two others crouched off to the side, invisible through the screen door, ready to pounce. Jack aimed his rifle at the sky and squeezed off five rounds. *Bam-bam-bam-bam-bam.*

"Get the fuck out of here!" Jack screamed as the men ran off. "Don't ever come back!"

For all Jack's volatility, he knew how to engender loyalty among customers. Customer service, Jack believed, started with the best food: something tangible that made people happy. So he ran his kitchen—always *his* kitchen—with authoritative precision. When he drank to excess, his temper flared. It didn't matter how many people were in the kitchen.

Rose describes herself as "the peacekeeper at Arnold's...the mediator." Most of all, she knew how to calm Jack down. But as Kahlil reached adulthood, he felt compelled to shoulder some of his parents' stress. He transferred to Middle Tennessee State in Murfreesboro, where he could live near home and work at the restaurant while he finished his degree in criminal justice.

Kahlil soon got married to Alyson Bennett. They

had two children: a son, Barrett, and a daughter, Juliette. Later, the couple adopted a second daughter, Savannah. Kahlil got an interview with the Secret Service but determined that career path wasn't compatible with family life.

He briefly left Arnold's to work as a general manager for Tom Morales at the Loveless Café, another Nashville stalwart famous for its biscuits. Kahlil hoped some of Tom's charisma might rub off on him. Soon, though, Jack's health began to fade. He'd spent his life on his feet in the kitchen, and he needed surgery. After his operation, he came right back to work. But it became clear that before long, he would need to leave the business.

Rose saw traces of Jack in Kahlil. They both loved the stage, the gladhanding, the showmanship of the restaurateur. Rose is a great cook—fried chicken and seafood are among her specialties—but a private person. When obligated to speak publicly, she prefers to stand next to one of her children so that she can grasp their hand. She had little interest in being the face of Arnold's, but she suspected Kahlil would. So she did what she knew was necessary: She called Morales, a good friend, and asked for her son back.

BY 2005, WHEN JACK RETIRED FROM Arnold's and Kahlil rejoined his mother, Nashville had changed around them. In 1999, a group of local developers bought twenty-five acres near Arnold's and drafted a vision for the neighborhood. By the end of the aughts, the result was a mixed-use neighborhood called The Gulch, packed with bars, fusion restaurants, high-rise apartments, and an Urban Outfitters. It was centrally located, half a mile south of Broadway, the type of neighborhood that could make you feel, for a minute, like you lived in a bigger city. It was the type of place that made sense to transplants from New York and Los Angeles.

"We're not doing anything new, son," Jack often told Kahlil. "Stick to what works."

"He set a firm foundation for my family to follow and expand upon," Rose says. "And I am very grateful to him." But to survive, Rose and Kahlil needed to embrace both tradition and innovation. "Adaptability," Rose replies when asked what kept Arnold's open for four decades. They stayed true to the foundation of consistency and quality that Jack built, and from there they began to tinker and evolve.

Kahlil and Rose figured that New Nashville would probably be confused by chicken livers, so they added fish to the daily menu, along with rotating specials. They changed the catfish recipe and dusted off the restaurant's smoker, in which they made brisket. They added sides they hadn't previously offered like cauliflower casserole, corn pudding, and succotash.

The atmosphere in the kitchen became more collegial and collaborative. Dishes often passed through several iterations before hitting the steam table, shaped by the palates and perspectives of multiple cooks.

While they evolved, Rose and Kahlil also clung to some of the old: to Jack's high standards of customer service and food quality, and to the nostalgic touches that were their own selling points. Near the beginning of the city's twenty-first-century renaissance, a reporter from New York visited Arnold's, unaware of the restaurant's cash-and-check-only policy.

"All I have is a credit card," he told Rose at the register. "Let me go get some cash."

"Don't worry about it," she said. "When you get back to New York, just send me a check." He did—and, as Rose recalls, he included the anecdote in his article.

The national culinary establishment began to recognize in Arnold's what locals had known for decades: that its food was a totem, somehow encompassing each corner of the growing city. In 2009, Arnold's won an America's Classic award from the James Beard Foundation. Guy Fieri visited. Dolly Parton ordered takeout: chicken livers and creamed corn. At John Egerton's behest, Kahlil competed in, and won, a shrimp and grits competition alongside some of the most prestigious chefs in town.

As its national profile grew, Arnold's maintained its base of regular customers. Rachel Louise Martin, a journalist who often writes about Nashville food, cites Arnold's location—on a busy four-lane street within stumbling distance of Lower Broadway and downtown offices—as a reason it thrived as the city changed.

There were bigger forces at play, too, Martin says. People who move here are always eager to grab hold of something that makes the city theirs. In 2017, when the Nashville Predators hockey team made a surprise run to the Stanley Cup Finals, bars were full, Broadway was packed, and everyone shared in collective joy. Whether you'd been here for three decades or three months, you could high-five the stranger next to you when the Preds scored.

Nashville food provides a similar opportunity.

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"I think food is a way that people who aren't raised here can start to feel like they're from here," Martin says, pointing to the proliferation of hot chicken—and the enduring pull of Arnold's.

"Because this is someplace where, at least historically," she continues, "you need to be three generations deep before you can really say you're from Nashville. ...And I think anything that can help people feel like this is their town is a valuable cultural touchstone. Especially when it uses lingo folks not from the South don't know, like meat-and-three."

