

Local Sourcing, Scratch Cooking - Raleigh Magazine

Chef Blake Gotliffe's farm-to-table café brings hyperlocal eats to Smithfield.

There's a lot of work that goes into chef-owner Blake Gotliffe's farm-to-table menu at Under the Oak Café in downtown Smithfield.

For one, there's tending to the farm in his backyard in nearby Clayton, which provides much of the produce for the restaurant's lunch sandwiches and salads, dinner entrees and his wife Megan's desserts. In addition, 90 percent of the menu's remaining ingredients are sourced from North Carolina farmers and producers, requiring trips to nearby towns to pick up products—including a run to Raleigh twice a week for seafood from Locals Seafood, meat from First Hand Foods and various items from the State Farmers Market. "I prefer the one-on-one interaction with farmers," Blake says. "Really knowing the people and supporting them means a lot."



Under the Oak Farm; Photo by Felicia Perry Photography

Then there's the task of curating menu items and cooking them to order for hungry customers, a job that comes easily to Gotliffe thanks to five years in the restaurant industry under his belt, with two of those years spent working under chefs Scott Crawford, Eric Montagne and Steven Goff at Standard Foods. Gotliffe attributes much of his skill to his time working at the now-closed restaurant and grocery store that was located just outside downtown Raleigh. Although he went to culinary school at Wake Tech and ran his own catering business before he joined Standard, Gotliffe says he realized there were techniques and methods of cooking that he had yet to learn.

Crawford helped him develop his palette and balance flavors, Gotliffe says, and he was able to put his skills to the test in Standard Foods' prepared meals section. It was Gotliffe's job to use the restaurant's vegetable scraps or items that weren't selling in the grocery to make dishes people could heat up at home, a task that now influences much of his cooking at Under the Oak, which opened last February. Gotliffe's menu is based off of sustainable practices such as preservation, full utilization of resources and zero waste. His specialties are homemade pickles and charcuterie, both of which feature on the restaurant's signature charcuterie board and in many of its beloved sandwiches. Gotliffe makes his own bread for the sandwiches, too. "The sandwiches are very special in that regard," he says. "It's rare that you eat somewhere where they make the meat, they make the bread and they grow the lettuce and make their pickles. It's a 98 percent scratch-made sandwich." Condiments, including Lusty Monk Mustard and Duke's mayo, both of which are North Carolina-sourced products, comprise the other two percent.

On the dinner menu—served Friday and Saturday nights—Gotliffe makes a special handmade pasta dish each week using a variety of freshly made pastas, which are also used in a mac and cheese prepared with Ashe County Cheese and local cream. These dishes are sides to meat and fish-focused entrees, while creative small plates change with what's available and in season. "I like to say [the menus are] very versatile," Gotliffe says. "It's mainly just seasonal cooking. I let the product decide my menu."



Blake and Megan Gotliffe; Photo by Stacey Spreng Photography

Seasonal local produce also helps Megan decide on items for the restaurant's dessert menu that includes rotating cakes, tarts and ice creams. Also a graduate of Wake Tech's culinary program and a former pastry chef at Mandolin and The Umstead, Megan, too, practices preservation to save summer produce for winter desserts and vice versa. Megan also runs her own wedding cake business, I Do Cakes, and occasionally sells cakes and cupcakes through Under the Oak Catering.

But Smithfield isn't Raleigh and Gotliffe says his menu needs to be more approachable for Johnston County residents than the adventurous menu at Standard Foods, though he says Smithfield diners appreciate Under the Oak's local sourcing—the Gotliffes have a steady stream of regulars, some of whom dine at the café every single day.

"There is no other farm-to-table restaurant out here at all," Gotliffe says. "It's definitely opened people's eyes."

"I've enjoyed getting to know the locals and I've kind of fallen in love with this town," adds Megan.

A 40-minute drive from Raleigh, Under the Oak gives you the perfect excuse to experience what the Gotliffes love about Smithfield for yourself. undertheoakfarm.com