



A Chef for all Seasons

BY JEFF BOOK
PHOTOS BY CALEB CHANCEY



FRANK STITT HAS DELIVERED HAPPINESS ON A PLATE

for more than 30 years, tickling local palates and elevating the Birmingham dining scene to nationally recognized heights. The city's reputation for memorable meals stems largely from its top chef, who has presided over a huge leap forward in culinary quality and quantity.

It's as if in some warm kitchen corner at Stitt's flagship, Highlands Bar and Grill, there exists an ever-rising ingredient, a kind of sourdough starter for restaurants. Highlands begat Bottega Restaurant and Bottega Café, later joined by Chez Fonfon, his note-perfect take on a classic French bistro. Chefs who worked for Stitt have launched their own restaurants in Birmingham and beyond, among them Chris Hastings (Hot and Hot Fish Club), Clif Holt (Little Savannah), Brian Somersfield (Trattoria Centrale, El Barrio and Paramount), Mauricio Papapietro (Brick & Tin), Randall Baldwin (Dyron's Lowcountry), Chris Newsome (Ollie Irene) and Drew Robinson (executive chef for Jim 'N Nick's smokin' barbecue empire). "I'm proud of them," says Stitt. "So many folks have come through here, learned what we're about and taken some of that away with them."

"He has been the benchmark for every one of us who spent time in his kitchen," Holt says. Indeed, it's hard to think of a chef who has made as great a difference in any other American city. In a bigger metropolis, one person couldn't have had as large an impact, while a smaller town couldn't have supported the bumper crop of eateries with ties to Stitt. No wonder he's been dubbed the dean of Southern cuisine.



Chef Frank Stitt at his take on a French bistro, Chez Fonfon



On a recent workday morning, as spring blossoms erupted all over town, Stitt discusses the night's menu with Highlands chef de cuisine Zack Redes. (The menu changes daily at Highlands and Bottega, twice a season at Bottega Café and Chez Fonfon.) Redes tells him that last night's tuna crudo wasn't as popular as expected, but the guinea hens virtually flew out of the kitchen.

They talk about recently arrived ingredients. "In the morning," Stitt says, "I like to look in the coolers with the chefs de cuisine—sometimes I need to see what's there to get an idea. A big part of my job is finding the best ingredients available." In the walk-in he looks at trays of veal sweetbreads and Gulf snapper and tastes recently picked baby carrots. A plastic bag in one corner holds vegetable trimmings that will become compost on Stitt's farm in Harpersville, which supplies eggs and produce to the restaurants and gives his polo ponies room to run.

THE PATH TO SUCCESS He and his wife, Pardis, have been regulars at the James Beard Foundation's annual awards ceremony. This is the sixth consecutive year that Highlands Bar and Grill has been among the five finalists for outstanding restaurant. Not that Stitt lacks for laurels. In 2005 he was given a Lifetime Achievement Award by the Southern Foodways Alliance, which he and Pardis helped found in 1999. In 2013 the Charleston Wine and Food Festival presented the first Frank Stitt National Chef Award to the man himself. The Beard Foundation named him Best Chef in the Southeast in 2001 and in 2011 inducted Stitt into its Who's Who of Food and Beverage.

Whether or not Highlands wins this year, it's a great honor to be nominated. If the Beard gala is the culinary equivalent of the Academy Awards, the outstanding restaurant award is the closest to Best Picture. "It is like the Oscars," Stitt muses. "It's held at Lincoln Center, everyone's in black tie and there's even a red carpet and paparazzi. It's



The Moroccan Composed Salad at Chez Fonfon with artichokes, farro, yogurt and watercress

funny—when I started out, being a chef wasn't cool or prestigious."

It certainly wasn't the expected occupation of a surgeon's son from Cullman. But his maternal grandparents had a farm nearby, a cornucopia of fresh milk, eggs, honey and produce. (Today the area's bounty is corralled in the Cullman Farmer's Market.) "I can't say I learned farming from my grandparents, but I did learn to appreciate the rhythm of the seasons," Stitt says. The chef has fond memories of summertime lunches with vine-ripened tomatoes and just-picked pink-eye peas and butter beans cooked with onions and new potatoes. He recalls foraging for watercress and wild asparagus with his mother, who studied dietetics at Cornell

University and was a talented, adventurous cook, serving dishes from around the world. "My mom expressed her love in her cooking," he says.

