

Food & Dining



PHOTOS BY JULI LEONARD jleonard@newsobserver.com

Pan-seared N.C. sea trout, beached on a colorful dune of greens, corn and red bell peppers, is a keeper on the menu at Crook's Corner in Chapel Hill. Chef Justin Burdett is gradually adding his own contributions while flawlessly executing the restaurant's iconic dishes.

REVIEW

Crook's Corner chef preserves classics but has his own flair

BY GREG COX
Correspondent

CHAPEL HILL

Crook's Corner has been a fixture at the west end of Franklin Street for so long that the sculpture of a pig perched above the entrance is as familiar a Chapel Hill landmark as the Old Well. From the quirky collection of hubcaps cladding one end of the building to the bamboo screen enclosing an enchanting courtyard patio at the other, the place looks pretty much the same as it has for decades.

Inside, an astute observer may have noticed a few changes late last year when Gary Crunkleton (of The Crunkleton bar down the street) and Shannon Healy (of Alley Twenty Six in Durham) bought the place. In addition to bringing the antiquated kitchen up to date, they gave the dining room a sprucing up (though they thankfully kept the vintage formica tables and black and white tile trim).

Not surprisingly, given their mixology backgrounds, Crunkleton and Healy concentrated on the bar area, removing cabinets that had been block-



Little has changed at Crook's Corner since new owners took over last year, aside from some sprucing up to the dining room and bar.

ing a window and adding six inches to the depth of the bar so that, in Crunkleton's words, "people can belly up and eat

there."

But those are by no means the biggest change the new owners made to the restaurant

that the James Beard Foundation named in 2011 to its list of American Classics, in recognition of "our nation's beloved regional restaurants ... distinguished by their timeless appeal."

They hired a new chef. So what's the big deal, you may well ask. Turnover is notoriously high in the industry, where restaurants go through chefs like a spoon through a dish of Crook's banana pudding.

Not this restaurant. Justin Burdett, who took over the kitchen in October of last year, is just the third chef at Crook's Corner since it opened in 1982.

He's got some pretty big shoes to fill. Legendary founding chef Bill Neal is widely credited as the pioneer in contemporary Southern cuisine who elevated shrimp and grits from a simple shrimper's breakfast to the nationally recognized (and often imitated) dish it is today.

When Neal died in 1991, the mantle passed to Bill Smith, who for the next 17 years walked the tightrope of preserving that Crook's heritage while leaving his own mark with signature dishes like green Tabasco chicken, Atlantic Beach pie and honeysuckle sorbet.

Burdett's challenge has been to continue that delicate balancing act. A year in, the young chef is proving to be more than up to the challenge.

He should be. A native of rural Georgia, Burdett cut his culinary teeth under James Beard Award-winning chefs Hugh Acheson and Steven Satterfield before opening Local Provisions in Asheville, which was named by Eater as

SEE CROOK'S, 4C



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FROM PAGE 1C

CROOK'S

one of the best new restaurants in America in 2016.

At Crook's Corner, Burdett's considerable talent is abundantly evident, as is his respect for an institution that The New York Times once dubbed "sacred ground for Southern foodies." His faithful execution of the restaurant's iconic shrimp and grits — a beautifully balanced presentation featuring plump and peppery shellfish, sautéed mushrooms, bacon and scallions over cheese grits — is flawless.