In 2012, Jack's thirty-year lease was about to end, and Rose and Kahlil saw their building for sale on a commercial real estate website. They ran the numbers and realized that if they were willing to take a big risk, they could buy the property themselves. They took out a loan and combined it with their own savings to reach $750,000. They purchased their building and its two neighboring lots.

LIKE MOST RESTAURANTS, ARNOLD'S lost money in the early months of the Covid pandemic. Once more, the family adapted. When Nashville started to eat out again, Kahlil and Rose expanded beyond lunch hours, offering a dinner menu they called Arnold's After Dark. It was a hit. Customers could order specials like hanger steak over cheese grits and drink craft beer and cocktails. To help with the rollout, Kahlil's eldest, Barrett, moved back to town from Chicago.

Kahlil had always tried to nudge Barrett away from the restaurant business. When he graduated from Lancaster Christian Academy, Barrett thought he'd become a preacher. In undergrad—fascinated by the humanities, spellbound by philosophy, religion, and ancient history—he realized he wanted to become an academic. As part of a study he worked on with a professor in Chicago, he delved into what ancient philosophers like Plato had written about the legendary city of Atlantis. Although he's continued to find opportunities in academia, Barrett often ends up back in Nashville, working for his father and grandparents. He started at Arnold's at six or seven years old, peeling potatoes and serving tea. He remembers watching as his grandfather tossed his dad's "shit" dishes in the garbage. Then Jack looked at Barrett, nodded, and smiled.

Barrett, as laid-back as Kahlil is animated, is still imprinted with traces of his father and grandfather. In part because of Jack, he didn't drink alcohol until he was twenty-five. Like Kahlil, like Jack, he's ambitious. When he's asked about the DNA that he, Jack, and Kahlil share, Barrett thinks for a moment. "I'd say a love for the stage."

Kahlil wants Barrett to understand what this business takes from you, what it took from Jack and Rose. When he looks back on his run at Arnold's, he thinks about the vacations he didn't take, the places he's never seen, the marriage

that didn't last. Kahlil hopes Barrett will chase dreams beyond the kitchen—the same wish his mother Rose once had for him.

By fall 2022, property taxes in The Gulch had risen. Rose, by then sixty-five years old, felt drained. Kahlil, in theory, wanted to take some of those vacations he'd missed. The bet mother and son made when they bought the building had paid out. In a decade, the property's value had tripled to $2.1 million. The adjacent lots, which the Arnolds also own, are worth nearly double that amount. Just as the Arnolds knew how to survive, they knew when to exit.

THE NASHVILLE MEAT-AND-THREE ISN'T doomed without Arnold's. Silver Sands Café, near downtown, is in its third generation of family ownership. Yet much of Nashville seemed to agree there was something special about Arnold's. It was a mirror in which the city saw the best version of itself.

"It was a spot where a lot of people from different walks of life all ended up," Martin says. "Which made it a really valuable third space. It was somewhere where you would eat next to a construction worker, whose people have been here for generations. You would see people of other races, you would see people from out of town, from in town, you'd see record executives having their meetings."

"So it gave a much broader cross-section of Nashville, and I don't know that we're also going to have *that*."

On Saturday, January 7, 2023, Kahlil opened the restaurant's doors for the last time. A line had already formed around the block. Kahlil thanked the crowd, then started to cry.

Though he's still married to Rose, Jack now lives in a retirement home. Kahlil sees him regularly. Rose suffered a minor stroke last winter, so she stayed home and watched the final shift on a livestream. Barrett felt ambivalent about Arnold's last day. There had been times, he says, when he thought he might one day run the place.

"I was a little mad, because when I was younger, I thought I would inherit the restaurant," he says. "That was probably the end goal. So it was bittersweet also, in a sense, because I'm happy for my Grandma Rose. Like, I'm happy for them. They're retiring." He pauses. "But I'm also a little mad." He grins and laughs.

To start the day, Kahlil and Barrett made 7Up pancakes, which have become an Arnold's staple. Kahlil claims they cooked up the recipe together, while Barrett maintains it came to him in a dream. Barrett is the one who added the secret ingredient: a dash of lemon-lime soda. Now, even Kahlil admits that Barrett makes better pancakes than he does.

Along with pancakes, the last steam table offered meatloaf, roast beef, hot chicken tenders, blackened trout, baby back ribs, and fried chicken. The veggies included mashed potatoes, green beans, turnip greens, and white beans.

At the final After Dark, they served smoked brisket. Preston James, a singer-songwriter Kahlil swears will be famous, played a set. After he finished, Kahlil stepped onto the restaurant's stage and gave a toast, raising his Jack-and-Coke to the crowd. He thanked his family and the community for everything. The night crescendoed into karaoke. In today's Nashville, there's one song to sing when you're feeling maudlin, and Kahlil launched into its chorus.

You're as smooth as Tennessee whiskey
You're as sweet as strawberry wine

Even though vacations sound good in theory, Kahlil's a restaurateur for life. He can't keep himself out of the game. He loves the showmanship, the connections, the chance to face the people. He'll be back, but this was the last time he'd work at the place his parents had built.

At the end of the night, after all the regulars had gone home, Kahlil walked to the serving line. Barrett, who had worked the whole shift behind the scenes in the kitchen, came out to join him. He'd sliced a mountain of roast beef that day, and calluses—the outlines of which were visible when I interviewed him a month later—covered his fingers. Now, when he thinks of his future, he pictures himself giving history lectures to rapt classrooms.

There, in front of the steam table—the Arnold family's stage for three generations—Kahlil wrapped Barrett in a bear hug.

"Thank you," he told his son.

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