

BALLANTYNE[®]

magazine



Behind the Scenes

Meet Three of Our Contributors



Michelle Boudin

Michelle is a reporter at NBC Charlotte, a People Magazine contributor and a firm believer that diamonds are a girl's best friend. That's why she loved learning from Ballantyne Jewelers' Yuhon Tekin and writing about jewelry trends for this issue.

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Amy Rogers

Amy grew up in Detroit and New York and traces her early love of global cuisine to her family's dining-out experiences. She was pleased to profile Open Rice and learn how the restaurateurs chose to locate in the Ballantyne area. "Our dining scene gets more diverse every day," she says.

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Michael J. Solender

Michael is always up for eating out with family and friends. In researching Firebirds Wood Fired Grill, he spoke with the founder, executive chef and those touched by the restaurant. He also sat down with some serious lobster spinach queso and a perfectly cooked chile-rubbed Delmonico steak.

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On the Cover

In 2020, we mark the 20th anniversary of our publication. Thank you for your readership!

Firebirds *Soars*



BALLANTYNE-BASED RESTAURANT CREATES RECIPE FOR LONG-TERM SUCCESS

By Michael J. Solender

Photos courtesy of Firebirds Wood Fired Grill

Twenty years ago, a local developer reached out to south Charlotte resident and serial restaurateur Dennis Thompson about an opportunity right in Thompson's backyard.

Steve Sturm, senior vice president of food and beverage, has been with Firebirds since the beginning.



Live-fire cooking adds bold flavors to the food, including a filet (above). The fire itself is an inspiration for the restaurant and led to "Wood Fired Grill" being added to its name.



A new shopping center set to open in the Ballantyne area off Interstate 485 and Rea Road was looking for an anchor restaurant, one that would draw people to a budding StoneCrest at Piper Glen.

Thompson had recently left his role with Lone Star Steakhouse, the now-closed chain of casual dining restaurants he'd helped develop. Bringing a new, more upscale restaurant concept to a shopping center appealed to him, especially one that would be alongside boutique shops, specialty retailers and a multiplex theater.

Firebirds was born. The free-standing, 270-seat restaurant took a prime northeast corner lot location. Ample parking and a dramatic street presence near I-485's Rea Road exit ensured a steady flow of diners.

"The area around 485 was just starting to bloom," says Thompson. "I felt like it was a good spot in a really growth-oriented area of town, and I always liked to open new concepts where I live so I can watch them and keep a good eye on them."

At the time, Charlotte's restaurant scene had seen nothing like it. Firebirds impressed guests with a Colorado ski-lodge design. It featured a high, exposed-beam ceiling, open kitchen where chefs cooked over a wood-fired grill and an inviting dining room with an ember-like glow.

Live Fire Cooking

The menu was an eye-opener, too. Bold flavors and the western tradition of live fire cooking had Firebirds initially calling itself a "Rocky Mountain Grill." It wasn't too long, however, before "Wood Fired Grill" took over in the moniker; the fire itself being an inspiration for the restaurant.

"At the time, I had a house in Aspen, Colorado," says Thompson. "I enjoyed the style of open-fire cooking and the bold flavors found in Colorado. I had the idea there needed to be a concept incorporating that style and satisfying guests looking



Dennis Thompson, pictured at right with his wife, Sharon, opened the flagship location of Firebirds 20 years ago in StoneCrest at Piper Glen.



for a dining experience in between the cowboy steakhouses and high-end chophouses like Del Frisco's."

Thompson set about creating a restaurant that was attractive to the after-work crowd as well as to families, couples and friends looking for a relaxed atmosphere and high-quality dining.

Longstanding menu favorites include the chile-rubbed Delmonico steak, wood-grilled salmon, the Durango Burger and baby back ribs. A luminescent Firebar serves specialty cocktails like the Double Black Diamond Martini.

With Firebirds, Thompson hit on a recipe for success that has since seen the concept grow to 51 locations in 19 states.

Polished Casual

Steven Loftis, Firebirds' vice president of marketing, notes that Firebirds is a leader in defining a new category within the restaurant industry known today as "polished casual."

