

Try Link and Pin's Huevos Rancheros from their brunch menu to spice up your summer weekend.

dishing

SUMMER

ISSUE NO. 2

CHARLOTTE

5
WAYS:

Tiki drinks that are perfect for summer sips

A LESSON IN BEER PAIRINGS

+ KINDRED'S MILK BREAD RECIPE AND MORE

A FOOD LOVER'S GUIDE TO GREAT DINING AROUND CHARLOTTE

In the Kitchen with Sam Diminich

A life-changing detour led to refocused priorities and rekindled passion for Upstream's executive chef.

by Michael J. Solender
photos by Grant Baldwin

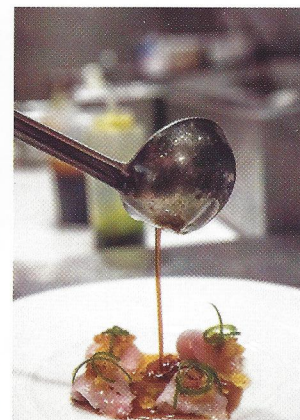
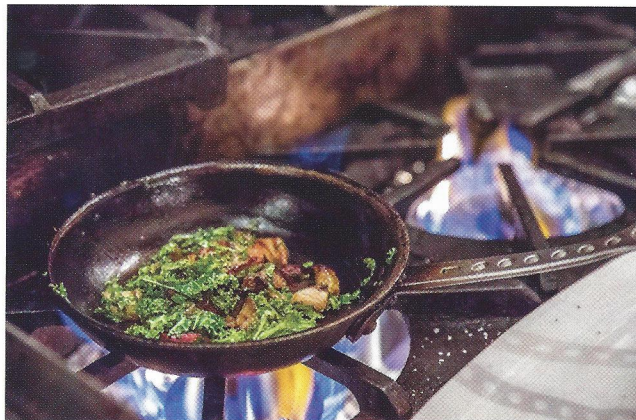
Note: At press time, chef Sam Diminich has decided to start Your Farms Your Table. Upstream is still open and offering a similar menu.

A CALM INTENSITY SURROUNDING Upstream's executive chef, Sam Diminich, sets him apart from many who command elite kitchens in this city. Whether working the line during a busy Friday lunch, discussing evening service with his wait staff, or competing against and beating Bobby Flay (which he did recently on Flay's eponymous Food Network show), Diminich is always singularly focused.

The soft-spoken, gym-honed, diminutive chef has mastered the art of making those he's speaking with feel as if they are the only person in the room. Listening to and respecting others are new skills for Diminich. His long battle with alcoholism, including devastating episodes of "bottoming out," left him, in his words, "unemployable." Through an extended rehabilitation program, the love and support of his family, and Diminich's own determination and perseverance, he discovered sobriety and restarted a sidelined career.



DUCK, DUCK...GOOD: 
Chef Diminich prepares Dry Aged Duck Breast with parsnip puree, scarlet turnips, heirloom carrots, aged soy demi and peach preserves.



Diminich is more than a year into his role at Upstream, SouthPark's Asian fusion stalwart for the past two decades. He first joined Upstream in 2003, earning a promotion to the then-Harper's Restaurant Group's (now Burke Hospitality Group) beloved Arpa, where he was the executive chef from 2006 to 2009.

Diminich grew up in Myrtle Beach, where his introduction to the hospitality industry began in his grandfather's red checkered-tablecloth Italian restaurant. He started washing dishes at 10 years old and after sneaking into the kitchen with the chefs, dreamed of his own role on the line. Diminich's culinary training includes a degree from the Culinary Institute of America at Hyde Park and kitchen roles at Philadelphia's storied Le Bec Fin and the innovative kitchen of the Hampton's Restaurant in Sumter, South Carolina. *Dishing Charlotte* sat down with Diminich earlier this year to discuss his 30-plus years in the kitchen.

YOUR IMMEDIATE UPSTREAM PREDECESSOR (GENE KATO) MADE SOME SIGNIFICANT MENU SHIFTS PRIOR TO HIS DEPARTURE, FRUSTRATING SOME LONG-TERM GUESTS. HOW DID THAT IMPACT YOUR DIRECTION COMING IN?

We learned our clientele has a voice and this conversation is a two-way conversation. It shined a bright light on the traditions that Upstream has established and how important they are to the people that we cater to.

DOES IT ALLOW YOU TO INNOVATE AND BRING YOUR VOICE TO THE TABLE?

Obviously, we're seafood heavy, influenced by Japanese and Korean flavors. But there must be a happy medium. I embrace seasonality and ingredients. There has been this shift within me to chase and highlight simple flavors. Less is more. An example: Short ribs I recently featured were accompanied with a butternut squash tart that had three

ingredients (squash, kale and a savory piecrust). The braise has several elements, but the plate has two components (short ribs and tart), three with the garnish. You have the starch and the veg. Together, they're unified. The squash has been confited in duck fat; the kale has a sweet and sour preparation.

VEGETABLES ARE STARS ON YOUR PLATES — TALK TO US ABOUT THAT.

