

NORTH CAROLINA

BY JENN RICE

LEAH & LOUISE
Charlotte

In March 2020, Greg and Subrina Collier opened Leah & Louise, a Memphis-inspired juke joint, with flavors adapted from Memphis, Tennessee; Jackson, Mississippi; and New Orleans, in Charlotte's Camp North End. The duo is unapologetic when it comes to frank, but necessary, conversation on social media, further putting them on the map as advocates paving the way for Black-owned businesses to receive the recognition they deserve. The Colliers are also co-founders of Soul Food Sessions, a nonprofit to break the mold and create opportunities for African-American chefs, and most recently launched BayHaven Food & Wine Festival—the first all-Black food festival of its kind.

"Our biggest hurdle was trying to build a new business while also trying to sustain a long-standing business in the middle of Uptown," says Subrina Collier. "Our biggest success was being able to create Leah & Louise and build something that allowed us to speak through our culture, heritage, and foodways," she adds. At Leah & Louise, guests explore the Collier's vision of Black Southern cuisine by way of dishes like River Chips: chicken skins with "granch," a delicious green onion and ranch mixture; the show-stopping Mud Island blackened catfish, sitting in a bath of smoked catfish stew alongside rice grits, pickled field peas, and candied pepper; and Leah's cabbage: a modern take on smothered cabbage, plus a nod to Greg's late sister, Leah, who continuously experimented with dishes in the kitchen. A "Pay What You Can" community dish has remained on the menu since day one, allowing patrons to enjoy their food, regardless of their social or financial status.

Greg Collier is hoping for more conscientious diners as restaurants maneuver the pandemic. "We hope the pandemic showed folks how difficult hospitality is and we hope they understand the folks that stayed alive to serve love to serve," he says. The Colliers have further evolved BayHaven Restaurant Group, partnering with Camp North End to open four new concepts in summer 2022: Passage Seafood (a modern fish camp reflecting the Carolinas' terroir mixed with the Colliers' heritage), the Abyss (a modern speakeasy led by Leah & Louise's mixologist Justin Hazelton), Bird Is the Word (a "chicken-centric" counter-service spot), and B.A.D. (Beyond Amazing Donuts, from former Leah & Louise pastry chef Jasmine Macon). @leah_and_louise



Greg and Subrina Collier

CAN'T MISS

COCKTAIL

Carolina Gold Coast, a combination of whiskey, amaro, Carolina Gold Rice orgeat, egg white, and Angostura bitters

APPETIZER

River Chips, crispy chicken skins with green onion-inflected ranch dressing

MAIN

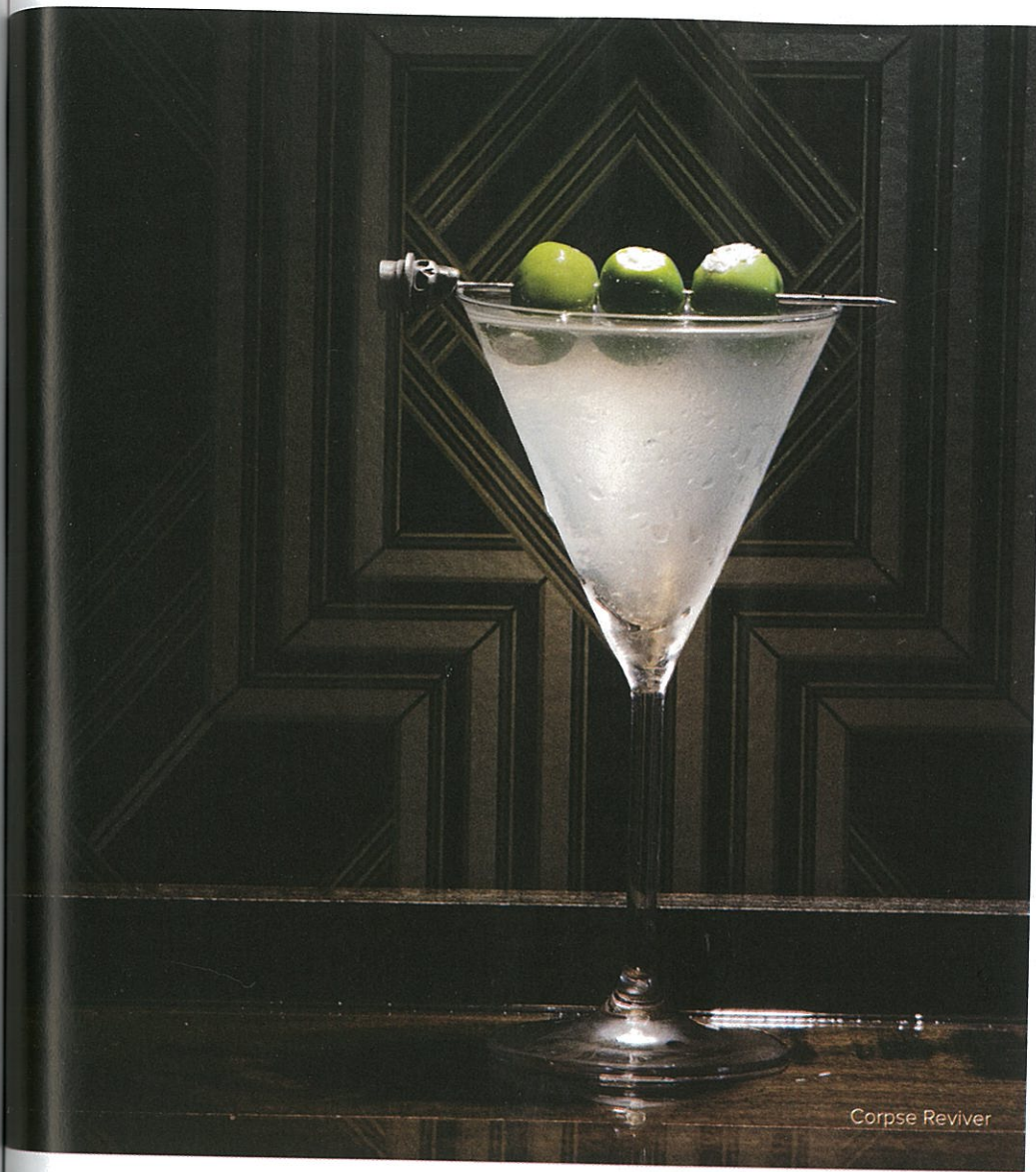
Mud Island blackened catfish over smoked catfish stew and rice grits

