



What do you get when you cross a Johnson & Wales-trained food enthusiast (whose childhood memories include plucking zipper peas off the pod and cooking farm-to-table feasts alongside his grandmother) with the abundant culinary bounty of Georgia's coast?



Straight up Southern magic. You know, like local shrimp and grits with Tasso gravy or marinated fried chicken slathered in truffle honey and toasted pecans.

Chef Jay Cantrell, Executive Chef of The Club at Savannah Quarters, is no stranger to shaking up the classics. Ingrained with a lifelong dream of living on the shoreline, his wishes came true when he landed in one of Charleston, South Carolina's top culinary programs. From there, he dabbled in some of the area's award-winning eateries followed by a transition to Georgia—where he helped open (and set the tone for) legendary downtown dining destination, Vic's on the River.

Needless to say, he's been hooked on the coast ever since.

After nearly four years at Savannah Quarters, Chef Jay is still packing the house with customers (as much as COVID-19 will allow) for his elegant themed dinner nights and bold brunch creations.

Below is his inspiring odyssey from grandma's kitchen helper to innovative, hard-working head chef.

Hooked on the Coast: Chef Jay Cantrell's Colorful Culinary Trek Through the Southeast

Chef Jay Cantrell
Executive Chef
The Club at Savannah Quarters
Savannah, GA

by Fanny Slater

Did you know from a young age that you wanted to be a chef? What are some of your earliest memories in the kitchen?

I did, and a lot of that came from cooking with my grandma. Farm-to-table is basically what we did together. She had a fantastic garden in her backyard, and we'd go out there and pick things like zipper peas and corn for sides. My papa was a hunter, so occasionally, whatever he'd bring home—that's what we could cook. Food was plentiful, that's for sure!

In addition to attending Johnson & Wales for culinary arts, what was your hands-on career path like (working your way up the ranks at restaurants, working at other clubs, etc.)?

I lived in Charleston for about six years and worked at Magnolias for a good long time. I also worked at Charleston Grill for about two years, and under Chef Bob Waggoner, I learned so much.

I moved from Charleston to Savannah to help open Vic's on the River. It was scary as it was my first executive chef gig, but it was successful. I was there from the ground-up.

What drew you into the country club environment vs. working at free-standing restaurants?

I had never done it before! I was also used to transient audiences where I never saw the same people. At a country club, it's more of a challenge to keep members interested.

How have your menus evolved over the years?

I take a lot of inspiration from back in the days of cooking upscale Southern food with French technique in those Charleston restaurants. I do a lot of braising and work with stocks and sauces like classic velouté or demi-glace—lots of low and slow.

When I started at Savannah Quarters, I didn't want to just do "country club food," which can be kind of bland and boring. I wanted to create menus for customers who wanted a downtown meal without having to go downtown.

Sounds risky! How was that change received?

I tried it out once, and they loved it! I got great feedback from the

BBQ Rubbed Cedar Plank Salmon Romesco



2-6oz quality salmon fillets
4 tablespoons BBQ rub (recipe follows)
4 tablespoons romesco sauce (recipe follows)
2-6"x6" cedar planks

Directions:

Prepare the cedar planks by placing them over the hottest part of your grill until well toasted. Take the BBQ rub, and liberally season the salmon. Place salmon on the toasted cedar planks, and cover the tops with romesco sauce. Place over a hot grill, and close the lid. Cook the salmon until you reach an internal temperature 145 degrees, about 12-15 minutes. If you would prefer your salmon cooked well done, cook until the internal temperature reaches 155 degrees, about 20 minutes. Let the salmon rest for 5 minutes and enjoy.

Romesco Sauce

5 Roma tomatoes, halved
1 large red pepper, quartered
5 cloves garlic
½ cup whole toasted almonds
¼ cup red wine vinegar
1 teaspoon paprika
1 pinch red pepper flakes

Directions:

Add tomatoes, red peppers, and garlic cloves together in a mixing bowl. Toss with salt, pepper, and oil. Roast in a 400-degree oven until garlic cloves are browned. Set aside and let cool. Place all items in a food processor and puree until well blended. Drizzle in EVOO until desired consistency. Season with salt and pepper to taste. Let sit for at least an hour, preferably overnight, before serving.

BBQ Rub

2 teaspoons smoked paprika
1 teaspoon brown sugar
1 teaspoon kosher salt
1 teaspoon cumin
1 teaspoon granulated garlic

1 teaspoon black pepper
1 teaspoon chili powder
1 teaspoon seasoned salt
1 teaspoon chipotle powder
Mix all ingredients together until well incorporated.

guests and my team. I can't stress enough how much I rely on the whole staff, particularly food and beverage director Pamela Thompson. She and I work hand-in-hand with a lot of things.

