

Brave Simplicity

The James Beard Award might be only the beginning for FIG

BY JEFF ALLEN

James Beard Award-winning chef Mike Lata is not a man easily drawn into discussing his vision, his craft, or his future. He's too busy perfecting his art to devote time to a dissertation. And if you've ever eaten at his restaurant, FIG, then you know that such single-minded devotion to his art extracts the essence of every detail within. Whether it's the chateaufleur mushrooms on the edge of your plate or the modern details of the interior design, the artful nature of FIG owes less to the theatrics of trend and fashion than to a relentless refinement of technique, informed by locally available food and a desire to push past the temptation to do traditional dishes "our way." With its straightforward style, FIG just may be creating the new Charleston cuisine.

Upon first glimpse, FIG can seem almost pedestrian, too simple and half-baked. In a time where chefs compete

to offer fantastical flavor combinations and novel approaches to both culinary technique and presentation, the current summer menu at FIG might look a bit plain. For instance, on July 7, they offered pan-roasted triggerfish with potatoes, white shrimp succotash, and corn broth; a fish stew *en cocotte* with Carolina Gold Rice; and, for the adventurous, the crispy Caw Caw Creek pig's trotters with sweet corn-field salad. It's in the simplicity of the menu that one begins to understand the genius of Mike Lata and his vision that, six and half years on, has made FIG a top restaurant destination in the Southeastern U.S.

For Lata, the road has been much longer. Ask him about his formative experience and a few snippets of biography might spill forth, memories of his grandparent's half-acre garden, of picking and cooking fresh produce, wrong turns in his chosen profession that brought depressive realizations of failure, and a defining epiphany on a sidewalk in Atlanta, as he read a menu that evoked the lost techniques of the traditional French kitchen brigade.

Burned out by a soulless culinary landscape and dejectedly "flipping burgers and punching the clock" at a local dive, Lata entered the aforementioned restaurant displaying that menu and talked with the owner, who hired him on the spot, thus sparking his true passion for the cooking he was destined to pursue.

"I asked if he would let me come in at 10 a.m., off the clock, and work through my regular shift," recalls Lata. "And I worked that way for six months." Within a year, he was the executive chef.

But it was dedication to local produce that brought him the most attention. That obsessive focus on such (formerly) alternative sourcing ultimately attracted the attention of Anson Restaurant in Charleston and brought him to the city. Here he met growers like Celeste Albers of Wadmaw and established a cuisine that has now come to define his and partner Adam Nemirow's efforts at their own endeavor, FIG.

Walk into their kitchen and you will find a scene unlike most other restaurants in town. There is no "walk-in" refrigeration or freezer, only a few small upright refrigerators and a small freezer used to keep ice cream and stocks. Products arrive daily and the menu wraps itself around what's best and what's fresh. Local growers know to bring only their best to FIG, or it won't leave the truck.

So by July 9, that aforementioned triggerfish had been supplanted by beeline snapper in the same configuration, and the appetizer portion of pasta, formerly a fresh sheep's milk ricotta gnocchi, was now a spicy Windy Knolls Farm lamb bolognese. Lata shifts dishes and concepts as rapidly as, and often in conjunction with, the weather.

"It's like you're throwing a dinner party every night, like when you go to the market in the morning, figure out what you have, and cook something delicious, but we start it all over the next day." What looks simple on the surface turns out to be an intricate dance among farmers, cooks, servers, and diners, all kept in time by the orchestration of Nemirow and Lata.

With a small kitchen team, FIG constantly interprets the Carolina Lowcountry, not by selling Charleston's cultural history, which has become the shtick of so many others, but by constructing a modern, seasonal representation of the cosmopolitan influences that currently shape the region. It is in this refinement and paring down that Lata has found voice and artistry within his trade. He is a man at the nexus of aptitude and passion, obsessively focused on his craft.

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—Chef Mike Lata on the quickly shifting dishes and concepts at FIG



Kaitlyn Iserman

MIKE LATA AND HIS KITCHEN STAFF WORK SIMPLE MAGIC WITH LOCAL INGREDIENTS AND MAY JUST BE CREATING A WHOLE NEW STYLE OF CHARLESTON CUISINE

To this end, innovation is constant, if barely perceptible. Dishes that become too regular, too mundane, too hard to locally source, and often just too popular, are stricken from the menu, legendary stuff like the deviled eggs that I used to suck down by the half dozen at the bar, the pan-roasted cauliflower that sold "three fields worth a year," the signature rice pudding that made it all the way to Food Network, and even one old standby they asked us not to mention, lest it stir up additional "protests" from longtime diners.

It is in the slow rhythms of the seasons and the desire to interpret Charleston on its own terms, rather than the expectations of the current vogue, that FIG has found success.

For Lata, Nemirow, and the employees at FIG, the brightest days may lie ahead. A James Beard Award for Best Chef Southeast might be a major achievement, but the nature of the restaurant is now well defined; it is a well-oiled machine that, as Lata inter-

prets it, "is what it is, not looking for the next big thing."

Perhaps that sums up the magic of FIG, a place that doesn't steal the show from the environment that produces it, that seeks to mold the local and the sustainable through a lens of deference, that respects the past (Lata sheepishly admits to once serving "shrimp and polenta") while not becoming a slave to it. Where singular success means it's time to move on lest people come back only for that one dish, not the full experience of the whole.

Perhaps that is what it means to invent a new cuisine — to shift beyond the archetypes into the fluid authenticity of the here and now. Perhaps FIG is that bold contender that redefines what it means to cook and eat in Charleston and becomes a model that others emulate. Mike Lata, of course, puts it a bit more succinctly:

"We want to be brave enough to stand in front of our simplicity."