



Playing with FOOD

A pinch of creativity. A drop of business sense. And a dash of pure madness.

By CINDY THOMSEN | Portraits by DANIEL DUBOIS

There's something about chefs and restaurateurs that isn't quite normal. They thrive on working 70 or 80 hours a week. They live for the organized chaos of a busy kitchen. Sharp knives, open flames and raw meat are the tools of their trade.

And they wouldn't have it any other way.

The five Vanderbilt graduates featured here left with degrees in elementary education, history, economics, history and business administration. But they each wanted something more than a 9-to-5 day job ... something with more spice.

Fortunately, they each discovered a passion for food. And their timing couldn't have been better. Thanks to the Food Network's celebrity chefs, state-of-the-art home kitchens, and the widespread availability of gourmet ingredients, food people are hot. As Jon Bonnell, BS'94, says, "It's the most fun time in the world to be a chef."



The restaurant life isn't for everyone, but for these guys, nothing tastes better. They absolutely love what they do. And judging by the popularity of their establishments, so do their patrons.

Jon Bonnell

Taming the wild taste of Texas.

When Jon Bonnell, BS'94, was teaching school, summers were pure hell. And it had nothing to do with the Texas heat.

"I was bored out of my mind," Bonnell says. "The Food Network was just getting started, and I got hooked on it."

He had always cooked but never considered it as a profession. But then a chef on television mentioned culinary school, and Bonnell was intrigued. He spent two years at the New England Culinary Institute where he honed the concept that was to become Bonnell's.

"Texas has really interesting flavors, and I wanted to help define that. I designed the place around what the local farmers and ranchers had available that's high quality, hand crafted and organic."

Almost every item on the menu, including the game, seafood and cheese, has Texas origins. From the beginning, Bonnell knew his concept would work because he knows Texas and Texan taste buds. His family has been in Fort Worth for four generations.

Today one of his passions is in sharing his craft. He calls himself the chef with no secrets. "When I was growing up, the restaurant kitchen was a place

you weren't allowed to see. Dishes had names like beef Wellington and chicken Kiev, but you weren't allowed to know what was in them."

Bonnell shares his recipes with anyone who asks.

He makes appearances on local television, has been featured on ABC's *Nightline*, and has cooked with Bobby Flay on the Food Network. Don't be surprised if you see him on *Iron Chef America* one day.

