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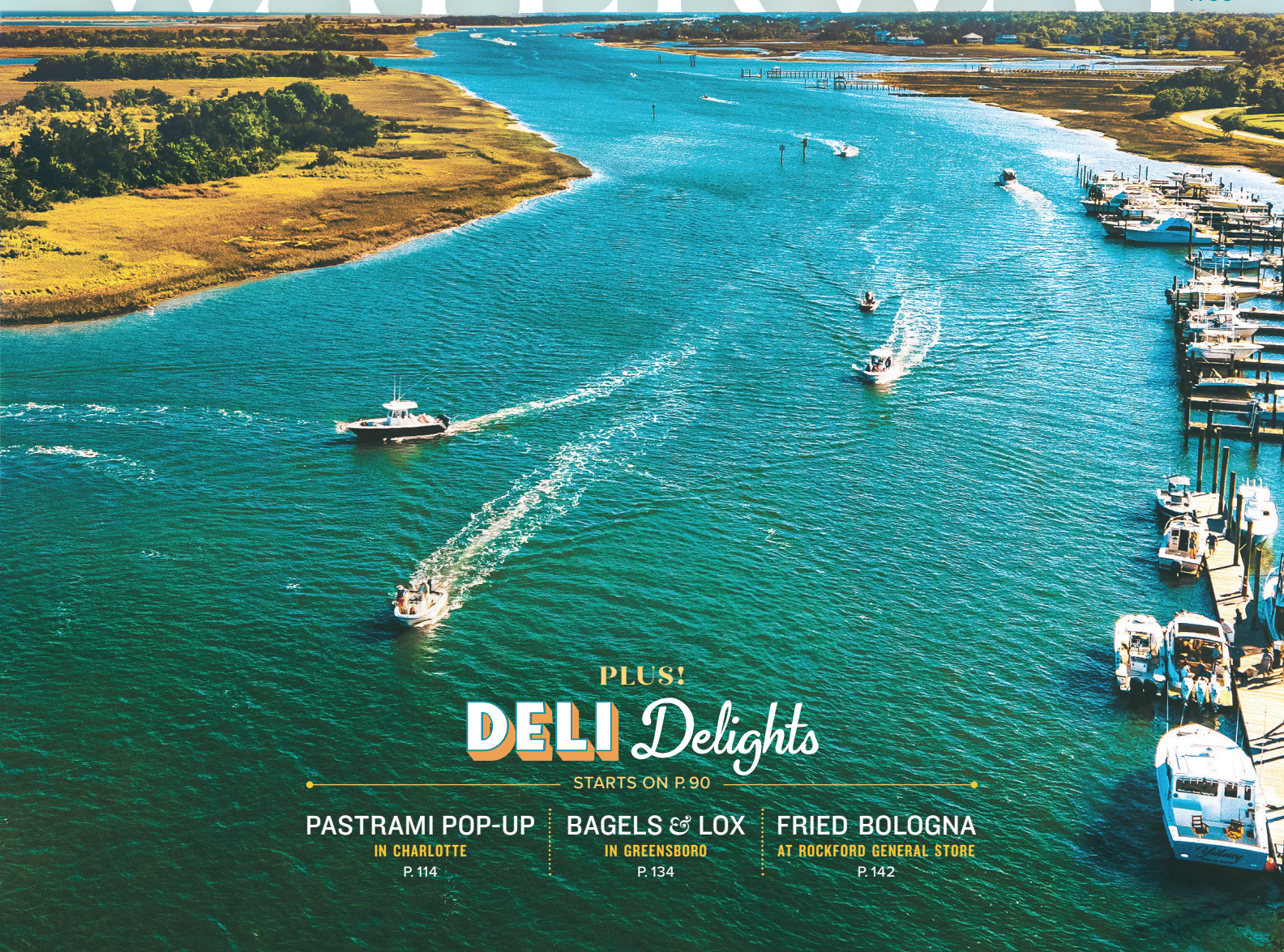
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GOATHAM'S DELI

Livin' ON A **PRAYER**

In Johnston County, a family has blessed North Carolina's Coastal Plain with a welcoming New York-style deli — complete with Mets and Yankees memorabilia and a miniature Statue of Liberty.

written by BILLY WARDEN / photography by ALEX BOERNER



Diners at Gotham's Deli in Smithfield may think they've been transported to Midtown Manhattan. Its famous Brass Knuckle sandwich — toasted sourdough piled with pastrami, Cheddar, mozzarella, mayonnaise, and more — is New York City with a Southern drawl.





