

New Food

LINGERING LIBATIONS

For Frank Stitt, Slowing Down Is Imperative to Preparing Alabama's Best

BY JENNY ADAMS

Chef Frank Stitt began his illustrious career with the opening of Highlands Bar & Grill in 1982 in the Five Points area of downtown Birmingham, Ala. While Highlands' more global approach to cuisine was rapidly successful, Chef Stitt ventured outwards within the same area of the city to open Bottega in 1988, Bottega Café in 1990 and Chez Fonfon in 2000.

Enticing the social, hungry customer base in Birmingham with global, Italian, Mediterranean and French experiences for more than two decades, Stitt has a growing list of accolades. These include but are not limited to Highlands Bar & Grill being voted No. 5 in Gourmet magazine's list of "The 50 Best American Restaurants," a New York Times review, an award of "Best Chef in the Southeast" by the James Beard Foundation, an induction into the Dining Hall of Fame by Nation's Restaurant News and a spot on Food & Wine magazine's list of "Top 25 Hot New American Chefs."

Chefs around the country respect him for his skills at plating delectable cuisine, but Stitt always has married his philosophies on fine dining with his cocktails and wine selections. In these days of limelight for fresh limes, Stitt has the respect the country's top mixologists when it comes to the "fresh" movement in libations.

The Philosophy

Frank Stitt's background and world travels have contributed heavily to the fact that his restaurants and bars enjoy 35 percent of their total sales from beverages alone.

"I love great bars, and when I fell in love with food in San Francisco in the '70s, the great bars of that city were a big inspiration," he says. "Some of the great bars did unusual things even for now, in that they had big bowls of fruit, and they would juice drinks to order."





Chef Stitt took notice of this and moved on to study wine in Provence and Burgundy, France, all the while combining ideals that would become his own personal beverage philosophy for both grapes and grains. His focus on bringing the kitchen to the bar in each of his restaurants is flanked by a commitment that every bar should have its identity and atmosphere within the room. In every location he owns and operates today, there are large bowls filled with fresh produce, and more often than not, an errant orange or two rocking softly on the bar top.

"We wanted to try to introduce people to things like Sazeracs, to Mint Juleps to Ramos Gin Fizzes -- some drinks that were real traditional New Orleans cocktails," he says of his beginning days with Highlands in the early '80s. "I think besides San Francisco, New Orleans is the great cocktail town.

"One of the things that we really focused on was the bar being its own entity. Twenty-five years later, like last Tuesday night, the bar is still jam packed with bar regulars. And these are people who never eat dinner in the dining room, but it is like 'Cheers,' in that it is their bar."

To build and increase this guest traffic of bar-only

how to squeeze the ripe white peaches by hand through a strainer to use for a Bellini. Bartenders think I am crazy, but we will do the same thing with the watermelon juice -- just squeeze it by hand and put it through a strainer."

The House Blends

"If anything with the direction we are going in now, there is a nationwide move toward more creativity behind the bar," says beverage director and sommelier for all four venues, Sean Meyer.

"Bartenders are now part chemist and part chef where you are mixing these things and there is also a real focus on flavor combinations. It may be something as simple as serving a cucumber slice with a Hendrick's Martini or something as complicated as preparing fresh juice for a much more involved cocktail," he says. "What it does, is it draws a lot of appreciation. You can see how excited people get when they are sitting at the bar and they see someone juice something in front of them. For me, I can't watch someone juice something and not start salivating."

One aspect of Stitt's operations that may seem too involved for the majority of restaurant/bar operators

Stitt's focus on bringing the kitchen to the bar in each of his restaurants is flanked by an equal philosophy that every bar should have its identity and atmosphere within the room

regulars, Stitt worked on twists of the classics and on creating signature touches that Birmingham's night owls have come to associate as synonymous with his operations.

"We have developed a Martini way before the Martini craze," he says. "We would use a wooden muddler and churn ice for about 20 seconds, so when you pour the Martini there is a little glacier-like freeze of ice on the surface. Then, we would make an extra big Martini and leave the shaker. Now, a lot of people have started to do that, but as far as I know, we were one of the first ones."

Other ideals held dear at his venues include working with seasonal, fresh fruits beyond apples and oranges. Blueberries, blood oranges, house-branded cherries and local strawberries all make the list, provided they are in season.

"Right now," Stitt says, "the fresh mint we have growing at each property is making a big presence at the bars. In the blood orange season, December through March, they will be everywhere on the menu.

"Each summer when the peaches come in June, I will have those. I learned from Harry's bar in Venice

is the approach to wine. The focus is on smaller growers who are still very hands-on at their perspective vineyards, and for many years now, Chef Stitt has cultivated a growing relationship with Jim Clendenen of Au Bon Climat and Il Podere. This group now makes specific house red wines just for Stitt's venues.