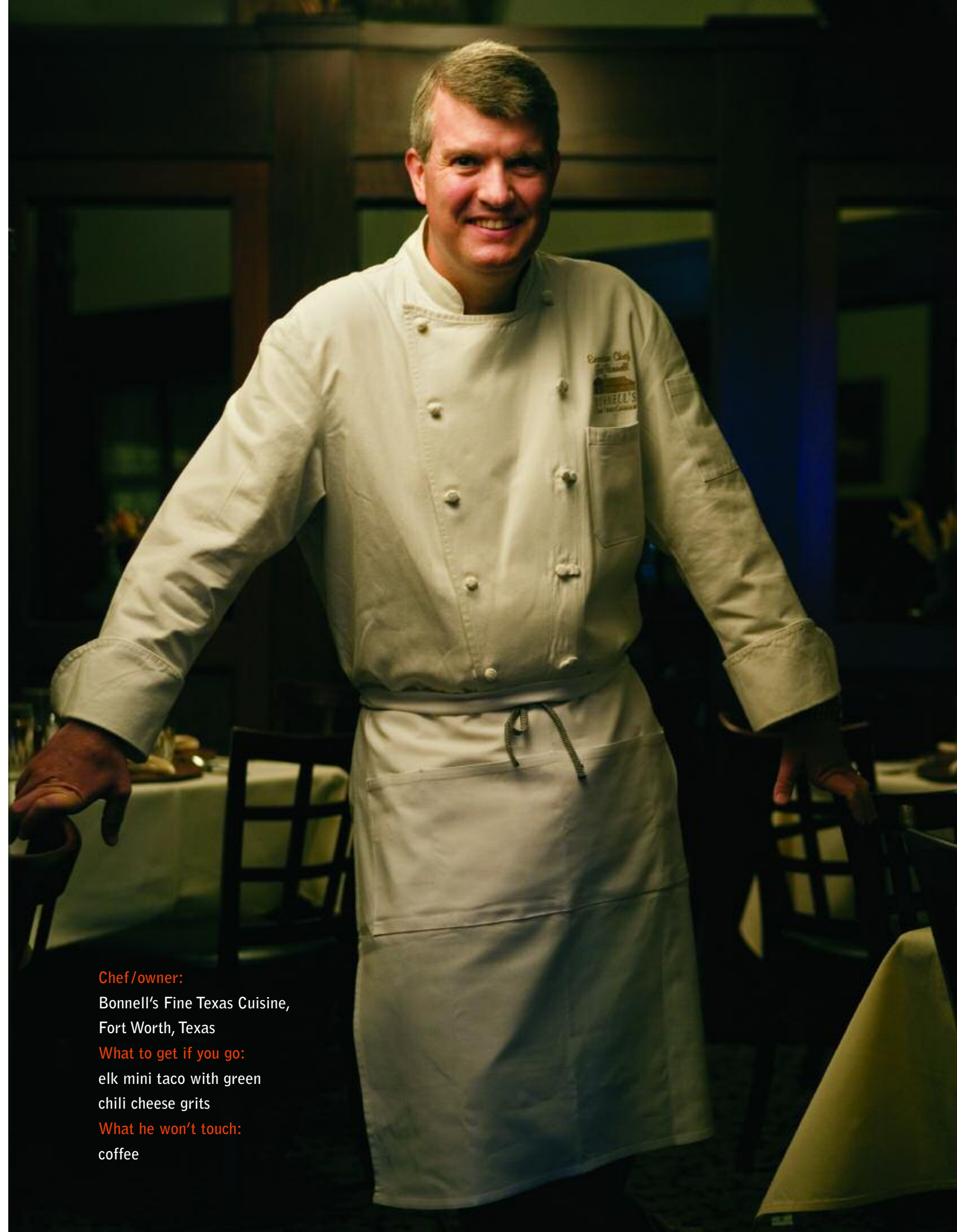
"It's the most fun time in the world to be a chef," says Bonnell. "I'm just an average guy who grew up around here and can cook pretty well. Now I've got friends I knew at summer camp calling to say they saw me on TV."



Bonnell's Fine Texas Cuisine

4259 Bryant Irvin Road
Fort Worth, Texas
817/738-5489

www.bonnellsrestaurant.com



Chef/owner:

Bonnell's Fine Texas Cuisine,
Fort Worth, Texas

What to get if you go:

elk mini taco with green
chili cheese grits

What he won't touch:

coffee



Partner: Margot Café and Bar and Marché, Nashville

What to get if you go:

Who knows? The menu changes daily.

What he won't touch: cooked carrots

Jay Frein

How a restaurant changed the face of a neighborhood.

Back in June 2001, there was a buzz in Nashville about a new restaurant in town. It wasn't in any of the neighborhoods where you'd expect to find fine dining. And it was in an old gas station. From the day it opened, though, Margot Café and Bar has enjoyed a reputation for excellence. Legions of food lovers have found their way across town to the building once known as Fluty's Service Station.

Early on, Jay Frein, BA'92, and Chef Margot McCormack recognized that well-heeled, well-traveled homebuyers were flocking to East Nashville for its large older homes and lower prices. "We were fortunate in that we had a captive audience of neighborhood folks who are all progressive," Frein says. "They are educated people who just want good food. They embraced what we were doing from the get-go."

Margot Café specializes in rustic French and Italian cuisine. Last year the pair opened a second venture, Marché, which serves breakfast and lunch and also sells specialty items. It's an extension of the Margot concept, with fresh seasonal ingredients as the basis for everything served.

"We have people who eat breakfast and lunch at Marché and then come back for dinner at Margot," says Frein. "People keep coming back because our menu keeps changing. It's the best way to counter all the big chains where you always get the same steak."

Today East Nashville is home to an eclectic collection of restaurants and bars, and the one that started the trend is staying put. "People always ask us about opening in other locations," says Frein, "but our goal has always been to stay in the neighborhood."



Margot Café and Bar

1017 Woodland St.
Nashville, Tenn.

615/227-4668

www.margotcafe.com

Marché Artisan Foods

1000 Main St.
Nashville, Tenn.

615/262-1111

www.marcheartisanfoods.com

Jeremy Barlow

Original. Creative. And fiercely independent.

