construction crews. My friends smiled while I pieced things together. Maybe it was the drinks, but meeting this young man felt like more than coincidence. In that moment, it seemed divined. By this time I was already set to move out of state. Everything seemed heightened, everything a potential last or never again. Here I'd been given a chance to tell this young man how much his family's food meant to me—something I'd failed to do any of the times I dined at Taqueria Jaripeo.

I'm sure my words fell short, but the young man appeared happy and proud to hear how his family's restaurant had changed the way I thought about Mexican food. My friends and I bought him whiskey shots and asked when the restaurant would reopen. A foolish question, I now realize. Change had come. Its fulfillment would be the development of high-rise condominiums, chain stores, and restaurants near the University of Alabama campus, not the return of small, family-owned businesses in a neglected, largely Latino neighborhood a couple miles away.

The young man left sometime before the band finished that night, and I never saw him again. It's possible that he, like many Latinos who lost their homes in the tornado, left the state altogether. I remember that night now, and many others from this period in my life, like a burn. I wish I could remember the young man's name.

As Nate and I pulled away from the vacant lot last November, I was glad to have reconnected with my past. Since moving away from the state where I was born and raised, returning to my past has become something of a fetish, though returning usually leaves me feeling worse than the missing does. As Nate and I crossed some railroad tracks, I thought about the first time I went to Taqueria Jaripeo. It was summer and I brought a friend, which I tried to do every time after for the selfish reason that I wanted the restaurant to stay open so I could keep eating there. My friend and I were hungover from a night of drinking and dancing at Egan's. I don't remember what she ordered that day. What I do remember is holding my chorizo torta out for her to taste, how the sandwich spilled itself onto the table when she took a bite.

After lunch we bought canned beers at a gas station then went to swim in a pool at an apartment complex where neither of us lived. We were alone. We drank those beers while standing chest-deep in the piss-warm water. Later, the sky opened up and dumped rain on our heads. We didn't care or dare get out. This was not a storm, but a shower, and we were happily full on Mexican food and beer.

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VIEW FROM THE TREEHOUSE

CHEF JASON ZYGMONT HAS A KICKASS RESUME AND A DISTINCTIVE CULINARY VOICE. BUT IS THAT ENOUGH FOR THE CRITICS?

by John Kessler

Let's start with the dish. This plate is slate gray and heavy, so concave it wants to become a bowl. If you eat out often in restaurants, you know it. Perhaps you remember your futile attempts to balance a knife on its curved rim. Maybe it once held an off-center swoosh of spice-dusted roasted carrots in yogurt, one of those plating designs that looks like yin without its yang. In a different restaurant, that dish might contain a mound of farmstead goodness: Carolina Gold rice grits, Cherokee Purple tomatoes, and heirloom okra topped with an enormously special chicken leg.

At the Treehouse in Nashville, that plate cradles a serving of pasta that looks like a Dale Chihuly glass sculpture and tastes like nothing you've ever eaten. Soft, fat agnolotti filled with puréed caramelized sunchokes wallow like baby hippos in a ruby red cranberry sauce. A scattering of Brussels sprouts' leaves, seared to emerald translucence, crest the top. Even the white shreds that dust the plate bring a surprise; they look like Parmesan but deliver a sinus-clearing dose of horseradish. Everything about this combination of flavors wallops you with surprises. The pasta pillows squish sweetly; the sauce shrieks with fruit acid; the leaves steer the flavors toward bitterness and char. But does it all work?

It's hard to answer that question when the ingredients—the primary tastes themselves—create such a wall of flavor. Did Phil Spector's Wall of Sound strike virgin ears as a mile wide and an inch deep, lush but weirdly shallow, unfathomable because 'fathom' is the wrong word? Or maybe the better musical reference is Prince's "When Doves Cry." This dish is a song belted out with heart-gripping energy but no bass line, a trailblazer of the treble clef. I liked many dishes at the Treehouse better and a few not as well. But the sunchoke agnolotti was what you might call the most Zgymontian, and by the time the waiter cleared the plate, I still hadn't made up my mind about

it. That's a good thing.

Chef Jason Zygmont is 31. You either will or will not be hearing more about him. He's at that point in his career where he is more than a hired gun and less than a marquee chef. Nashville's general dining public knows the restaurant, which was around before Zygmont came on board; Yelpers enthusiastically pitch their thumbs up and down, but rarely notice fresh voices from the kitchen. The local dining crowd, however, recognizes the new auteur in town. *Eater Nashville* named him its 2016 Chef of the Year, citing his "unique" fare and "Instagram-worthy plating." Local food writers applaud his ambition; national food writers... well, they're coming. Or not. They will make the call to put him on the national radar. Or not.

Let me—a writer who parachuted into Nashville for 48 hours and two meals—tell you something about Jason Zygmont. He has worked at the Treehouse for almost a year and a half, where he roasts a very special chicken, indeed, and lacquers pork shanks until they are as shiny as toys. Above all else, he manages to find rare drama in ugly root vegetables. Seriously, you will eat wedges of his twice-cooked celery root in fermented chili emulsion with caramelized onion cream and exclaim, "Celeriac, I hardly knew ye."

