

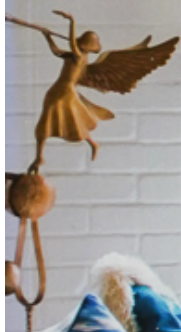
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Here in Raleigh

Up to speed with  
Ashley Christensen

Cape-tivating  
Winter style

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WALTER profile

Up to speed with...

# ASHLEY CHRISTENSEN

by LIZA ROBERTS

IT'S EARLY-MORNING DARK WHEN JUAN ESPARZA ARRIVES AT THE FORMER FISHERS Bakery on the edge of Mordecai. In a couple of hours, the sprawling kitchens he manages there will bustle with nearly two dozen prep cooks and bakers; its massive walk-in refrigerators will empty out, then fill up again. Whole hogs will be delivered; so will cords of cured oak and gallons of Howling Cow milk, crates of vegetables and wheat flour and honey, bulk-purchased dish soap and oranges and eggs.

This is the nerve center of Ashley Christensen's growing restaurant empire, the command post that enables each of her five Raleigh restaurants, a bar, and an event space to work and thrive. It's called Aux Kitchen, and it's what made it possible for Christensen to open the restaurant Death & Taxes and the event venue Bridge Club last summer. It's also what makes it possible for her other four popular eateries — Poole's, Beasley's, Chuck's, and Jolee — to reliably churn out fresh, award-winning, creative cuisine.

Photography by NICK PIRONO

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#### CHEF AND LEADER

Ashley Christensen is right at home in the open kitchen of Death & Taxes, her latest and best restaurant. As her company has grown, so has her role as leader. Behind her, sous chef Kevin Donnelly preps for the dinner service. Behind him, the massive woodfire stove that defines the restaurant's cuisine is already blazing.

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And perhaps most importantly, Aux Kitchen is a tangible symbol of the transformation of Raleigh's best-known chef. In the space of a few short years, Christensen has morphed from a lone genius on a sprint to a team leader for the long haul. If Raleigh already knew what the rest of the world learned last year when she won the James Beard Award for Best Chef in the Southeast — that this woman is a serious talent — now it's clear she's also building a company with the legs to last.

It's been a thoughtful evolution. "I no longer do everything," Christensen says. "The more things I started to take on, the weaker I was at all of them." A shift in focus has sharpened her efforts: "My job has changed so much," she says. "At this point ... I don't think I'm supposed to be a manager. I'm supposed to be a leader. I'm supposed to lead great managers."

Today, Aux Kitchen's Esparza and a fleet of other long-time, trusted employees

make it possible for Christensen to do less racing, more thinking and creating; to do fewer things, and to do them better.

#### What she wants

It's 2 p.m. on a Friday at Death & Taxes, her new 60-seat hotspot, and as Christensen's team of five cooks (led by chef de cuisine Sam Jett and sous chef Kevin Donnelly) prepare for dinner and stoke an already-blazing fire in the massive wood stove, hip-hop blaring, deliveries are arriving, and Christensen is sitting back in her elegant and unpretentious dining room, offering a visitor a glass of rosé. Behind her, words in Latin are etched into an antiqued mirror. *Vos nuncos ne exsturi! Est ibi durissimum!* The words continue across several mirrors and lend the place a subtle shimmer.

Given that the restaurant's name is a sly reference to the building's past as a bank and a funeral home, it's not surprising to

find out the Latin isn't Plato. It's Rodney Dangerfield — a quote from the graduation speech his character Thornton Melon delivers at the end of *Back to School*. ("And so, to all you graduates, as you go out into the world, my advice to you is ... Don't go! It's a jungle out there! Stay in school!")

Christensen appreciates its irreverence. "Coming from this long line of people who never went to college" (she went to N.C. State), "I think I had this connection with this ... happy guy who just goes in and buys everybody a round and does what he wants."

It's too simple to say that not long ago Christensen was pursuing a similar path (metaphorically buying everyone a drink and doing what she wanted), but she says it's true that an independent mindset was limiting the company. "At first, we couldn't really listen to people" who had any criticism, she says. "We were too young, too busy, too immature," she says. "Now we've



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learned how to listen. It wasn't criticism, it was advice. We learned not to react, but to respond."

A similar mind-shift happened about management. "At first, when you're younger, and not secure enough," she says, "you don't know that it's OK to not be good at everything. You don't know that it's OK to be the employer of someone who has a greater strength at something important ... than you do ... And then, as I grew up a little bit ... you get really comfortable with the strengths of the people around you, because you realize it allows you to hone in on your own strengths."

Those strengths of hers — developing killer recipes, dreaming up and running unique restaurants, cooking as well as anyone in the Southeast — weren't helped by her relentless pace and the company's then-scrappy management style.

On the heels of Poole's success, Christensen opened Beasley's, Chuck's, and Fox Liquor Bar all at once in 2012; she launched *houle* a couple of years later, all while

Opposite: At Aux Kitchen, AC Restaurants executive pastry chef Andrew Ullom wheels a steaming cauldron of scalded milk he'll turn into yogurt. Gaston Pacheco and Purnima Mendez prepare sweet potatoes, and Dina Funes gets mac-and-cheese ready to go. Above: There's a lot of pickling going on at Aux. Here, jars of pickled turnips, okra, string beans, watermelon rinds, peppers, green tomatoes, eggplant, celery, fennel, garlic, corn, leeks, muscadines, green onions, and ramps fill the shelves.

working on two cookbooks (the first one should be out next fall) and traveling constantly to cook around the world. While the non-stop action fed her creativity, she was spread thin, and sought out guidance.

