



ABOVE: (from left) Duane Nutter, Tiffanie Barriere, and Reggie Washington

MOBILE'S MODERN SOUL

THE ATLANTA DREAM TEAM OF DUANE NUTTER, REGGIE WASHINGTON, AND TIFFANIE BARRIERE ARE BRINGING THEIR SOUTHERN-GLOBAL STYLE TO ALABAMA'S PORT CITY

by Julia Bainbridge

WOULD YOU CALL meatloaf, sandwiched with sautéed spinach and a fried egg, “soul food”? Or would you call okra, served as a side to soy-glazed grouper, “soul food”?

Through those dishes, chef Duane Nutter started communicating to diners at One Flew South in Atlanta, Georgia’s Hartsfield-Jackson International Airport in 2008. He calls his style “Southernational”—food rooted in Southern cooking and inspired by the chef’s travels around the world. He doesn’t call it soul food.

“It’s from *my* soul,” Nutter told me, “but it’s not the TV soul that you think is soul food. It has a lot to do with me being raised in Seattle and being from Louisiana: My collard greens may have star anise in them.”

Matthew Coughlin; top right, Jeff Moore

“There is always an expectation that if you’re a black guy, you’ll do things a certain way,” he continued. “I do things my way.”

This spring, Nutter, restaurateur Reggie Washington, and beverage director Tiffanie Barriere will open Southern National in Mobile, Alabama. In the process they will go from one of the world’s busiest airports to a port city that helped build the South.

Like many cities across the country, Mobile is having something of a renaissance. Employment trends in the city are promising: Shipbuilder Austal USA, the city’s largest private employer, has been hiring robustly from 2009 to 2015, the same year that Airbus brought its \$600 million facility to the United States. This trio is making sure the rebirth includes better dining.

Perhaps most importantly, Nutter and Washington will own Southern National. It falls under Port City Hospitality, the name that Nutter and Washington gave to their LLC.

Across the South, equity is an issue for black chefs. As former *Atlanta* magazine restaurant critic Corby Kummer wrote in his farewell review, there are “not enough black chefs and owners, something I’d hoped would go with the diverse restaurant crowds and staff.” African American representation is weak across the country’s kitchens. Kummer wondered what could be done to bring more diversity into the back of the house.

Southern National is an example of one solution, hatched 300-odd miles south. “I was like, ‘Hey, I’m not gonna keep takin’ out your trash,’” Nutter said about ending his relationship with One Flew South. “I’m gonna grow up and own something.” The turning point came during a 2:30 a.m.

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phone call from Delta’s operations manager. A fire alarm had gone off, and it was Nutter’s name that was listed as One Flew South’s emergency contact. “I don’t know why they didn’t just call the maintenance guy,” he said. Nutter drove to the airport, met with mechanics and technicians, and solved the problem. Now, if he has to answer 2:30 a.m. phone calls, Nutter wants to do it as an equity partner.

American media consumers expect stories about people of color in this industry to be stories of underdogs. This one isn’t. As a boy, Nutter wanted to cook, so he found a way, developing a relationship with Darryl Evans, the kingpin Atlanta chef of the early 1980s. Evans, who was black, led the modern Southern restaurant Azalea, forging a cuisine that was grounded in the



A rendering of the soon-to-open Southern National in Mobile, Alabama

South but not limited by the South.

Nutter's family didn't get why he'd want to do "domestic work," which they, black descendants of slaves, felt was a step back.

Our acknowledgment that minorities face challenges isn't unfounded, though. Port City Hospitality is just one of a few shining examples of success. "We are a part of the small groups of African American guys in the industry who have been able to create a brand and open on the level that we're doing it," said Washington, who was born and raised in Mobile.

His cousin, Oliver Washington IV, a fourth-generation horticulturist, still manages the family's 50-acre plant nursery as well as their pecan, muscadine, kumquat, and satsuma orchards. The two men recently launched the five-acre Down the Road Farm. Ten miles from Southern National,

it will supply the restaurant with fruits, vegetables, and herbs.

Nutter wants the food at Southern National to reflect his style and ambition, but he also wants it to be approachable. His pimento cheese plate will come with pickled cauliflower and sesame crackers, and he will top his chicken schnitzel with crawfish sauce. "You don't want to show up in a new town, flexin' with a bunch of tweezers," he said. "You gotta cook food that people want to eat. You know, there's a whole fleet of people over there making \$85,000 a year, but they drive F-150s and wear blue jeans every day."

Nutter wants Southern National to be "fun, a little bit loud—somewhere you come after work to grab a drink, and then, on the weekends, you can get dressed up and get something to eat," he said. "I want it to be like a country club that everybody can come to." 🍷

Julia Bainbridge is the food editor of Atlanta magazine and a James Beard Award-nominated writer. She's also the host and creator of The Lonely Hour, a podcast about loneliness that's not a bummer.

Courtesy of Port City Hospitality, LLC

THE VALUE OF SOUTHERN FOOD

AN ACADEMIC TALLIES UP WHAT PRESTIGE AND PROGRESS ARE ACTUALLY WORTH

by Kat Kinsman

DR. KRISHNENDU RAY HAS CRUNCHED THE NUMBERS AND EATEN the food. Researching his most recent monograph *The Ethnic Restaurateur*, the New York University associate professor and author delved into data from Michelin and Zagat to assess the influence and reputation of world cuisines. He compared those cuisines by the price and prestige they command in restaurants. Southern food "took a beating," in his words, on prestige. But Ray isn't counting it out. He's convinced that one future of American food is in small Southern cities.

What does your research tell you about the perception of the value of Southern food?

I have data from 1986 to 2016 from the bigger markets on the coasts, and Chicago. I'll start on a cautionary note on what I saw in terms of the data about New York City, and America's top restaurants. I asked: "What cuisines are popular? What are the cuisines that have prestige?" I count prestige by considering the average price of a meal for one person with two glasses of wine. Higher price means higher prestige. I noticed the precipitous decline in the category of "Southern" in terms of price.

What was behind this decline?

A couple of things are going on. One is that there is confusion and anxiety about what is Southern—



Photos courtesy of Krishnendu Ray