Zygmont grew up in Alpharetta, an Atlanta suburb, and attended the University of Georgia. He left school in 2006 and did not, as his parents hoped, parlay his philosophy studies into a law career. The cooking bug had gotten its chompers in. When he wasn't trying to focus on David Hume's *A Treatise of Human Nature,* he was glued to *Emeril Live* on television and dreaming his way through *The French Laundry Cookbook*. After college, he put in his sweat equity at one restaurant job, then another, then climbed the Atlanta totem pole. He cooked under Linton Hopkins at Restaurant Eugene, Hugh Acheson at Empire State South, and Kevin Gillespie at Woodfire Grill. At the latter restaurant, I first remember seeing Zygmont in the open kitchen, back when he was a chubby kid with wild hair. I remember walking past him at the end of a slamming night, his face pink from the oven heat. Hunched over, he wolfed a quick plate of food before breaking down his station.

When Zygmont realized he didn't have a lot more to learn in Atlanta, he sent out his resume "to the ten best restaurants in the world" without any expectations. Within two days, he received an offer to *stage* at Noma in Copenhagen, the restaurant that introduced discerning diners to both fried reindeer moss and those slate gray plates as frames for naturalistic new directions in cooking. In other words, jackpot.

Noma's American chef de cuisine at the time, Matt Orlando, took a shine to this young,

Natalie Nelson

Macerated butterkin, black mint, feta, jalapeño, puffed rice

Southern *stagiaire*, starting him in the production kitchen. A quick study, Zygmont was promoted to the test kitchen where he helped the research and development chef make the case for a dish composed of Danish miso, sea snails, elderflower, and raw-ish potatoes.

In 2012, after five months, Zygmont's time was up. Orlando told him, "If you don't do New York now, you won't have the chance again." By "do New York," he meant the top of the global food chain, working in the kind of kitchens that would break anyone who isn't young, energetic, talented, able to weather abuse, and almost pathologically hungry for advancement. He got Zygmont a position as a *commis* at Per Se, the restaurant so high up in the food world it was beyond the top floor. (Like King Kong, it got knocked down last year by an unflattering review in *The New York Times*.)

After experiencing "the highest form of teamwork" at Noma, Zygmont found the kitchen culture at Per Se a shock. "It was militaristic—all about 'get your shit done,' and if not there were six sous chefs there to yell at you," he recalls. "The problem was, you had to figure out how to do one project to make six people happy." He spent more than a year in New York, first at Per Se then Atera, another New York fine-dining fantasia that now charges $275 per dinner and offers "an immersive sensory dining experience" and a $95 "tea progression." He

Jason Zygmont

was working on what he considered "a doctorate in technique," but it came with so much daily stress, bullying, and abuse (a *lot* of shit needs to get done to immerse senses) he didn't think he could hold on much longer.

"I was about to have a fucking panic attack when Hugh Acheson called," he says. His former boss reached out with an offer to take over the kitchen at his flagship restaurant, Five & Ten in Athens, Georgia. "Hugh bailed me out of a bad situation and gave me the biggest promotion of my career," Zygmont says with relief still in his voice. Plus, it had long been his goal to come back South. "I know the farmers; it's the pantry I'm comfortable with."

By the time he got his picture taken for the Five & Ten website, he looked like a different person from the frazzled line cook I saw before. Coiffed, slender, and handsome, he sat on a sofa and stared directly into the camera, his dark-washed jeans cuffed just high enough to display stylish footwear. Enter the chef.

I tried his food once at Five & Ten as a critic for *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* and wasn't quite sure what to make of it. His pan-seared trout was such a stunner—the skin so crisp, the flesh so supple—it could serve as his dissertation for that doctorate in technique. It arrived nestled in a camera-ready tableau of red beets, samphire (salty "sea beans"), and pickled mushrooms.

I think I found a dissonant harmony somewhere in this colorful freakout. But the dish was finished before my thoughts were. I wanted very much to know his cooking better, yet Athens was too far from my home in Atlanta to conduct the level of research (four, five visits?) this tricky food required. Zygmont, I could tell, didn't cook to be loved. He wasn't going to burger you up and bacon you down, and push every fat, salt, and sugar hedonic hotspot in your brain.

So I punted. I wrote the one visit, un-starred, "can't yet make the call" first look review. And I stashed my curiosity. Until now, it felt like unfinished business.

You think you know where this story is going: I describe the dish that makes you ravenous. (Hint: it's 'nduja on toast.) I go on to quote Zygmont extensively (say, about fermentation, his obsession) and make the call to put him on the national radar. But forget about Jason Zygmont for a moment. Since I've introduced a musical analogy, let's change tunes. After all we're in Nashville.

Specifically, we're in East Nashville, which the local tourism authority calls "eclectic" and "hip"—a place with a "low-key vibe and neighborly personality" where you can hear local songwriters perform and drink good coffee. The area has a diffuse feeling, with strips and clusters of retail scattered among Georgian, Victorian, and Cape Cod homes. It's not as pedestrian friendly as the 12South neighborhood, but maybe cooler.