PETER TAYLOR PHOTOGRAPHY. OPPOSITE FROM LEFT: FELICIA PERRY TRUJILLO; GREG AND SUBRINA COLLIER: JENN RICE

CHEENI INDIAN FOOD EMPORIUM
Raleigh

Preeti Waas' housemade masala chai, Indian filter coffee (crafted with chicory from India), and savory cheese toast keep locals coming back to Cheeni, an Indian-inspired cafe nestled inside the YMCA on Hillsborough Street. Dedicated to telling stories via food, Waas' newest concept, Cheeni Indian Food Emporium, is a portal into the world of Indian food and conversation. And it's a place that encompasses all of Waas' ideas in one space—a cafe, deli, fast-casual, dine-in, cooking classes, pop-up dinners, feasts, and retail. "The word 'emporium' evokes a place where you don't quite know what you might find—and that's what we're going for." The concept was imagined to function during a pandemic lockdown or on any regular dine-in kind of day. "I'm most excited about bringing true, regional flavors of India to the Triangle market [and] the ability to host guest chefs and pop-ups in our beautiful demonstration kitchen," Waas says. Equally as exciting is the spice boundary—as in, no levels of spice are offered when ordering. "If something is meant to be spicy, it will be—otherwise, it won't."

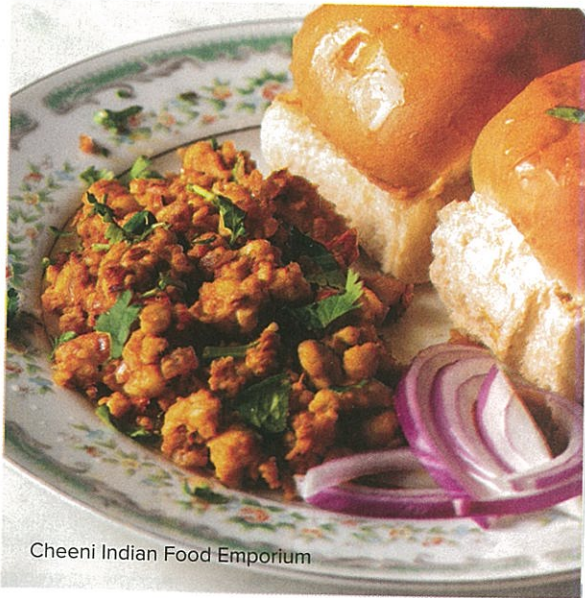
@cheeniraleigh



Corpse Reviver

CORPSE REVIVER
Durham

Science backgrounds and a true love for gin led Melissa and Lee Katrincic to the creation of Durham Distillery. One sip of Connipion Gin and you'll understand the countless accolades and awards. By May 2018, the two were the first distillers from the American South to be inducted into the Gin Guild in London, with Melissa trail blazing as one of the country's leading female distillers. In March 2020, Corpse Reviver came to life—a cocktail bar attached to the distillery, aptly named after the classic Corpse Reviver No. 2 cocktail and a nod to the space once serving as a coffin manufacturer in the 1960s. Big on education, the team devised a martini menu that acts as exploration through different styles of martinis, minus the intimidation. "The happy surprise is that we embraced that we were a place to revive your spirit," says Melissa, noting an immediate body language shift upon entering. "[Guests] relax their shoulders and look like they've just found their spot." @corpserevivercocktailbar