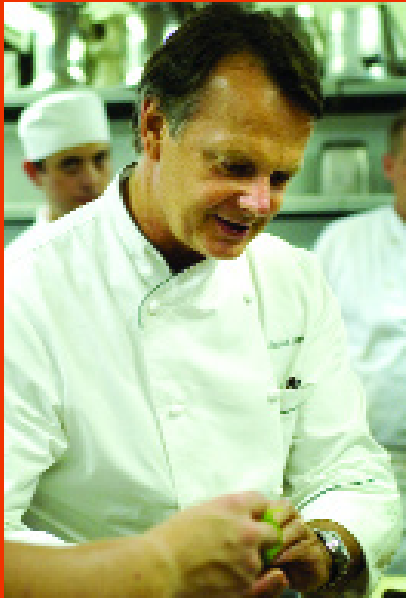
The Southside Red label is a barbera and refosco, and the vineyard also provides a signature pinot noir for them as well. Joseph Phelps, also out of California, has been providing the Birmingham business with its house chardonnay for more than 15 years.

Slow Food Finds a Friend

All of this attention to detail led Chef Stitt to a firm philosophy of taking the time to do things correctly, which in turn led him to become involved in a movement known as Slow Food International. Begun in Italy, Slow Food International is an organization dedicated to reversing the negative effect of years of fast, cheap food with a return to the beauty and simplicity of sitting down to a table for a proper meal.

"It is all about celebrating taking the time with food and drink and trying and enjoying artisan prod-

ucts, whether they be olive oils, foccacias, strawberry jams, wines, grappas or bourbons," Stitt says. "It is taking the anti-industrial position of the last 50 years and saying, 'Well, let's go back and think about those ingredients that are time-honored and those animals that were grown because of their



Frank Stitt's passion for slow food shines at Highlands Bar & Grill.

flavor and character," he says. "It's a whole philosophy that has to do with sustainable agriculture and sustainable eating, but more than anything, it has to do with the pleasure of being at table."

Service with Sense of Pride

The pleasure of being at one of Stitt's tables has become legendary, as has being at one of his barstools. Just as the vino is flown in from boutique vineyards, the meat and dairy are as well. The benefit of being in

Alabama, Stitt says, lies in repeat customers and local farmers.

"All of our lettuce and herbs come from local farms," he says. "One of our missions is to try to promote local farmers and to get more of our food from local sources."

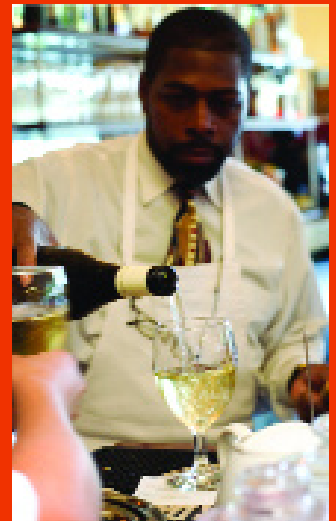
The extensive cost and time employed at Highlands, both Bottega concepts and Chez Fonfon is offset by the fact that these are fine dining establishments that can support longer ticket times and extensive mixology. They also are blessed with being establishments that foster and empower skilled staffs.

In each location on a rotating weekly schedule, Sean Meyer will host seminars for the servers ranging from topics on wine-producing regions around the world to bourbons to scotches.

"Because of the way we train the staff, we will see a steady overall gross instead of a spike in sales," Meyer says. "We take a very holistic approach to beverage training. A lot of folks will train on an individual scotch or on an individual wine and tell them a whole lot about one product. A lot of what we do is to give people the information they need to be able to glean from new products what to expect from the area and general characteristics.

"We focus on the laws of production — on what makes a bourbon a bourbon and what makes a Tennessee whiskey a Tennessee whiskey."

NCB



Raisin Infusions

Chef Frank Stitt empowers his staff with knowledge and confidence in a very sellable wine list and menu. Flavor is king in each location, and this is just as key in the sauces and reductions as it is in the Martinis and cocktails. Following a growing trend of house infusions, Stitt's Bottega Manager Patrick Kemmesat recently began experimenting behind the bar.

"I am working on a grappa infusion," Kemmesat says. "I have been wanting to use grappa for a while, but in Alabama, it is a special order and is hard to get."

After working to secure a bottle for almost two years, Kemmesat was rewarded, and he has used the product

sparingly in small experiments with astounding results.

"When I began," he says, "I thought about the Italian approach. How do they make grappa? Well, they press the wine, and it is the leftover skins. Of course, raisins are dried grapes, so it kind of made sense in my mind. I knew it had to be something rich and nothing too fruity."

The outcome of a few weeks produced something that surprised everyone.

"It just changed the entire outlook of grappa," he says. "It becomes a liqueur, and it is not even the same thing that it was before."