Family travels introduced him to fine dining at landmarks such as The Four Seasons and La Caravelle in New York, the Pump Room in Chicago and Antoine's in New Orleans. "My parents loved to dress up and experience the excitement of a great restaurant," Stitt says. As a boy he was struck by the finery and pageantry of such places, where gustatory pleasure was far from frivolous. An exemplary, still-vivid memory: At Brennan's in New Orleans, he watched a man feasting on escargots and Champagne—at 10:30 in the morning.



In Stitt's culinary philosophy, ingredients and dishes can, given enough thought, approach a Platonic ideal. That's one reason he advises would-be chefs to get a liberal-arts education: "Get that first, gain an understanding of Western civilization, then go to culinary school."

"But we'd also go to Birmingham," he recalls, "to eat at The Club, the [old] Tutwiler Hotel and Joy Young on 20th Street. It was one of the great Chinese restaurants in America, serving sophisticated Cantonese food. You could order crabmeat egg foo young and sit in a booth with a buzzer to call the waiter. They grew mushrooms in the basement." (Now that's locavore.)

EARNING AN EDUCATION In the Highlands kitchen, a chef filets what Stitt calls some of the most beautiful redfish he's ever seen. Based on their firmness and vibrant hues, he reckons they were in the Gulf day before last. The first crawfish of the season have arrived (over at Bottega a pan of them is roasting in the wood oven). As his chef de cuisine makes notes on last night's menu, Stitt suggests complementing the redfish with a crawfish meuniere. Slicing a taste off a fat, flour-dusted dome from Continental Bakery that will join cornbread in table baskets tonight, he declares, "This is seriously good bread, like a French pain au levain."

Stitt came to his appreciation of French cooking like a priest finding his vocation. After high school, following a summer in Europe, he spent a couple of years at Tufts University in Boston, then transferred to the University of California, Berkeley to study philosophy. There he discovered the perceptive, poetic food writing of Elizabeth David and Richard Olney, who lit up links between culture, agriculture and cuisine.

Inspired, Stitt sought to apprentice in San Francisco's best restaurants with no success (one chef threw him out for his awkwardness with an artichoke). Finally a Swiss chef, Fritz Leuenberger, took him under his wing. "Fritz taught me a great deal about cooking," he says. "Later he invited me to cook with him in Switzerland, but that didn't happen because he had a speed-skiing accident." There were stints at other San Francisco restaurants, including one whose French owner left the fledgling chef in charge of the kitchen and went to Brazil for a month. Was the owner crazy, or did Stitt inspire confidence? "A little of both," he says.

Finally he scored a place in the vanguard of America's culinary revolution by volunteering to work for free at Chez Panisse in Berkeley, where chef Alice Waters was pioneering a French-style approach grounded in local and seasonal produce. After a while, feeling the need to learn at the source, Stitt got Waters to send an introductory letter to her friend Olney, who was busy in London creating the multi-volume Time-Life series "The Good Cook." "He was producing a volume every nine months," marvels Stitt. "Those books are still prized by chefs."

Stitt followed the American expat from England to his home in Provence, serving as his assistant. "He was so knowledgeable, it was like being with the Buddha," Stitt says. "But he didn't suf-

fer fools." Through Olney he met wine expert Stephen Spurrier and Julia Childs and her co-author, Simca Beck. He also worked in the vineyard and cellar of a small Provencal winery. Straddling a chute with a pitchfork as an avalanche of grapes streamed down reminded him of playing defense on the Cullman High football team. "In mid-morning we'd break out wild boar paté and rosé to tide us over till lunch," he recalls. "We treated the 90-year-old syrah vines reverently, like old family members." Struck by the parallels between small farms in Alabama and France, where "ancient and wonderful ways endured," he says, "I came home knowing I wanted to do something with food and wine—write about it, cook, maybe run a restaurant."

A PERFECT BALANCE In Chez Fonfon's très compact kitchen, chef de cuisine Adam Grusin is assembling the house paté de campagne, a luscious concoction of pork shoulder, chicken livers, ham, pistachios and brandy-steeped foie gras. Stitt calls it "a five-day paté based on my favorites from France." It embodies his overarching preference, "a balance between rustic and elegant." He has an aversion to precious food, which is why Chez Fonfon hews to tradition and avoids the fussy flourishes of Michelin-minded temples of haute cuisine. At any of Frank Stitt's restaurants, if you're after trendy molecular gastronomy, with its transmogrified ingredients, its trompe l'oeil foams and powders and gelatins, you're in the wrong place.

"People may criticize me as not innovative," he allows, "but I feel we can innovate by reinvigorating traditions. That comes from care and respect. It may sound pompous, but respecting something's inherent nature is good, whether it's foie gras or collard greens." In Stitt's culinary philosophy, ingredients and dishes can, given enough thought, approach a Platonic ideal. That's one reason he advises would-be chefs to get a liberal-arts education: "Get that first, gain an understanding of Western civilization, then go to culinary school."