AFTER MONTHS OF STRUGGLING, Scott and Lisa Gandolph couldn't cover their bills. Their big bet on bringing New York City-style pastrami and salami sandwiches to a small Southern town seemed destined for the chopping block. The transplanted Northerners knelt in their family room and prayed — not that their declining fortunes would suddenly reverse, but that they might prove to be worthy neighbors. “Lord,” they murmured together, “bless that we may be known for good in our community.” That approach, their well-fed customers now say, is what eventually made Gotham's Deli a success in Smithfield.

At some point, all six of the Gandolph children have been drafted into deli duty, but these days, Lisa and daughter Arianna handle the recipes and cooking. Scott, a 54-year-old who's light on his feet and quick with a smile, plays the field. “There are enough pressures in the world,” he says between quips with customers. “If I can make you smile a little, that's a good thing.”

THE WAY SCOTT COVERS THE CONTROLLED CHAOS of Gotham's at lunchtime feels close to miraculous.

He rings up customers. He waves more in. He hand-delivers deli classics and custom-made creations, including a high-protein, low-fat sandwich named Syd the Kid for one of his regular customers. Scott's knack for public relations has become the deli's secret ingredient.

“For someone who wasn't born in the South, he's adopted the Southern ways to fit in,” says another regular, T. Ruffin Johnson Jr., from under the wide brim of a cowboy hat. “He's generous. He's kind. He likes people. And he works hard.”

If a prayer requires some earthly effort to come to fruition, Scott has earned his blessings. Ruffin should know. Early on, he let Scott in on an important Southern secret. “I taught him how to make grits,” Ruffin boasts. The 88-year-old was part of a regular breakfast group at Gotham's. At first, Scott served only eggs and sausage — on Kaiser rolls, of course. Ruffin changed that. “Scott didn't seem too happy about it at first,” Ruffin says, “but he did it because he cares about his customers.”

Along with the grits and other such gestures came the holy grail of business: customer loyalty. As Ruffin's wife, Connie, waits for her usual — a chicken salad sandwich known as the Soho

Scott Gandolph (second from right) has a personality that'll put a smile on anybody's face, including those of his crew: (from left) Jamie Simpson, Julian Carey, wife Lisa, and son Bryce.



T. Ruffin Johnson and his wife, Connie, are regulars at the Ava Gardner table — just beneath a photo of Ruffin posing with the movie star decades earlier. Elsewhere, sports collectibles rule this space, presided over by a massive Babe Ruth statue.



— she teases her husband. “If Scott put a cot in the storage room,” she says, “Ruffin would sleep here.”

The Johnsons’ table of choice is in the back, situated beneath portraits hanging in tribute to Ava Gardner, the Hollywood screen queen who was born and raised near Smithfield. One of the old black-and-white photos features a 14-year-old Ruffin with Gardner, who leans in to autograph his tie. A *Photoplay* magazine crew captured the moment during a homecoming visit by the movie star. When Scott found out that the photo existed, he hurried to the nearby Ava Gardner Museum to get a copy.

AVA’S CORNER AT GOTHAM’S IS, AS SOME MIGHT SAY of the deli itself, an anomaly. The decor mostly celebrates sports with jerseys, photos, stat boards, and pennants — none of them of the Atlantic Coast Conference variety. A larger-than-life statue of Babe Ruth greets customers, but otherwise, the Yankees take a back seat to Scott’s beloved Mets, Buffalo Bills, and bygone Brooklyn Dodgers.

