



S OUT H B Y S OUT H EAST

On Atlanta's Buford Highway Hieu Pham specializes in Cajun crawfish with a Vietnamese accent

As told to Kate Medley by Hieu Pham, May 31, 2010

"One day, I literally woke up in the middle of the night and said, ' You know, I might as well do something I enjoy. I'm twiddling my thumbs here in college for years trying to figure out what to do. I love to bake— why don't I go to culinary school?'"

Vermont turned out to be a lot like home. People ate pies. Lots of pies. And they greeted each other by name in the grocery store. The New England Culinary Institute, in Montpelier, was a perfect educational match. Dwayne recalls, "I knew from the very first time that I rolled my croissant dough that this was for me."

At NE CI, Dwayne discovered that he is a perfectionist. And he learned that the ranks of pastry chefs are well populated by cooks attracted to routines, methods, and measurements. "I don't like to fail in life," Ingraham says. "And I like to have all the tools I need to succeed."

That approach is yielding impressive results. This winter's jumbled-sounding chocolate roulade—with coffee cream, flambéed bananas, chocolate sauce, Chantilly cream, and salted peanuts—initially threw John Currence for a loop. But it made sense once he tasted it, and the "Funky Monkey"—named after a coffee drink Dwayne fell for in Las Vegas—made the menu.

So have some family favorites. "I put my mother's sweet potato pie on the menu last fall at the Grocery," Ingraham says. " The only difference is I made a marshmallow fluff to put on top."

Ingraham's dream is to someday open his own place in Oxford. He wants to serve the kind of elaborate Sunday brunch he fell in love with at culinary school. " That complete buffet style," he says. "Where somebody's making your omelets fresh, right there. There's a pastry section with miniature petit-fours and petite pastries and a showpiece that pulls you in, somebody doing cherries jubilee and bananas foster, flaring up in front of you."

I, for one, am hoping for macarons. 🍪

Vanessa Gregory is a writer and an assistant professor of journalism at the University of Mississippi.

PHOTO, PAGE 6 by Katie Williamson.



BORN IN ATLANTA in 1983 to Vietnamese immigrant parents, Hieu Pham calls himself “a true peach boy; a Southern guy.” As a teenager, Hieu spent many summers and holiday vacations at youth camps sponsored by the Vietnamese Baptist Church. There he made close friends from New Orleans, who taught him about Louisiana cuisine. He recalls, “they would bring sacks of crawfish up to Atlanta, or whenever I came to New Orleans, we would have a big seafood feast.”

Hieu opened Crawfish Shack Seafood on Buford Highway in August 2008, when the economic crisis was at its worst. The strip-mall restaurant almost didn't survive its first six months. Four years later, it's going strong, serving a menu anchored by boiled or steamed shellfish, fried fish, and New Orleans-style po-boys. Hieu manages a staff of some twenty employees, but at its core, the Crawfish Shack remains a family affair.

MY PARENTS ARE FROM VIETNAM. My dad is half-Chinese, half-Vietnamese; my mom is half-Cambodian and half-Vietnamese. They both were refugees from Vietnam during the Vietnam War. They came to Atlanta in 1980—they were sponsored by a Vietnamese Baptist Church. They actually met on the boat on their way over here.

I have only visited Vietnam once. On my mom's side, everybody is actually over here in the United States. The majority of my dad's family actually still lives in Vietnam, in Soc Trang, south of Saigon.

My mom grew up and was raised in Cambodia, near the border where Vietnam and Cambodia meet. My mom told me that she worked most her whole entire life and did not have a lot of food. She traveled a lot between the countries selling cigarette boxes, rice, just anything just to make a buck or two. Due to her traveling, my mom actually picked up how to cook Malaysian, Thai, and of course Vietnamese and Cambodian. Growing up I ate a lot of home-cooked South Asian food. My mom was not really always about spice so much; but really about flavor. She always added a lot more ingredients than necessary for a typical Vietnamese dish. My mom would be the number one influence in my cooking.

Crawfish Shack Seafood is a Cajun inspired restaurant, but it's not a typical Cajun restaurant. There is a lot of Asian influence behind the ingredients of the food, which gives a different taste, a little bit

more enhanced flavoring and aroma. We wanted to make sure that the food was well balanced and properly cooked.

One of the Vietnamese products that we brought to the restaurant was the nuoc mia, or simply, in English, sugarcane drink. It's just a freshly squeezed sugarcane stalk. It's a wonderful drink because a lot of customers remember chewing on it as a little kid as a snack. So I have a machine that compresses the whole stick to juice it out. It's mixed with a slice of orange or kumquat to bring out a little bit of the citrus taste behind the sugarcane, so that it's not overly sweet. It was the type of drink that I wanted to draw Vietnamese customers in; another thing that made the Shack a little different that customers could enjoy with their spicy seafood besides sweet tea. 🍹

PHOTO, PAGE 9 by Kate Medley.



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The graphic features a bright yellow background with black text. At the bottom, there are three black silhouettes of wine bottles of varying heights. The text is centered and reads: "Visit the Southern Foodways Alliance Culinary Hub at the Charleston Wine and Food Festival for SFA films, folks, and food." Below this is the website "www.charlestonwineandfood.com" and the dates "March 1–March 3".