Two years working at a high-end corporate steakhouse might have stifled the creativity of some chefs. There's not much room for personal touches when the rib eye in Nashville has to taste the same as the one in St. Louis, which has to taste the same as the one in San Diego. But Jeremy Barlow, BA'95, watched and learned and put his time there to good use.

"I learned how to manage, but there's no creativity. Consistency is the key to corporate America," says Barlow, who blames the chains for "dumbing down" the American palate.

"People stand in line for hours to go to the Cheesecake Factory. They could go down the frozen food aisle at Kroger with a menu and see the same stuff."

A graduate of the Culinary Institute of America, Barlow is adamant that his restaurant and menu remain unique. If he hears another restaurant is doing a dish similar to one of his, he'll quit serving it. He is determined that Tayst be in a niche all its own. He also demands the best from his suppliers.

"I use as many local farmers as possible, even if it costs more. If it's not perfect, I'm not going to pay for it. And I'm not going to charge someone else for it, either."

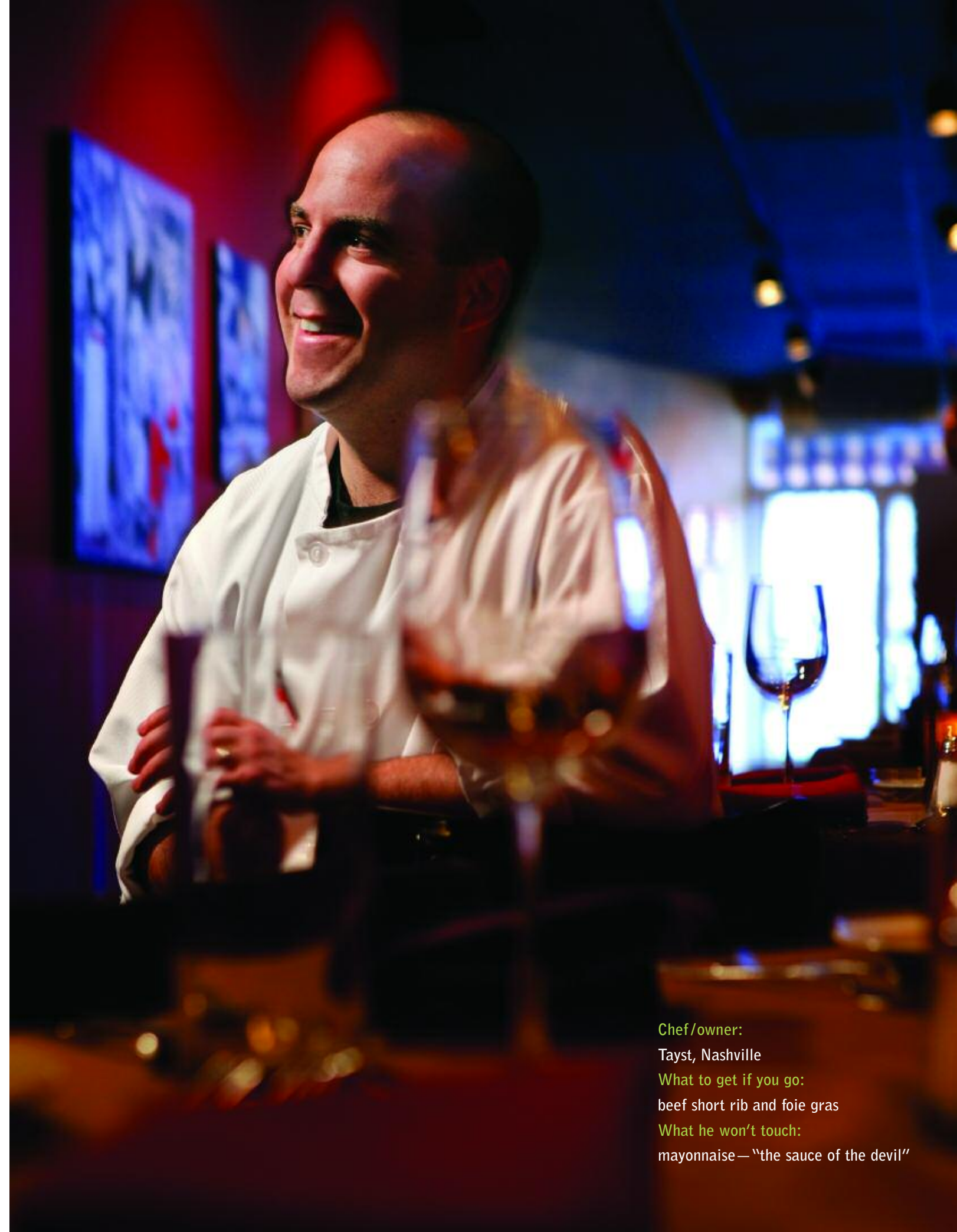
Barlow admits that Tayst has had some rough spots—especially when 3,500 new restaurant seats opened in the market in the past year alone. But he remains passionate about food and cooking.

