

BY JOHN T. EDGE

College-Town Flavor

AT THEIR NEW SPOT IN A CONVERTED RANCH HOUSE, TARASQUE CUCINA'S JOHN AND LAUREN STOKES BRING A DELIGHTFULLY HOMEMADE TASTE OF FUN TO OXFORD



College towns are outposts of oddity in a sea of conformity. That's the promise, anyway. When I moved to Oxford, Mississippi, in 1995, I fell for the Hoka, where a local named Ronzo screened art-house films and served dense and delicious fudge pies in an old warehouse near the courthouse square. Two years in, I became a regular at Don Pancho's, a brown-bag Dominican restaurant in a squat shed across from Second Baptist Church, where Maria and Dario served a vinegar-and-onion-smothered catfish escabeche that I chase today like a marathoner striding toward a runner's high.

Both of those places, now gone, were random. They made no sense. Unless you chalked them up to the grace that a college town, flush with new arrivals, rich with idealism, and tolerant of oddity, affords residents. Grace is now harder to come by in Oxford and other college towns. Today, real estate investors push out mom-and-pop retailers, and fast casual chains and powerful local restaurant groups dominate places that once nurtured a kaleidoscope of fish houses and steak joints and burger walk-ups.

Tarasque Cucina, which John and Lauren Stokes

opened this past spring in a converted house with a stack of exhaust vents mounted on the roof like blocky periscopes, behind a liquor store and a Domino's pizza delivery pod, presents like a throwback. Five nights a week, John wraps his forehead in a bandanna and pogos from his twelve-burner stove to the order counter, where Lauren, his wife, beams a smile that could power a sawmill and says, in a bright and earnest and pleasingly goofball tone, "We're so glad that you're here," to every soul who crosses the threshold.

An Oxford native, John began washing dishes in a local restaurant at sixteen. Before he turned twenty-five, he became chef de cuisine of the late and beloved L&M's Kitchen and Salumeria here. Back in 2016, he and Lauren opened a takeaway kitchen that doubled as a commissary for other food businesses, including an ice-pop maker and a cake studio. They served rigatoni with house-ground sausage, pappardelle Bolognese, and other pasta dishes. And they staged occasional in-house tasting-menu feasts. The restaurant half of the equation was charming and fledgling, in the manner of a punk rock band that knows what it aims to agitate about but doesn't yet know the songs it wants to sing. And then, in the summer of 2018,

From left: House-made sourdough ciabatta; Lauren and John Stokes; pappardelle Bolognese.

Coffee Stop

Pop in next door for a worthy cup and more

A gleaming stainless espresso machine perches in the front window, and a sherbet-green coffee roaster hunkers along the back wall at Gretchen Williams's Heartbreak Coffee, tucked alongside Tarasque. Along with vegan doughnuts and cookies, baked in the Tarasque kitchen, Williams and her crew serve lovely single-origin coffees. Get a pour-over, snag that Camus novel left by a student, and you'll feel at home.—J.T.E.

Illustration by Michael Spitz

they lost their lease.

A year of dreaming, plotting, and remodeling later, John and Lauren now run a new-guard college-town mom-and-pop restaurant. The pastas have reappeared. So has the sourdough ciabatta. Ditto the butter bean hummus, bound with tahini, sharpened with lemon, and glossed with olive oil. This time out, though, many of the small-plate dishes that John previously reserved for tasting menus earned spots on the everyday chalkboard menu.

That change has proved transformative. Tarasque is still a modest spot, where you order at the counter and fetch your own water glass and cutlery roll. And, yes, John and Lauren still do a lot of takeout and delivery business. But now they make their reputation on such small plates as fried artichoke hearts with lemon miso dressing, boiled peanuts doused with olive oil, sweet-corn skewers rolled in a pecorino gremolata, and blueberries tossed with cashew butter and sunflower sprouts. Come fall as local farmers harvest new crops, the roster will shift to include turnips braised

in buttermilk, vanilla roasted carrots with sorghum, and gigante beans cooked in a scuppernong broth.

Stunningly, those small plates rarely top ten dollars. In the spirit of college-town restaurants past, you get to brown-bag in wine and liquor. (Tarasque charges one dollar for every wineglass used.) Along with goofy optimism, a frugal spirit guides the look. To salvage lumber for the counter and the tables, John chainsawed out twelve lanes from a defunct bowling alley. For a country-boy parquet floor, he cut four-by-sixes into half-inch pucks, mounted thousands of them on the subfloor, and grouted the gaps. To fill tabletop vases, Lauren bartered with a farmer, trading bowls of pasta puttanesca for zinnias and cockscombs. Macon Humphries, who works as a waiter here when he's not coaching girls' soccer at the high school, contributed the plastic dinosaurs that stand alongside each vase.

All of that adds up to a restaurant aesthetic that we might as well call shop-class chic. That handmade look jibes with the handmade food, which suits a clientele

that ranges from women in yoga pants who arrive with bottles of rosé to professors and spouses who book babysitters to roll through one of John's tasting menus, which run around fourteen dishes and cost just forty-five dollars a head.

Earlier this summer, to get organized before a big writing project, I cleared out my office, filing tattered newspaper clips and yellowed black-and-white family photos and tossing an occasional palmetto bug. At the bottom of a pasteboard box, I found a hand-drawn flyer for an army man show my friends and I staged when I was eight or so. The energy was infectious, the colors bright, the lines simple, the text crossed through and corrected.

Dinner at Tarasque tastes the way that old flyer looks. A night here feels the way that army man show felt. John and Lauren Stokes work with a kind of jubilation. To make food that is artful and delicious, to make a space that is warm and graceful, they channel earnest intents and good energy. Their small plates beg your attention. The show they stage wins your affection. 




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