What are some of your standout dishes on the current menu?

The cedar plank salmon with romesco sauce is great, as well as a feature I'm doing right now, which is duck two ways (seared duck breast with confit leg, cassoulet risotto, fried spinach, and blood orange gastrique). And I love my fried chicken—a marinated, fried airline breast hit with truffle honey and toasted pecans as soon as it comes out of the grease.

Your culinary style screams elevated Southern comfort food. How much of that inspiration do you pull from the region itself?

I stick to local companies as much as possible who get Georgia-grown ingredients like the shrimp I use. Those are wild Georgia shrimp. A good friend of mine is a charter captain, and I get to go fishing with him. We pick up a lot of trout, redfish, and sheepshead, and I take them home, cook them up, and figure out recipe ideas to bring to the workplace.

Speaking of the region, you got to participate in the Savannah Food & Wine Festival a few years ago, which is a huge event. What was that experience like?

I got first place in the presentation, and we had the most popular booth! We were doing lobster rolls and had quite the line. Every restaurant in town was there, so I was a little intimidated to compete. But we had a great time, and I'd love to do that again!

What else inspires you when you're writing menus? Seasonality? Cookbooks? Food television? Travel?

I just love where I live. I love living on the coast. I grew up in a landlocked area of Georgia, and I always wanted to live on the coast, which I got to do when I went to culinary school in Charleston. I fell in love with it, and I'll never live away from the coast again. That's enough inspiration for me.

It's now been a full year since the COVID-19 pandemic began. How have things shifted at the club since last March?

We've been hung-ho the whole time other than closing down for about two weeks. We did themes like lobster and prime rib to-go, and once those started picking up—we decided to do a limited takeout lunch and dinner menu as well. We did so many to-gos, it was almost like we were still open!

After that, we started slowly opening up with increased capacity, and we're still doing quite a few to-go orders along with the now in-house theme nights.

We don't do tables any bigger than six and each seat is separated. The dining room looks totally different, and I'm definitely ready for it to be over with so we can have a full place again.

These theme nights sound like a hit! Which food has been the most successful?

Even though the menu changes seasonally, the theme nights are something really different and bring in a big crowd. It just gives the customers something totally different to experience.

Italian night was great. We try to go as authentic as possible and serve things like Fra Diavolo and gnocchi. We've done Indian fare, shrimp, and BBQ (complete with dry-rubbed Boston butt, ribs, baked beans with burnt brisket ends, and dynamite coleslaw). We do the basics with a little bit of a kick. That prime rib night packs the house every time!

Are there any procedures that went into place during the outbreak that you found ended up being for the better?

We used to do a huge Sunday brunch buffet with various stations (omelets, carving, waffles, etc.). Post-COVID-19, I began doing an a la carte brunch menu which I've had a lot of success with. It's also my favorite food to cook! In my opinion, there's nothing better than eating—or cooking—brunch.

We do chicken and waffles, huevos rancheros, shrimp and grits with Tasso gravy, and chicken and biscuits. Also, basics like steak and eggs, though it's a New York strip topped with bearnaise and fried eggs. The presentation is pretty fantastic. We've had some picky customers, so we were a little nervous at first, but once they tried it, they were wondering why they never ate it like that before.

What advice do you have for home cooks who aren't very comfortable in the kitchen, but want to entertain and improve their skills?

There's a world of knowledge in books and online, as well as on channels like Food Network. If you're not comfortable, just make yourself comfortable. What's the worst thing that could happen? If it's not good, try to make it better!

You've been on your feet cooking all day. What's your go-to takeout order?

I live on Wilmington Island, and Chef Mir Ali who owns Lili's Restaurant and Bar is an amazing chef and a good friend of mine. He incorporates a lot of traditional Indian spices in his dishes. I'll pick up his tandoori chicken and waffles any day. 🍴



TELL'EM I'VE MET SOME
NEW FRIENDS,
WHO FEEL EXACTLY
LIKE OLD FRIENDS.

I thought that moving to a new place at this stage of life, it'd be hard for me to meet people. Especially people that I'd have things in common with. I couldn't have been more wrong. I think my circle of friends now is wider than it's ever been. And it's much closer, too. Hard to believe I didn't know a single one of them just a year ago. Feels like I've known them my entire life.

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