This "in-between" dining category offers both a trade-up option from fast casual and a trade down from the

more formal (read: more expensive) white tablecloth experience.

"We're in that great space where you can come in dressed up before the play, or wearing jeans, shorts and flip flops before the game," says Loftis, "You're going to have a really nice meal in a great environment and not break the bank."

The industry has tracked Firebirds' success. In August 2019, FSR Magazine included Firebirds on its list of "FSR 50: America's Top 50 Emerging Restaurant Chains." Additionally, CNBC named Firebirds one of the nation's top 10 hottest restaurant brands in 2018.

Firebirds' day-to-day operations include a strong emphasis on sustainability. The company uses locally sourced hardwoods in its grilling and offers dishes with sustainably raised salmon and 100% cage-free eggs. The organization also recycles



A luminescent Firebar (top) serves specialty cocktails like the Double Black Diamond Martini (below left).



its fryer oil, uses compostable to-go containers and recycles the crayons used by its youngest customers.

In a country where more than half the restaurants close within 18 months of opening, Firebirds' kitchen has developed staying power.

"Our wood-fired grill had been the centerpiece of our culinary success," says Steve Sturm, Firebirds' senior vice president of food and beverage. Sturm has been with Firebirds since the beginning, opening the Ballantyne restaurant with Thompson two decades ago.

As Firebirds has grown nationwide, Sturm says maintaining consistent quality has been critical. "Our menus are the same across all Firebirds," he says.

Sturm refers to the Ballantyne location as the "mothership," where the

"We take a scratch-made approach with virtually every menu item."

—Steve Sturm

company tests many new recipes. "One variable, however, across locations is the wood we use," he notes. Oak and hickory are most common in Charlotte and the Southeast, with apple and cherry more common in northern states, and pecan used out west.

"We take a scratch-made approach with virtually every menu item," says Sturm. "Our Lobster Spinach Queso is a great example. It's been one of our signature appetizers from the beginning."

"We smoke the tomatoes to make

the tomato puree, sauté onions and garlic, add cream and chicken stock, reduce the sauce, add pepper jack cheese, lobster and spinach," he says of making the queso. "We (also) hand cut and fry our chips fresh every day. That's all for one appetizer. At the end of the day, what matters most for our guests is our food tastes great."

Supporting the Community

Firebirds has partnered with Alex's Lemonade Stand Foundation (ALSF) since 2013, raising more than \$1.8 million to fight childhood cancer. Firebirds' commitment extends well beyond writing a check, however.

"Firebirds could serve as a case study on how to get behind a cause and make a huge impact," says ALSF Co-Executive Director Liz Scott. "They fundraise for us every day by

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“Firebirds could serve as a case study on how to get behind a cause and make a huge impact.”

—ALSF Co-Executive Director Liz Scott



Longstanding menu favorites include the Durango Burger.



having ALSF on their menu, raising awareness and donating \$1.25 from every glass of lemonade sold. They promote ALSF on social media, engage their employees in each of their restaurants and even have our story on their kids' menu. Mark Eason (Firebirds' CEO) is on our advisory council and is a tremendous advocate and very engaged with us."

In Ballantyne, Firebirds hosts an annual golf tournament in support of ALSF, and this past fall teamed up with the Isabella Santos Foundation (ISF), cooking for a fundraising brunch at ISF's annual 5K for Kids Cancer.

"It's in our DNA to be involved with and support the communities where we do business," says Loftis. "It's simply part of who we are as an organization."

Firebirds is keeping its 20th anniversary celebration activities under wraps for the moment, but fans of the restaurant know treats are in store this fall.

"We're looking at some fun, interactive menu items," Sturm hinted, noting that desserts were likely to get some extra special attention. "We always look to delight our guests; our upcoming anniversary is an occasion where we're sure to shine." ®



Firebirds has raised more than \$1.8 million for Alex's Lemonade Stand Foundation. Pictured here is the organization's namesake, Alexandra "Alex" Scott.



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