But his honor-the-essence approach also springs from staying true to his—and his diners'—roots. Stitt returned from France convinced that Alabama would support a restaurant with Provencal panache and Southern soul. He found a handsome 1920s building in then-sketchy Five Points South. When he couldn't persuade any Birmingham bank to loan him money, he rounded up individual investors, starting with his mother, who mortgaged her house to bet on her son.

From the day it opened in 1982, Highlands was a hit (the chef paid back his investors in the first four years). "I put 'bar and grill' in the name because I wanted people to know it wasn't elitist, that this was somewhere they could just hang out and feel comfortable,"



Stitt's dishes highlight fresh, local ingredients, not the latest culinary trends.

Stitt says. The menu then included more green beans and mashed potatoes than it does now, but they were superior examples of those tired standards. Even customers who at first thought sweetbreads came dusted with sugar trusted the chef enough to order them, and told their friends how good they were. And the bar at Highlands has surely witnessed more deals made, recruits persuaded, images enhanced and romances launched than any other watering hole in Alabama.

In the classic movie “It’s a Wonderful Life,” an angel shows Jimmy Stewart’s character what a difference he’s made in the town of Bedford Falls. If Frank Stitt had pursued his vision somewhere else, would Birmingham have transcended its dominant diet of barbecue, meat-and-three and dubious “continental” fare? The answer is likely yes—sooner or later the city was bound to reflect the new culinary currents spreading across America. But without Stitt, it would have been later. The young chef set a lofty standard. The local food scene badly needed a catalyst, and Stitt was it, in the right place at the right time.

EXCEEDING EXPECTATIONS

At Highlands, the afternoon sun bounces off the pale walls of the stately Methodist church across the street into the big front windows. Framed menus from a raft of special dinners with winemakers line the stairs leading up to the office. There, a bookshelf holds cookbooks by Alice Waters, Mario Batali (who called Bottega “one of the best Italian restaurants outside of Italy”), Daniel Boulud and other Friends of Frank, along with vintage tomes he orders from San Francisco bookshop Omnivore and mines for inspiration (a recent arrival: “Housekeeping Made Easy” by Mrs. H.P. Hill, published in 1869).

To keep up with current culinary trends and new restaurants, Stitt reads *The New York Times* and other publications and gets tips from savvy friends. “Part of what I live for is to eat when I travel, to experience new restaurants and old favorites,” he says. Though he’s glad the profusion of food shows on TV has raised awareness, he’s not a big fan of the genre, especially shows that pit chefs against each other. “The atmosphere in a kitchen should be cooperative, not competitive,” he insists.

In the front of the house at all four restaurants, Pardis Stitt deftly conjures a care-free ambience, so that diners at every table feel festive and well served, in the classic sense of having needs met before one feels them. Trained in ballet, she expects the wait staff to move with grace and precision. “Pardis is a perfectionist,” says her husband. “She works

at least as hard as I do, and has an amazing way of making people feel welcome and important. That drive for perfection in service sets us apart.”

In the post-lunch lull at Chez Fonfon, he reminds the staff to greet people when they come in and thank them when they leave. The Stitts require employees to treat not just guests but each other with respect. The resulting civility is one reason for their lower-than-usual staff turnover; four employees have been with Stitt from the beginning (30-plus years), another 15 for more than a decade.

“Every night we have people who’ve trav-



eled far to dine with us,” Stitt says. “But this isn’t a tourist town like New Orleans, so most of our diners are repeat customers, which gives everyone an incentive to make sure we meet the standard they’ve come to expect. We’re not just feeding people, we’re sharing culture and passion.”

Bottega Café’s dining-room walls glow in the festive, flattering hue Stitt calls Pompeii Red. In the kitchen he talks ingredients with Bottega chef de cuisine Paul Yeck, who’s shelling garbanzo beans that will accompany a grilled duck breast and tabbouleh with favas on the night’s menu. A kitchen sign reads “Farms, Not Factories,” which speaks to one of Stitt’s greatest concerns. “We’ve got to have more farmers and foragers,” he declares. “Every urban area should have outlying rural lands with sustainable farms. Fortunately, more young people are considering farming as an occupation. It’s hard work and you have to be a savvy chess player with regard to weather, what to plant, crop rotation and overall diversity. But we should

all vote with our dollars by buying from local farmers.” The chef does just that, and has served on the board of Jones Valley Teaching Farm since it began.