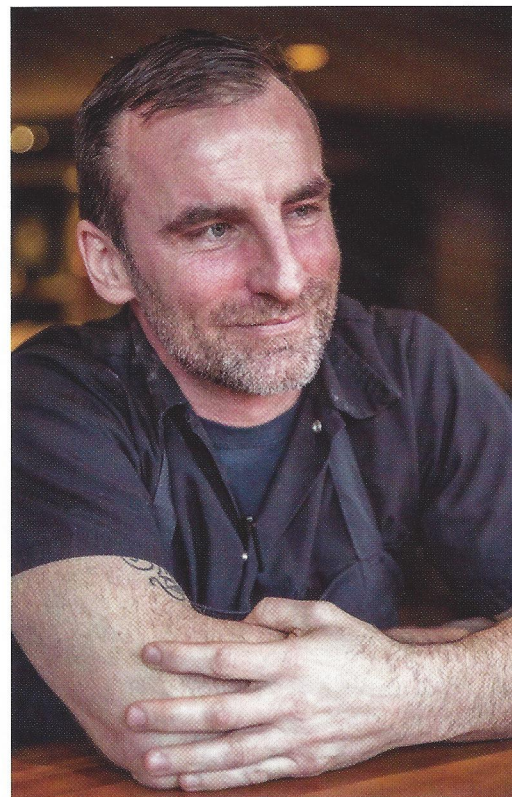
Chefs are stewards. We all know that the cooking and farming communities are growing. We treat vegetables as center of the plate items, just as we would our grouper, our black bass and squid. The potato and the filet — they're equal. Just because society says fillet is \$15 a pound and potatoes are \$.50 per pound — they are gastronomically equal.

For example, our potato/leek puree involves many steps other kitchens don't take. We steam them. There's no saturation; the flavor is the essence of potato. Instead of using plain cream, we infuse it with leeks that we've first braised. Once the potatoes are steamed, they never get cold. We rice them. Once. And then we pass them through a tami. Then we blend and strain the cream add it to the potatoes, season with sea salt and finish with butter.

YOU'VE BEEN VERY PUBLIC ABOUT YOUR BATTLE WITH ALCOHOLISM. HOW HAVE YOU COME TO SOBRIETY?

I drank at a young age and got into trouble. The thing about alcohol addiction is that it's so progressive. Once you pick back up, it's been with you the whole time waiting.

As it progressed, I was missing work, going into work inebriated, leaving. There was theft. As a parent, I wasn't there. I walked out on my kids several times. They didn't know what to expect. Finally, toward the end, I was out on the street. I spent anywhere from eight to 11 months homeless. I hit bottom in 2013.



OYSTERS WITH A TWIST:
Oven-roasted oysters
with leeks, country ham,
calabrian chile aioli and
scallion breadcrumbs
presented artfully at
Upstream.



UPSTREAM'S OVEN-ROASTED OYSTERS

1 tablespoon butter
2 ounces country ham, small diced
1 large leek, small diced
Calabrian chile aioli (see below)
2-3 cups ice cream salt
24 oysters, shucked in half shell
Aromatic spices for garnish

> Melt butter in medium sauté pan. Add ham and leeks, and cook slowly over low heat until soft but not caramelized.

For the aioli:

1/4 cup calabrian chile (jarred)
3 tablespoons Meyer lemon juice
1 tablespoon whole-grain mustard
2 egg yolks
1 pint vegetable oil
2 12-ounce bottles Kewpie (Japanese mayonnaise)

> Mix chiles, lemon juice, mustard, egg yolks and a pinch of salt in blender. Carefully pour in vegetable oil on low

speed until emulsified. Place mixture in large bowl, whisk in mayonnaise. Set aside.

For the breadcrumbs:

2 ounces scallions
1 ounce chives
3 1/2 ounces olive oil
2 cups panko breadcrumbs

> Quickly blanch scallions and chives in boiling water, shock in ice water and drain. Blend with olive oil and a pinch of salt in blender until smooth. Fold into panko breadcrumbs until thoroughly mixed. Spread on baking sheet and dry in refrigerator for 24 hours uncovered.

To Assemble:

Add ice cream salt to ovenproof dish, sprinkle whole spices and place oysters on top. Add 1 tablespoon aioli to each oyster and cover with even layer of breadcrumbs. Bake 12-14 minutes at 375 F until lightly browned. Serve and enjoy.



AS YOU RECOVERED, WHY WAS IT IMPORTANT TO HELP OTHERS? TALK ABOUT BEN'S FRIENDS (THE FOOD AND BEVERAGE INDUSTRY SUPPORT GROUP OFFERING A BRIDGE TO SOBRIETY) AND THE WORK YOU DO HERE IN CHARLOTTE.

My journey is something I've been very public about. I was very transparent on *Beat Bobby Flay* and got hundreds of emails from people thanking me for sharing my story, encouraging me. Five years ago, I'd given up on myself. I thought I didn't belong. It turns out I was wrong. I was wrong about a lot of things. We

do belong, we can recover. We can get sober together.

It's [co-leading the local chapter of Ben's Friends] a great way to give back. We offer a safe environment, no strings attached, no judgment, completely anonymous.

If you'd told me my life was going to look like this five years ago, I would have told you it's not happening. There's no way. For most of my life the priority order was always cooking, family and then recovery. I've flipped that to recovery first, and of course my family, and cooking. There's no stopping me now.