SOFT, FAT AGNOLOTTI FILLED WITH PURÉED CARAMELIZED SUNCHOKES WALLOW LIKE BABY HIPPOS IN A RUBY RED CRANBERRY SAUCE.

The Treehouse lies right in its central thicket, called Five Points, the one place you can't find parking. For nearly 25 years, a legendary fiddle player lived in this house. Session musician Buddy Spicher (pronounced "spiker") recorded with everyone from Dolly Parton to Bill Monroe, from Johnny Paycheck to George Jones. If you can hear in your mind the lush string chords framing Linda Ronstadt's voice in "Long Long Time," that's Spicher. He personally built the restaurant's namesake tree house, now used for small parties.

In 2013 Spicher's son and grandson transformed the space

with the intention of making it into a late-night industry hang for Nashville's burgeoning cadre of chefs and waiters. They reclaimed a lot of wood and found materials (old doorknobs, flashlights), kept the building's meandering quirkiness and put the small bar front and center. They opened with the chef Todd Alan Martin, who played with crowd-pleasing Latin American flavors.

ZYGMONT IS NO UMAMI FREAK EAGER TO BLISS-BLAST EVERY DISH WITH PARMESAN AND SOY SAUCE. HIS SENSIBILITY VEERS MORE SOUR-SWEET.

Right across the street from the Treehouse lies white-tablecloth Margot Café & Bar, which is not the kind of restaurant visiting food writers often mention because it holds no news value and appeals to baby boomers. But it remains significant because owner-chef Margot McCormack jump-started the East Nashville restaurant scene here 15 years ago.

Why talk about all this? Because someone familiar with the context of this restaurant (a local critic, say) would take it all into account. A musician sees the Treehouse in a different light from a chef. The young woman and East Nashville resident I brought to my first visit found the Treehouse much improved from her pre-Zygmont meal 18 months prior. ("I've got to bring my husband!" she enthused.) The next night I returned with a mother of grown children who drove from across town. She waited a minute for me out front and saw chef Margot through a window across the street, bustling about her kitchen. That made her happy. That was her restaurant. Her daughter, she said, liked the Treehouse.

Neither woman had heard of Zygmont before entering the restaurant. Both left fans.

A strong voice sets the tone of his menu, which feels local and seasonal, vegetable-forward, very much of the South but untethered from anything resembling repertory. Order shareable plates, and they become an impromptu tasting menu, a game of palate pong.

There are pink slices of house-cured lonzino hiding beneath a tumble of grilled rutabaga matchsticks and a sour apple relish. Grilled parsnip lengths loll in blackberry preserves, but you can't let down your guard because lashings of bitter dandelion and fermented pecan add a well-earned menace. (Parsnips do have an unsettling personality.) Fingerling sweet potatoes from a local farm share a bowl rich she-crab broth with smoked trout roe and peanuts.

Jason Zygmont

Zygmont plays: Grilled king mackerel, fermented green tomato buerre blanc.

And then there's that 'nduja on toast, sourdough rusks dappled with the spicy Sicilian pork spread, burrata cheese, gushy persimmon, and minty basil. You want to dance to these flavors.

Zygmont seems less focused on the perfect bite than other chefs. He's no umami freak eager to bliss-blast every dish with Parmesan and soy sauce. He will never develop a famous hamburger. His sensibility veers toward that Scandinavian—dare I say "New Nordic?"—sour-sweet axis. "Acidity is what I most crave," he says, adding, "A dish doesn't need to be completely balanced. You pick up a taste in one course and find it in the next."

And he ferments like he's a newly discovered species of bacteria: *Zgymonti bacillus*. He spices sauce with fermented turnip juice, which tastes like horseradish, or eviscerates the richness of richly braised beef cheek with fermented green strawberries. He loves warm flavors but has a cold A.F. sensibility. I dig it.

One can focus on the shareable plates on his menu or go large and get a "family style" meal. That might be an entire roasted chicken with a side of black-charred broccoli and a salad of shaved radishes and dandelion greens. Let me cheer that chicken from Quarter Springs Farm—bathed in a reduced *glace*—the chickeny-est experience of all my years. And let me cheer those sides, so bittersweet and serious, such a slap of vegetal funk, that they cut right to the core of this meal, that place where dirt meets appetite.

As an old-school critic I am a consumer advocate who has researched this menu enough to recommend it, with some reservations. Zygmont can deliver bristling invention and deep satisfaction, but he also dares you to make up your own damn mind.

I worry that so much restaurant writing today has migrated from local to national, and thus become travel writing. Critics cull their meals to curate experiences for the reader. Nashville becomes the cheeseburger at Husk (which is toe-curlingly wonderful), the tasting menu at the Catbird Seat, the line at Biscuit Love.

All fine. I get it. But I do wonder where the discourse is headed. We need chefs who push and critics who push back. Otherwise we are like those plates, framing the chef's narrative, rather than challenging it.

John Kessler was the longtime dining critic for the Atlanta Journal-Constitution. *He currently serves as the chairman of the James Beard Foundation journalism awards committee and is working on a book with The Giving Kitchen, an Atlanta nonprofit. He lives in Chicago.*