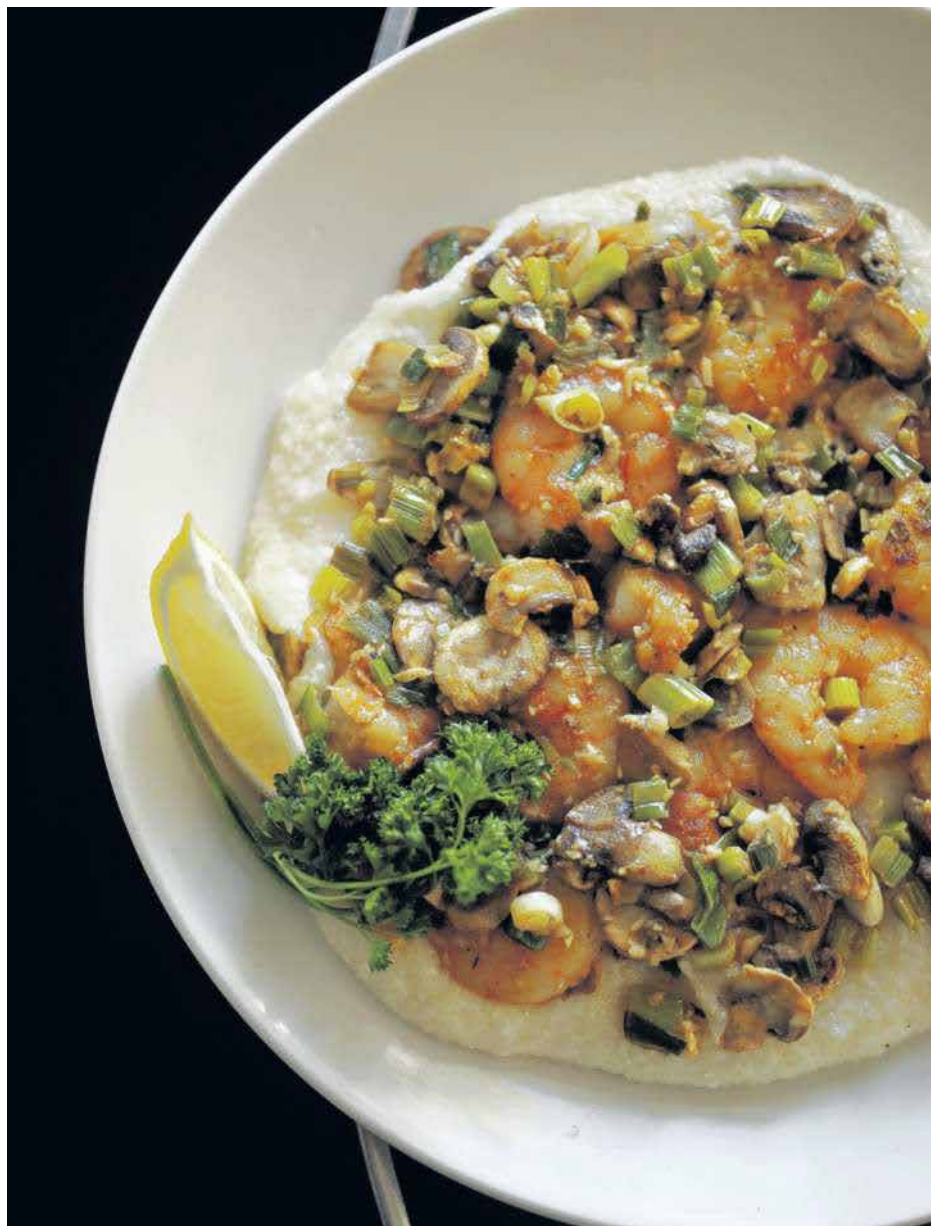
The chef does justice to other Crook's classics, too, from crusty, creamy-centered jalapeño-cheddar hushpuppies to citrusy, smooth-as-silk Atlantic Beach pie with its distinctive cracker crust. And if you happen to be there when cheese pork is on the daily evolving menu, you can find out why cheese pork (a Southern-style schnitzel wrapped in a Swiss cheese-laced crust and blanketed in sweet madeira sauce) is so popular you can buy an "I HEART CHEESE PORK!" T-shirt.

Meanwhile, Burdett is gradually adding his own contributions to the list.

None is more representative of the chef's instinct for honoring tradition while embracing change than a shareable starter of fried seafood and vegetables. Shrimp, cauliflower, scallions and fennel are all impeccable in an airy tempura-like batter, while cornmeal breaded oysters are a juicy, delicately crisp reminder that Crook's still has some of the best fried oysters around.

In that same spirit, a watercress Waldorf salad with walnuts, grapes and Granny Smith apples in a black pepper mayo is a refreshing marriage of tradition and trendiness. So is a charcuterie board of smoked chicken and andouille terrine with homemade hot sauce and assorted pickles.

Pan-seared N.C. sea trout, beached on a colorful dune of greens, corn and red bell peppers, is another keeper. So are grilled chicken thighs, paired with a medley of peas and dumplings in a rich veal demi. Farro verde, with a mouthwatering medley of rice, peas, butternut squash, pears, pearl onions, and a sprinkling of benne seeds, is sweet and savory proof of the chef's instinct for



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vegetarian fare.

Will any of these earn a place among the iconic dishes at Crook's Corner? Who knows? What really

matters is that Burdett plans to be around long enough to find out.

"Twenty years from now, I want people to be

ABOVE: Chef Justin Burdett's faithful execution of the restaurant's iconic shrimp and grits — featuring plump and peppery shellfish, sautéed mushrooms, bacon and scallions over cheese grits — is flawless.

LEFT: Chef Bill Smith, right, looks over a recipe with chef Justin Burdett. Burdett replaced Smith as chef last year. Burdett is the restaurant's third chef since it opened in 1982.

talking about something I made that's now an icon," he said in a recent interview.

I'd say it's not a ques-

Crook's Corner

610 W. Franklin St., Chapel Hill

919-929-7643

crookscorner.com

Cuisine: contemporary Southern

Rating: 4 stars

Prices: \$\$\$

Atmosphere: mid-century retro

Noise level: moderate

Service: welcoming and well-trained

Recommended: fried seafood and vegetables, smoked chicken terrine, shrimp and grits, sea trout, banana pudding, Atlantic Beach pie

Open: dinner Tuesday-Sunday, brunch Sunday

Reservations: recommended

Other: full bar; accommodates children; modest vegetarian selection; patio; not wheelchair accessible; parking in the small lot behind the building, and after 5 p.m. in the Passport Motors lot next door and across the street at Al's Garage.

The N&O's critic dines anonymously; the newspaper pays for all meals. We rank restaurants in five categories: 5 stars: Extraordinary. 4 stars: Excellent. 3 stars: Above average. 2 stars: Average. 1 star: Fair.

The dollar signs defined: \$ Entrees average less than \$10. \$\$ Entrees \$11 to \$20. \$\$\$ Entrees \$21 to \$30. \$\$\$\$ Entrees more than \$30.

tion of which dish, but how many.

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