



FOOD &amp; DRINK

## Iconic NC Southern foodie spot gets a new chef. Will shrimp and grits stay the same?

BY DREW JACKSON

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Crook's Corner, a favorite of Chapel Hill and an icon of Southern food, has a new chef. Alley-26 chef Carrie Schleiffer has also taken over the Crook's kitchen. *COURTESY OF CROOK'S CORNER*



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For only the fourth time in its history, a new chef has taken the reins at Crook's Corner.

The iconic Southern restaurant and Chapel Hill institution recently named Carrie Schleiffer as its new executive chef. Schleiffer is also the chef at Durham's Alley Twenty Six, a role she'll keep as she leads the Crook's kitchen.

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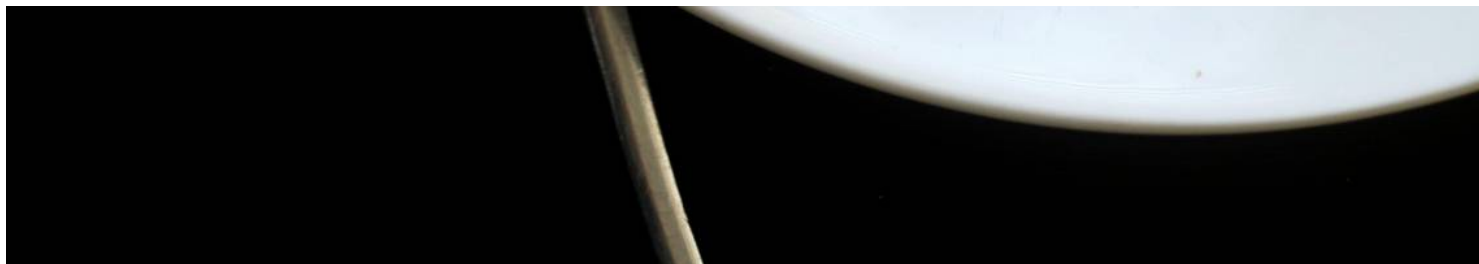
"I'm excited for all the right reasons," Crook's Corner co-owner and Alley Twenty Six owner Shannon Healy said. "She's never made me anything I didn't like. Her food is always so good, and this was the next logical step."

Healy, Gary Crunkleton and a partner bought Crook's Corner in 2019 from owner Gene Hamer, who opened it with original chef Bill Neal in 1982. Neal's style of Southern food drew wide acclaim and put Chapel Hill and Crook's on the national dining map.

Schleiffer will be the fourth head chef in Crook's illustrious history, including Bill Smith, who took over as chef after Neal died in 1991 and Justin Burdett, who Healy said stepped down due to medical reasons.







Crook's Corner's iconic shrimp and grits — a beautifully balanced presentation featuring plump and peppery shellfish, sautéed mushrooms, bacon and scallions over cheese grits. The Chapel Hill restaurant has made significant contributions to the local dining scene and won the James Beard Foundation's American Classics award in 2011, given to "our nation's beloved regional restaurants." Juli Leonard [JLEONARD@NEWSOBSERVER.COM](mailto:JLEONARD@NEWSOBSERVER.COM)

## NOT A 'STATIC' MENU

The challenge of a restaurant in its fourth decade, Healy said, is remaining true to its identity, while never growing stale. That balance means beloved and famous dishes like Crook's shrimp and grits will never leave the menu, but seasons and perspectives always change.

"This is not a mausoleum, it's a restaurant," Healy said. "There might be famous dishes on the menu, but the menu also changes almost daily. It's not a static thing."

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Healy said legendary Crook's chef Bill Smith has been helping out in the kitchen in an emeritus role, seeing that pieces of the Crook's culture remain.

Schleiffer had never seen hushpuppies served with cocktail sauce until Crook's. Neither the hushpuppies, nor the cocktail sauce, are going anywhere, but Schleiffer said they may be accompanied by citrus honey butter as well.

Born and raised in New Jersey, Schleiffer went to culinary school in New York City after graduating from college. She cooked in the venerable Gramercy Tavern and for the late Floyd Cardoz at Tabla.

She's been in North Carolina now for 11 years, moving South first to work for chef Ricky Moore at Giorgio in Cary and later landed her first chef job at G2B Restaurant and Brewery.

## DEDICATED TO THE FOODS OF THE SOUTH

More recently, Schleiffer helped open Bar Virgile in Durham and then started the food program at Alley Twenty Six. Her menus turned the cocktail bars into full-fledged restaurants, crafting bar food with elegance.

Though she'll lead kitchens at Alley Twenty Six and Crook's Corner, Schleiffer said the identities will remain distinct. Alley Twenty Six, she said, has always kept an eclectic worldview and Crook's will remain now and forever devoted to the foods of the South.

"I don't want one place to mirror the other," Schleiffer said. "They're each their own space. We're always going to have the Southern staples. Crook's to me is farm to table before that was a thing."

Schleiffer took the top Crook's job about two months ago and said fans of the restaurant have been supportive. She vowed the shrimp and grits will remain the same, but said she was excited to leave a mark on the Crook's legacy.

"Crook's, for me, is comfort food, Southern food, dishes that seem more like coming home," Schleiffer said. "It's not tweezer food. It's one of the oldest and most loved restaurants in the Triangle."

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Crook's Corner's iconic shrimp and grits — a beautifully balanced presentation featuring plump and peppery shellfish, sautéed mushrooms, bacon and scallions over cheese grits. The Chapel Hill restaurant has made significant contributions to the local dining scene and won the James Beard Foundation's American Classics award in 2011, given to "our nation's beloved regional restaurants." JULI LEONARD [JLEONARD@NEWSOBSERVER.COM](mailto:JLEONARD@NEWSOBSERVER.COM)



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BY DREW JACKSON

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