

Savannah[®]

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Jason Starnes



The Alida Hotel

Last June, just a few months before The Alida Hotel celebrated its one-year anniversary, a new chef came to town. Now, Atlanta transplant and North Carolina native Jason Starnes oversees the West River Street hotel's entire culinary program: Rhett, The Lost Square rooftop bar and The Trade Room lobby bar.

Starnes says cooking chose him at a young age. His first memories of the kitchen include cooking lessons from his grandparents and father, which might explain his collaborative and familial approach to managing The Alida's culinary team.

Although the overall menu skews Southern and sophisticated, diners can taste Starnes' German roots in dishes like Rhett's beet spätzle, a twist on an Eastern European pasta. On Starnes' core menu, artichoke risotto with Carolina gold rice keeps time with molasses-brined pork chop with glazed turnips and candied garlic jus. And at Rhett, guests can eat good and feel good about supporting business close to home: Starnes is also leading the initiative to source all food from within 150 miles of Savannah.

Below, Starnes champions simple ingredients, good conversation and community — both in and out of the kitchen.

On creative genes: I wanted to cook because it was a creative outlet

I could share with my family. Both of my grandmothers were in the food industry, and my grandfather did his own butchering. My friends made fun of me for taking home economics in high school, but back then high schools didn't have culinary

programs, so it was the only opportunity

I had to express myself.

On local food AND local jobs: I come from a rural town in North Carolina that was built around the furniture industry, and 15 or so years ago I watched this industry move all the business overseas, which absolutely collapsed the economy. You're talking about a town of 35,000 people with an unemployment rate of almost 40 percent.

From then on, I decided that when I had the ability to make decisions on when, what and where I'm going to buy from, I'm going to try to keep as much money in the local economy as I can — and that's what I'm doing now at Rhett.

On collaborative kitchens: It's important to me that my sous chefs and my cooks have an opinion and some investment in the menus we produce.

I think it builds consistency and creates an opportunity for them to grow. I define Rhett's success based on the success of the team around me. We're really trying to break down that traditional hierarchy and build a collaborative kitchen.

On his cooking philosophy:

Buy local as often as possible, and don't over-manipulate. Let the ingredients speak for themselves. I'm very ingredient-driven, so I'm not the kind of person who's going to take a beautiful piece of produce or meat and twist it to the point that it's almost unrecognizable. I'm going to let those products shine for what they are.

On unpretentious food: We call the cuisine at Rhett "comfort eclectic." Our dishes teeter on the proverbial edges of the box, but they're not going to go outside the box enough that it confuses diners. You're going to recognize the dish, but it's different enough that it's still interesting when it hits the table.

On the wow moment: If you have got a big group of people, there's so much conversation going on at the table, but then you get to put a plate in front of them, and you see everyone stop talking. When the server comes out and people are really wowed for a moment before going back to their conversation — that's what it's all about.

On eating around Savannah: I'm trying to get out and eat as much as possible! We found a little spot called Saigon Bistro when I ended up with a late summer cold a few months ago, and my wife got me one of their bowls of pho. It absolutely blew my mind. Even with a desensitized palette from being sick, the broth was so rich, the vegetables were fresh and it was an incredible experience.

On BRINGING locals downtown: What I'm learning about Savannah is, the locals don't really come downtown as much, because they don't want to deal with the hassle of parking. We're fortunate enough to offer our guests two-hour complimentary valet if they're having lunch or dinner in the restaurant. That makes it really easy to just roll up, valet your car and enjoy. For us it's about the full experience: great service, great food, free parking and an incredible atmosphere.