



New South Food

Asheville Chef Updates Grits and Greens

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Feature Writer

And the beat goes on ...
 "New" Southern cookbooks, each with a twist, just keep coming.

The twist on "Tupelo Honey Cafe: Spirited Recipes from Asheville's New South Kitchen" follows recently published "Sara Foster's Southern Kitchen." Like Foster, Brian Sonoskus is a restaurant chef. His cafe in uber-chic downtown Asheville (where penthouse condos go for \$1 million) doesn't take reservations. Even on a rainy evening people wait outside.

Which usually means something good's going on inside.

Few are the chefs who can resist capitalizing on this approval.

The proof comes to town on June 27, when Sonoskus hosts a tasting and book signing at The Country Bookshop during a visit to his parents, who live in Carthage.

"This isn't just a book of recipes; this is a book about Asheville," says the chef who grew up in Pennsylvania rolling pierogi dough with his Polish grandmother, which explains his international slant on Southern classics.

Example: Southern (fried) chicken saltimbocca with country ham in a mushroom Marsala sauce. Or just as intriguing, fried green tomatoes with goat cheese basil grits.

About the Asheville food scene. It is formidable — commingling sushi bars, cantinas, trattorias, brewpubs, burger joints, California bistros, vegetarian eateries and haute hotel dining rooms. Why, Asheville even has a gigantic, nicely

appointed and quite good Chinese buffet palace.

Lest we forget, President Obama's favorite barbecue is slow-smoked at 12 Bones in Asheville's River Arts District. He's been there twice.

So for Brian Sonoskus, near the top of that heap is not a bad place to be.

Sonoskus arrived in Asheville by way of the Jersey shore. Johnson and Wales

Culinary Arts, Utah ski country and Charlotte. Yet, he says, "I understand Southern food — with a bit of 'fusion,'" the trendy term for ethnic crossovers.

He worked his way through several Asheville restaurant kitchens before answering an ad placed by

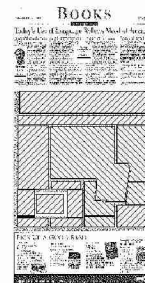
Tupelo owner Steve Frabitore.

That was 2000, when Tupelo was still searching for its mojo. Now-executive chef Sonoskus has established the downtown cafe and a suburban branch as a

place of innovations appealing to Asheville's old-lady Old Guard as well as New Agers.

"There's a love story between Asheville and Tupelo Honey Cafe," Sonoskus says, grandly.

Grandly goes the book in this direction, with archival photos of the Smoky Mountain resort town and famous residents Thomas Wolfe and George Vanderbilt, reminiscent of Charleston and New Orleans publications that link



food to history.

Sonoskus, like all good contemporary chefs, prides himself on showcasing local ingredients (including meats, fish and poultry), some grown on a friend's farm. To the concern that restaurant dishes with exotic ingredients are difficult to replicate at home, he responds that his have been adjusted, simplified and tested.

Because nothing's worse than wasting eight cups of heavy cream and 16 egg yolks on a candied ginger brulee that curdles.

Sonoskus holds back no secret recipes. Not all are crème brulee-extreme. He explores a simple roast chicken with herbs, huge biscuits, "smashed" sweet potatoes, coleslaw and grits cakes.

The book, co-written by Elizabeth Sims, of the Southern Foodways Alliance, with photos by Brie Williams, is arranged according to appetizers and soups, sandwiches and salads, fish, chicken, beyond the smokehouse, the three sides, brunches and sweets. To honor Tupelo, Miss.'s,

favorite son, Sonoskus includes a grilled peanut butter and banana sandwich with mayonnaise.

Other preparations appear West Coast-inspired: bronzed wild sockeye salmon with roasted corn salsa. Or

from New England, as lamb and multi-mushroom meat loaf with mint glaze.

Neither lamb nor mushrooms are "soul-ful" staples.

But the crab cakes mixed with fresh thyme, sherry, Vidalia onions and panko breadcrumbs look superb, and Tupelo honey beet salad is easy as fallin' off a log.

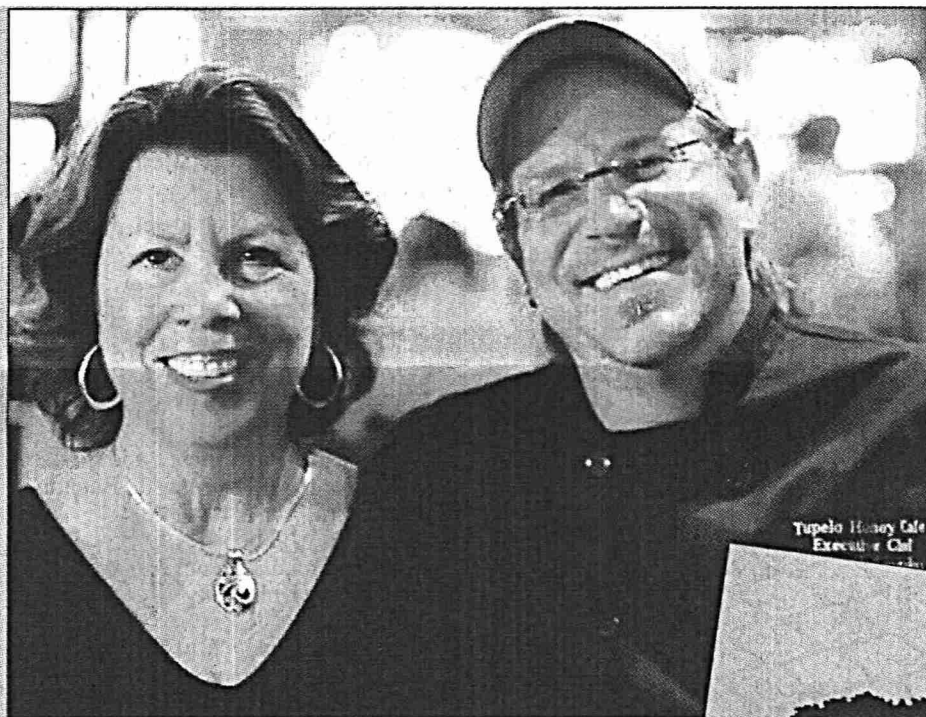
"Look what they've done to my song" has been some old-timers' reaction to the reconstructionist Southern food movement. Others say move on and up — just don't forget where you came from.

That works in Asheville — Atlanta and Memphis, too. Next stop, with the help of Sonoskus, Foster and other promoters: your dining room table.

Contact Deborah Salomon at debsalomon@nc.rr.com.

Special Event

Brian Sonoskus, author of "Tupelo Honey Cafe: Spirited Recipes from Asheville's New South Kitchen" (Andrew McMeel Publishing, \$29.99), will host a signing/tasting at 7 p.m. Monday, June 27, at The Country Bookshop in Southern Pines.



CONTRIBUTED

Elizabeth Sims and chef Brian Sonoskus