"The dream is always to own your own restaurant. Sometimes it turns into a nightmare, but mostly it's still a dream."



Tayst

2100 21st Ave. S.
Nashville, Tenn.
615/383-1953
www.tayst.info



Chef/owner:

Tayst, Nashville

What to get if you go:

beef short rib and foie gras

What he won't touch:

mayonnaise—"the sauce of the devil"



Owner: The Acorn, Nashville
What to get if you go: chorizo
and potato-encrusted halibut
What he won't touch:
honey-glazed ham

John Leonard

Entrepreneur first. Restaurateur second.

Some people are attracted to the restaurant industry because of their passion for food and cooking. Others want a job that doesn't involve a desk. But John Leonard, BA'00, saw it as the means to achieving a lifelong dream of owning his own business.

"I contemplated law school after graduation," says Leonard. "Then I got my license as a financial planner. But at the ripe old age of 23, I made a pact with myself to try the restaurant dream."

He wrote a business plan and followed age-old advice that encourages entrepreneurs to turn to the three F's when raising money: family, friends and fools.

Leonard was also searching for the right property and the right chef. All the pieces finally fell into place, and The Acorn opened in December 2002. Business at The Acorn has always been good, but Leonard has had his share of high-anxiety moments. One occurred when a gentleman arrived, declaring he had booked the restaurant's private dining room for a party.

"The person he had talked to on the phone apparently hadn't written down the reservation anywhere," says Leonard. "Fortunately, the room was available and we scrambled to set it up. Ultimately, we pulled off a party for about 25 people and he never knew about the mix-up."

That experience, along with some missed invoices, convinced Leonard it was important for him to be there during the day instead of all night. Today the restaurant is not only popular, it's prosperous. But it's just the beginning of his entrepreneurial career.

"We are now at a place where we can start thinking about what's next. The key is having patience, being smart about it."



The Acorn
114 28th Ave. N.
Nashville, Tenn.
615/320-4399
www.theacornrestaurant.com

Rick Elliott

Bringing Florence, Italy, to Florence, Alabama.

Around Florence, Ala., Rick Elliott, BS'76, is almost as well known for his alter ego, Ricatoni Valentino, as for the Italian dishes he serves up at his restaurant, Ricatoni's.

Elliott opened Ricatoni's in 1996, and a few years later Ricatoni Valentino, world famous lip-sync artist, made his television debut.

The commercials rarely show food and don't tout specials. Instead, the character takes on the Italian chain restaurants springing up in the area. In one he advises getting rid of an unwanted girlfriend by taking her to a chain instead of Ricatoni's. The character also has been seen as a boxer, a psychic with his own hotline and a swimsuit designer.

Elliott didn't plan to spend his life in the restaurant business. But after college, a friend asked him to help out at a Steak and Ale in Louisiana. One week in the kitchen, and Elliott knew this was the industry for him. During the years that followed, he worked

for several chains including Bennigan's, Rafferty's and Princeton's Grill.

If Ricatoni's commercials bring customers in, it's the quality and atmosphere that bring them back. "I have this core group of things I'm fanatical about," says Elliott. "Product quality, execution and service. Our guests know we're genuinely interested in their well-being. There's a feeling of comfort and warmth. They like to come down here because it's fun and they have a good time."

Elliott offers free Italian lessons, too. Just listen carefully when you're in the restroom.



Ricatoni's Italian Grill

107 N. Court St.
Florence, Ala.
256/718-1002
www.ricatonis.com



Owner:

Ricatoni's Italian Grill,
Florence, Ala.

What to get if you go:

tagliarini piace pellerossa

What he won't touch:

rutabagas