Cheeni Indian Food Emporium

QUEENY'S Durham

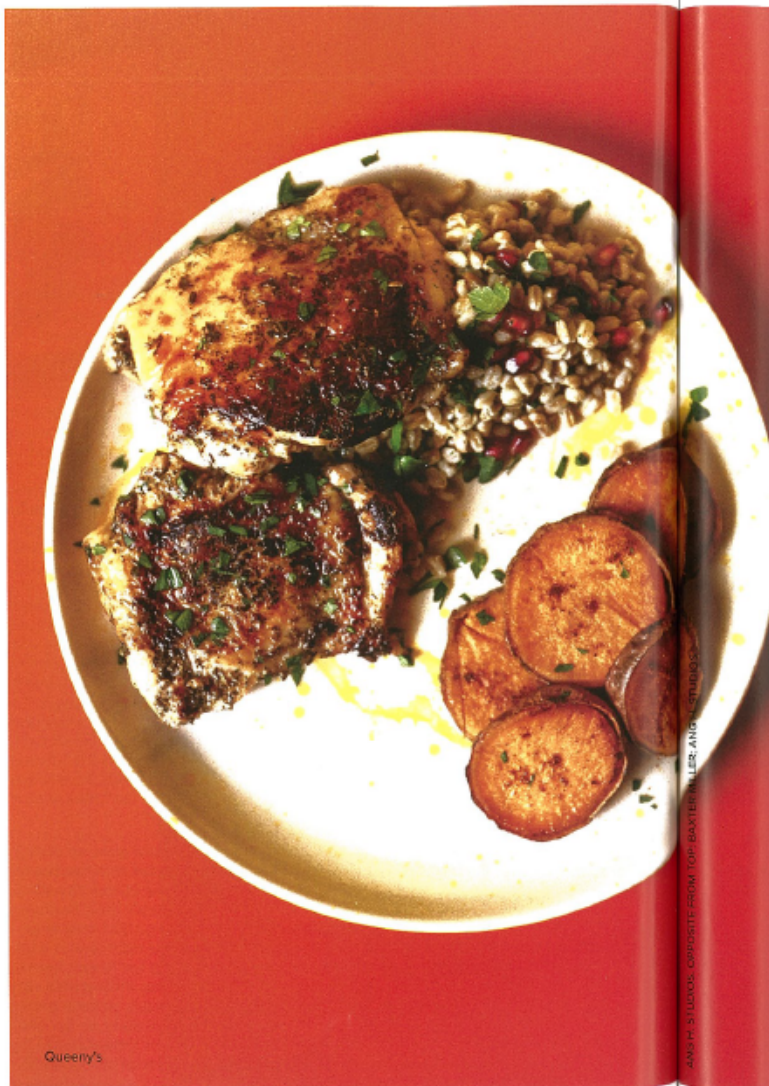
Sean Umstead and Michelle Vanderwalker opened Kingfisher, a farm-inspired cocktail bar, in 2019. The bar became a staple to Durham but when bars and restaurants were forced to shut down in March 2020, prohibiting the sale of to-go cocktails, the future became a big question mark. Kingfisher whimsically pivoted into Queenburger, an AstroTurfed outdoor patio serving smash burgers and cocktails to stay afloat (there's a permanent location coming soon). In January 2022, Umstead and Vanderwalker, along with King Kenney, also opened Queeny's—a neighborhood diner with a late-night menu and playful drinks list, plus a podcast studio and bookshop. While uncertainty lingers, Umstead is excited to offer something unique to Durham. "I think folks are gravitating towards our more indulgent dishes," says Umstead. "Our birria dip has been a huge hit—it's slow-braised brisket topped with cheese on a toasty baguette served with the braising liquid to dip it in," he says, adding that it was inspired by chef Steph Bell, who joined the team during the Queenburger days. "It has been wonderful to see folks join the team and jump in—it's great to see people who are still eager to do this work and do it well, even after the past two years."

@queenydurham

UNION SPECIAL Raleigh

"If I had to do it all over again, I'd still do it," says Andrew Ullom, of the expansion of Union Special into downtown Raleigh on Fayetteville Street at a time when downtown proved to be very quiet. Since opening the Gateway Plaza location in 2019, Ullom has been a steady voice for implementing a living wage and healthy work environment for employees, plus a community bakeshop and gathering space. The downtown menu differs slightly—the Italian sandwich, on a fresh semolina roll, is not to be missed, while Ullom notes the tomato soup and grilled cheese is "just a lot of fun" that brings him back to the nostalgia of being a little kid.

@unionspecialbread



Queeny's