BAKING BREAD

Want to make your own deli-worthy sandwich? The No. 1 most important element — the canvas that supports your masterpiece — is the bread. We talked to three talented North Carolina bakers to find out how to master the art of baking sourdough and other loaves in your own kitchen. Read more by scanning the QR code on page 6 or visiting ourstate.com/extras.



The memorabilia is a throwback to Scott's youth some 550 miles north on Long Island, where his older brothers worked at a true New York deli. Though Scott wasn't employed there, he soaked up a love for food service, working for Golden Corral and eventually managing one in Smithfield. He liked the people but felt hemmed in by the job. "Everything was focused on what happened within those walls," he recalls. "I wanted something that included life *outside* the walls."

In 1989, Scott's brother Craig founded Gandolfo's Deli in Provo, Utah, and by the early 2000s, he'd expanded, establishing strongholds of sourdough and dill pickles in places like Rancho Cucamonga, California, and Little Rock, Arkansas. Scott convinced Craig to extend the chain to Smithfield in 2003. Twelve years later, Scott took the place independent, renaming it Gotham's.

The early years as Gandolfo's were lean, but the location helped. The deli is nearly next door to the bustling Johnston County Courthouse, with its imposing columns, leafy hardwoods, and almost 100-year-old monument to the doughboys of World War I. The deli's main entrance faces the town's always-rumbling main drag, but the back

"If the family knows that you like something, but it might sell out, they'll call to see if you want them to hold some for you."

door can be just as busy, opening onto the alleys that connect the courthouse to the bustling sheriff's headquarters.

"There's a probation officer right there," says Traynham Dorn, a defense attorney from Clayton, nodding toward the line that always seems to be at least eight people deep. Dorn holds court at Gotham's two or three times a week, alongside judges, prosecutors, and cops.

One morning, Scott stopped the constant parade of cars out front on East Market Street to usher Dorn and a friend safely across. "He's always doing things like that," Dorn says. "And if the family knows that you like something, but it might sell out, they'll call to see if you want them to hold some for you. It's like the bar Cheers from TV."

Make that *Cheers* set in Mayberry with a ladle of *The Partridge Family* since all the Gandolph young'uns have worked here — and those who've moved on often travel back. When daughter Ashley found out that this would be a busy day for Scott, she motored down from Raleigh, where she's a dental hygienist, just to pinch-hit.

"Isn't that something?" says Ruffin, cocking an eyebrow. "For some people, working that closely with your family would be a nightmare."

And yet, Dorn says, "I've never heard any bickering back there."

On most weekdays, cops, lawyers, and judges amble over from the Johnston County Courthouse (below) to chow down on favorites like The Dark Knight (above), featuring roast beef, turkey, ham, pastrami, and more.



LUNCHTIME AT GOTHAM'S IS LIKE THE roaring apex of a revival. The faithful come hungry for fellowship and sustenance. After they're sated, the place feels spent. Only a few customers linger in the midafternoon quiet.

Scott's fifth-born child, 23-year-old Bryce, ambles out of the kitchen, toweling off his hands and catching his breath. In his soft-spoken way, he sets the record straight on the seemingly uncanny harmony among himself and his siblings. "No, there's some bickering," he admits, smiling through a trimmed beard. "Just never in front of the customers. Some days, we just aren't clicking. But mostly, we're pretty well in sync."

One thing that the whole staff agrees on is the importance of making sure that Scott remains out front as much as possible. "They like to have me at the register so I can be making jokes with people," he says. "The staff gets more tips that way — and they all split the tips."

Never one to be hemmed in, Scott dashes off on a late catering call with bags of Reubens, meatball subs, and tangy pasta salad. "I do most of the deliveries," he says as he heads out the door. "It gets me out and talking to people."

For Scott, the word "talking" comes out as *tawking*, his Long Island accent flaring up whenever he's in a hurry. But the point is, Scott is again bolting out to make friends in this small town — truly, a man who knows what butters his bread. "I was at the hospital the other day," Connie says, "and he was coming in with an order."

Bringing good cheer and good food — the stuff that prayers are made of. **Os**

Billy Warden is a Raleigh-based writer, marketing executive, and musician.

GOTHAM'S DELI

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