Back at Highlands, beverage director Matt Gilpen shows off house-made cocktail syrups, among them a strawberry maceration, an intense elixir used to flavor tonic and a pecan infusion for a Southern-style old-fashioned. Since a change in Alabama law allowing distilled spirits with less than 20 percent alcohol, Stitt’s bartenders have lost no time experimenting with old-school European concoctions such as dry curaçao and Luxardo, a cherry-based amaro. They whip up distinctive drinks such as the Bourbon Negroni, the Madison Avenue and the defibrillating Corpse Reviver No. 2.

Moving next door to Chez Fonfon, Stitt samples a house-made charcuterie platter that includes pate de campagne, soppressata, pork rilletes, chicken apple sausage, chicken liver mousse, celery root remoulade, roasted beets, whole-grain mustard and other delectables. When a chef asks Stitt to critique a relish for a dish on the evening’s menu, he adjusts its proportions of chervil, scallions, chives and sugar snap peas. At the bar, a sales rep offers tastes of small-batch olive oils from Italy and wines from France. He asks how the 2005 wines are tasting. “A lot of them are still really tannic,” Stitt tells him. “But some are already singing.”

Unlike most chefs at his level, he also oversees the restaurants’ wine program—and the wine lists, tailored to the menus, have little overlap. Supervising everything, meeting diners’ (and his own) high expectations, is an endless task. In their off hours, he likes to cook and Pardis likes to garden, both at their home in Forest Park and at their farm. “I love riding my horses and playing polo,” says Stitt, whose team won matches last year in Aiken, S.C. “I’m not the greatest player—fortunately my teammates are infinitely better.” Stitt’s son, Weston, is a junior at Sewanee, and lately they’ve gone there to watch him play soccer. His daughter, Marie, graduated from Rice University, completed a master’s program at the University of Gastronomic Sciences in Italy (a.k.a. Slow Foods U) and now works for a Charleston wine company. “Her territory includes Alabama, so she’s been here to share her knowledge with our staff, which is a treat for me,” he notes.

“I’d like to spend more time on our farm, but Pardis and I are very much hands-on managers,” he says. “We work six days a week—it’s not so much our job as our life.” The staff is talented and disciplined, but the Stitts are, in effect, conducting several orchestras at once, aiming to wow the audience at every performance.

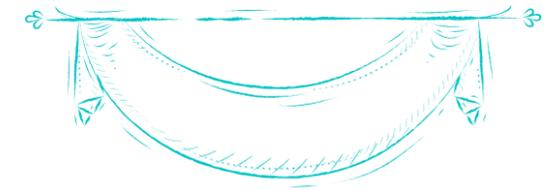


Chez Fonfon is in the heart of Birmingham’s Southside, a shady part of town when he opened Highlands Bar and Grill in 1982.



“To receive guests is to take charge of their happiness during the entire time they are under your roof.”

—Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin



What lies ahead for Birmingham’s most renowned chef? Both his cookbooks—“Frank Stitt’s Southern Table” (10 years old this year) and “Frank Stitt’s Bottega Favorita”—have sold well, and he’s considering a new one that would focus on his farm, on food based on the rhythm of the seasons. This summer he plans to go to France to revisit Richard Olney’s house and the fond memories he made there.

He reflects on famed Chicago chef Charlie Trotter, who died in 2013, the year after he closed his restaurant to travel and study philosophy. Stitt, who turns 60 this year, is too busy to think about an exit strategy, but says he’d like the restaurants to carry on for the sake of the employees (not to mention Birmingham diners). When he finally stops running his restaurants, chances are he’ll manage what Trotter couldn’t, to travel and study philosophy and other lifelong interests. “I love geography and history, and the way food helps create a culture of place,” he says. “In the long run I’d also like to do some good, maybe promote humane animal husbandry.”

Stitt has said, “The ancient art of farming is what drives me as a chef.” One day he’ll finally be free to idle on his own farm. It’s a fitting, even poetic notion: The philosopher-chef who championed the agrarian South going back to the land and, as always, turning its bounty into wonderful meals. ■

JEFF BOOK of Birmingham has been a staff editor at *Coastal Living* and *Architectural Digest* and a contributing editor for *Departures*. Covering primarily travel, design and food, his work has appeared in those publications and many others, including *Travel & Leisure*, *GQ*, *House Beautiful*, *Smithsonian* and *Garden & Gun*. He has filed stories from six continents, and has covered culinary tourism in places such as Alsace, Madrid, the Outer Banks, Corsica and Louisiana Cajun country.