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Burned by Pandemic-Era Customer Callousness and Seeking a Small-Town Feel, Scott Crawford Turned to Clayton,



North Carolina, for His Latest Restaurant

“Of all the places he could’ve chosen to invest, he chose Clayton,” Clayton Mayor Jody McLeod says. “It puts us on the map.”

BY LENA GELLER DEC. 15, 2021 6:30 A.M.



Scott Crawford at Crawford Cookshop | Photo by Brett Villena

According to Mayor Jody McLeod, the town of Clayton has been trying to get a Chick-fil-A for a decade.

“That has literally been a goal of the town council,” McLeod says. “On the record, a goal. And we can’t get it, because we don’t have enough people in a five-mile radius.”

So when five-time James Beard Award semifinalist **Scott Crawford** announced he would be opening a new restaurant in the Raleigh suburb, McLeod was thrilled.

“Of all the places he could’ve chosen to invest, he chose Clayton,” McLeod says. “It puts us on the map.”



Crawford, the celebrated chef-owner of downtown Raleigh's **Crawford & Son** and **Jolie**—as well as the upcoming **Crawford Brothers**, a steakhouse slated to open in Cary's Fenton development in spring 2022—launched his third restaurant, **Crawford Cookshop**, two weeks ago in downtown Clayton.

For someone who has spent his career working at big-city restaurants, Crawford's decision to open the Cookshop in a town with just under 30,000 residents was an unexpected change of pace. But because Clayton is one of the fastest-growing towns in North Carolina—its population has nearly doubled since 2010—McLeod says it makes sense that Crawford would want to put down roots.

"Clayton is getting so big that I can literally go to Walmart and not worry about what I look like, because I don't know anybody in there," McLeod says. "How awesome is that?"

Crawford says Clayton's growth trajectory helped draw him to the location, but ultimately, the community's warmth and hospitality sealed the deal.

"The more time I spent down here, the more I fell in love with it. The people are so nice and welcoming," Crawford says. "I grew up in a smaller town where people respect each other and support each other. This reminded me of that."

And despite Clayton's burgeoning population, McLeod says the influx of new residents hasn't detracted from its "small-town feel."

"It used to be that everybody who lived here grew up in Clayton," McLeod says. "Now we have new Claytonians and old Claytonians. That weave is creating a tremendous sense of community."

Crawford Cookshop is housed in the former J.G. Barbour and Sons Hardware building, which was built in the early 20th century and stands on Clayton's Main Street. Crawford renovated the building in a way that, similar to the town's populace, intertwines the past and the present. Working



with the architect Louis Cherry, he put his own modern stamp of “clean lines” on the space while also honoring the history of what McLeod says is the oldest structure in downtown Clayton.

After discovering a hand-powered rope pulley elevator in the bowels of the building, Crawford and Cherry took it apart and incorporated its wood and gears into the restaurant’s decor.

“When we were remodeling the building, we wanted to respect and preserve the era it came from,” Crawford says.

But elevator gears are far from the only repurposed aspect of Crawford Cookshop. The restaurant was born out of the pandemic—a member of the food industry’s rare “Children of the Quarn,” if you will—with a menu that Crawford originally created while adapting his flagship restaurant to curbside-only service during the first lockdown.

When restaurants closed in March 2020, Crawford and his team spent several days conceiving an entirely new menu for Crawford & Son because, he says, the items on the restaurant’s pre-COVID menu were “too composed” to be packaged to go.

“We sat down and said, ‘What travels well? What’s gonna comfort people?’” Crawford says. “We came up with this classic Americana elevated comfort food that was really in line with what we cooked every day but more casual.”



After a few months, Crawford and his customer base grew so fond of the curbside menu that he decided it had earned its own brick-and-mortar spot. In December 2020, Crawford & Son reopened for indoor dining, reinstating the carefully plated, temperature-sensitive dishes it offered pre-pandemic, and almost exactly one year later, an iteration of Crawford & Son's box-friendly menu resurfaced at Crawford Cookshop in Clayton.

When it comes to high-end restaurants, the word "casual" often has elastic applications: Crawford, for example, categorizes Crawford & Son as a "casual neighborhood eatery" and Crawford Cookshop as "totally more casual" than his previous restaurants. It's true that it does deviate from his standard cuisine in a number of ways: unlike his other two restaurants, the Cookshop's menu includes snacks, sandwiches, and wings as well as three kid-friendly dishes.

That being said, the food is still distinctly upscale (and a far cry from casual Chick-fil-A fare); one of the "snacks" is rabbit rillettes, and the server will likely encourage you to get the duck wings rather than the chicken.