Her friend Nick Pihakis, chef and owner of Jim 'N Nick's Bar-B-Q in Birmingham, Ala. and co-founder of the Fatback Collective, a local-food movement engine, taught her how to nurture her team. "To not just work hard and make delicious food," she says, "but to be sustainable, to create futures." She can't say enough about his influence: "The difference he has made

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in my life, and my company ... the things that are now my goals within this company and for my people ... I'd be years and years behind where I am" without him. Offering health insurance to all employees and a living wage to the staff at Death & Taxes is a milestone. She also wants to give all employees work schedules that "honor our family and our health."

The ultimate goal of that is to "create a place where people want to come to work. We haven't done it; we're doing it. And to stay true to that, you have to remember that you're not done."

Another major influence has been Derek Ryoti. Christensen hired him as general manager of what they call the ABC Corner Shop, or Chuck's, Beasley's, and Fox Liquor Bar, all neighbors at the corner of Wilmington and Martin streets. He brought her down to earth, and became her director of operations in the process. "He was absolutely responsible for building every bit of executive structure in this company," she says. "Without him, I was going to be the person who had a bookkeeper and a beverage director, and all of these restaurants. I was so stressed out ... I could see some of the answers, but I couldn't see how to slow down enough to line up those answers."

One of them was Aux.

#### Auxiliary force

On a recent morning there, a cook sliced and roasted several cases of sweet potatoes for the Corner Shop. Another poured macaroni into baking pans for Christensen's famous mac-and-cheese. AC Restaurants executive pastry chef Andrew Ullom scalded a cauldron of milk to make yogurt for Jolee, another baker cut circles out of biscuit dough for Beasley's. The building is a hive: All of the butchering for Death & Taxes takes place here; sausage is made; bread is baked; meat is brined; 300-pound blocks of ice are frozen and sawed into the massive cubes that fill Fox's cocktail glasses.

There's a lot going on, but every task has its place. That's a big change from the pre-Aux days of a year ago, when each restaurant's tiny kitchen struggled to contain and create the food it served. At Aux, there's room to spread out. Ingredients don't run out, because now that there's room to store it all, the company can buy in massive bulk. That ability also helps build relationships with farmers, says Ullom. And the added space also means that the company can invest in new equipment that wouldn't fit

before, which itself saves time and money. A massive juicer can turn a case of oranges into OJ in five minutes; another machine can turn ground beef into patties at warp speed.

It all "gives us the opportunity to get a lot more done," Esparza says. It also lets Christensen and her team get creative with new recipes and techniques like pickling, fermenting, canning, and curing.

When they're ready, all of those Aux creations get loaded into color-coded bins - black for Beasley's and Chuck's; blue for Jolee; red for Poole's; green for Death & Taxes - and refrigerator-trucked downtown. At some point in the next year or so, the truck will have an additional destination: the wood-fired pizza place Christensen's planning to open next door to Poole's. In AC Restaurants-land, at this point, the pizza place barely warrants a mention. There's simply too much else going on.

#### Back to basics

When an Aux delivery of freshly-butchered meat arrives at Death & Taxes, Christensen is considering several new serving pieces to incorporate into the restaurant's custom handmade Haand ceramics dishes. She chooses quickly. Meantime, cooks are simmering sauces, slicing artichokes, and roasting garlic and eggplant on the fire.

If you were to head next door and stand on top of the parking deck there, you'd catch a waft of that fire's woodsmoke, a bit of outdoor mystery in the downtown air.

It's that very smoke and what it represents that led Christensen to open this latest restaurant in the midst of everything else she had going on. A trip to Uruguay with the Fatback Collective, where every meal she ate was cooked outside over fire, got her thinking hard about the value of simplicity.

"We tend to get caught up, as American chefs these days, in all the different ways we can do things, and that's really exciting," she says. "But what happens when we take a step back? We re-evaluate how we approach ingredients, and the way that we're cooking, once we're working with that actual source of heat. I think it brings out some real sort of inner beauty in the food that exists in simplicity, and that I think disappears when we overcomplicate things."

The idea gripped her enough that she was willing to overcomplicate her life to

make it happen. But not in the way she would have before. This time, her team, plus her partner on the project, James Goodnight, Jr., were there. Which was key as the project snowballed, involving renovating an entire historic downtown building, and adding the event space Bridge Club to the mix. The result was worth it, she says.

Critics and crowds agree. Greg Cox, restaurant reviewer for *The News & Observer*, gave Death & Taxes top marks: "Expectations for the James Beard winner's new place were high - and it delivers," he wrote.

Christensen still sees it as a work in progress. Prices, proportions, and recipes are still being tweaked. The basement might become a bar - the team is taking its time with that, because the focus is upstairs: "Let's get in there and let's make some mistakes," she tells her crew. "Every-one working on this team is a part of this thing, and invests some creative energy and is really connected," she says. "Together we will come up with things we could never have imagined on our own." Evolution should always be underway, she believes. "Being great is a product of being willing to be better each day."

Greatness is a subject she thinks a lot about. "My goal is that we not ever want to be - it's one of my least favorite expressions: 'the best' ... To be 'the best,' you're done. Sounds pretty lonely to me. Doesn't sound like the place where I can have a cocktail after work with my friend Chetie (Kumar, chef and owner of Garland restaurant around the corner), and we can talk through our days and be really honest with each other."

Christensen sits back, takes in the scene she's created around her. It's the product of prodigious talent, curiosity, appreciation of what another culture does well, and a whole lot of teamwork. It's the culmination of years of personal and professional growth. She's proud of all that, and also, importantly, of the food coming out of this latest kitchen, with its emphasis on woodfire cooking and simplicity. "I think we have the chance here, together, to contribute something to American cooking right now."

But don't get her wrong. "My goal," Christensen says, "is that we not want to be the best, but that we want to be great in a great, growing community. Together we can all be great."

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