Crawford says he aimed to make this restaurant less expensive than his first two, and though the sandwiches, which range from \$14 to \$18, make the Cookshop's entrées slightly more accessible, the rest of the menu prices are essentially on par with Crawford & Son and Jolie. In a nutshell, the Cookshop is "more casual" in that its menu and ambiance are less formal than their Raleigh counterparts but also in that its beef tartare is \$15, and Jolie's is \$16.

But regardless of the way he categorizes it, Crawford's cooking is exquisite as ever, and it's particularly delightful to try the handful of menu items that are genuinely more modest than his usual creations—notably, the smoked fish dip with pickles and fried saltines and the spicy fried chicken sandwich with fermented pepper sauce and miso slaw—as their execution is equally impressive as the



higher-end dishes, and they allow Crawford's skills to shine in a way that feels fresh.

The Cookshop is currently only offering dine-in service, but items like the fish dip and the chicken sandwich will eventually be available for delivery and curbside pickup. About 75 percent of the menu will have a takeout option, according to Crawford, while dishes that don't travel well, like the tartare, will be limited to dine-in customers.

If you're dining in, you may notice that the restaurant's interior is a sort of tabula rasa, offering little of its own personality and assuming, instead, the vibrancy of its food and guests.

The chairs are so bare-bones that customers almost appear to be floating when seated around a table, and the overall color scheme is monochromatic in a way that directs your attention toward the vivid hues of the ingredients on your plate.

Sitting down for a meal at the Cookshop feels like you're stepping into Lois Lowry's *The Giver*, where you forget that color exists until someone hands you an apple-and-frisée salad and a Cheerwine cocktail.

The dining room is anchored by a sleek, square-shaped bar, with three sides of seating and two televisions mounted above the wall of liquor. The televisions are unprecedented fixtures at a Crawford restaurant, which Crawford says indicates just how "chill it is."

Outside, a spacious covered patio invites guests to cozy up under toasty gas heaters and enjoy a view of Clayton's quaint Main Street shop fronts, which are currently aglow with thousands of tiny holiday lights. The patio will be convenient if the Omicron variant shuts down indoor dining again—and it's also a good option if you're uncomfortable with the fact that none of the Cookshop employees are wearing a mask; Johnston County doesn't have a mask mandate for restaurants, so almost every staff member and customer is barefaced.



Crawford is known for naming his restaurants after his family members—his French bistro, Jolie, is named after his 11-year-old daughter; Crawford & Son and Crawford Brothers are self-explanatory—and though he doesn't have a nephew named Cookshop (I asked), the name is indeed tied to relatives.

“Cookshop is a super old-school term for a kitchen or a place that serves prepared foods,” Crawford says. “I grew up with blue-collar roots. My great-grandparents had a farm, my grandparents had a sawmill, my uncle had a machine shop, and I worked at all these places. The Cookshop name sort of just reminded me of that.”

Naming his restaurants after loved ones is meant to honor them, though the gesture has, during **an era of nasty online reviews**, sometimes backfired.

After Crawford stopped offering curbside service at Crawford & Son and Jolie, he encountered what he describes as “Facebook adult temper tantrum[s],” including one aggrieved customer who posted a string of profanities online—and blamed Crawford for ruining his wife's birthday—after Crawford refused to sell him steak tartare to go at Jolie.

“This guy was like, ‘F— — you, Jolie!’” Crawford says. “Do you really have to put that out on the internet? You want me to put raw beef in a box, and you could get sick, and then it's my fault. And because we wouldn't do that, because we weren't offering curbside, you cursed out my daughter's first name.”

Crawford hasn't previously discussed this issue with the media, he says, but **hostility toward restaurants has escalated** so severely during the pandemic that he feels a need to address it.

“The world should know what we have been dealing with,” he wrote in a text message shortly before forwarding eleven screenshots of expletive-filled Facebook comments, all from customers who were enraged that he had taken away



curbside pickup. “It is shocking to see the venom from an adult on a public forum insulting my family.”

Because Crawford had devised curbside-specific menus for his Raleigh restaurants, he explains, continuing curbside service after reopening for indoor dining would have meant offering two completely different menus worth of food, and “we can really only do one or the other.”

After divulging frustration about being on the receiving end of “some of the most vulgar, insulting language I’ve ever heard,” Crawford emphasized that most of his customers are considerate and accommodating—but it can be hard not to focus on the ones spewing vitriol.

“Please be sure to mention we did receive a lot of support from our Raleigh people too but were surprised at the animosity and anger from so many,” he wrote in a follow-up text.

Crawford’s recent wariness of the internet adds another contextual layer to his location choice for the Cookshop; after months spent trying to navigate the vast anonymity and outrage-dominated culture of the digital realm, it makes sense that he would be particularly charmed by an intimate, community-forward town like Clayton.

“The town really went out of their way to welcome us,” Crawford says. “We felt every step of the way that we were supported.”

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