

Chef Bios

RYAN BUTLER

A native of Oak City, NC, a small river town on the Roanoke River in Eastern North Carolina, Chef/Pitmaster Ryan Butler's culinary influences are rooted in the rich traditions of the farming and hunting/fishing cultures of North Carolina Coastal towns – a storied place where the land touches the water, the night sky is dark, everyone watches the weather and barbecue is smoked with hardwood. As an avid outdoorsman, trained butcher and farmer, Ryan curates seasonal dining experiences using locally sourced proteins, fruits and vegetables – recreating dishes that reflect his life experiences from church homecomings, Sunday lunches and mornings in a duck blind.

Ryan owned and operated Green Button Farm – a sustainable free-range pork and beef farm – for 15 years, developing relationships and his palate with the best chefs and restaurant owners across the Southeast. In 2015, Ryan founded Picnic Durham, an acclaimed whole-hog barbecue restaurant in Durham, NC, that earned recognition for its commitment to authentic North Carolina barbecue. Today, Ryan owns and operates Smoke Ropers Barbecue and Catering, a mobile kitchen and catering company based in Oxford, NC. Ryan and his team bring versatility and creativity to every menu, serving up casual favorites like the “Cypress”—a generous combination of hickory-smoked barbecue and fried North Carolina shrimp—alongside more refined, locally inspired dishes such as Parmesan-crusted NC striped bass and impressive North Carolina seafood towers for weddings, celebrations, and special events.

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SERA CUNI

Sera Cuni is the chef and owner of two North Carolina restaurants: Root Cellar Café & Catering in Chapel Hill and a sister spin-off, Café Root Cellar in Pittsboro. Classically trained in the culinary arts, Sera began her career in her home state of Connecticut, where she was raised in a family of passionate home cooks who celebrated their Italian and Czech culinary traditions. Her early professional experiences at acclaimed Connecticut restaurants, including Main and Hopewell, Americus on the Wharf, and Pastis, helped to inform and influence her approach to cooking. Today, she creates bold, imaginative dishes that reflect the rich diversity of American cuisine, rooted in tradition, but always with her own creative twist.

A founding member of the North Carolina Chapter of Les Dames d'Escoffier, Sera is deeply committed to uplifting women in the culinary industry. Over the past decade, she has mentored numerous women chefs, offering guidance, support, and a strong example of leadership in the kitchen.

Equally passionate about feeding those in need, Sera launched Feed-Well Fridges, a free community fridge program in Chatham County, NC, in August 2023. Feed-Well works to reduce food insecurity and commercial food waste, with the dual goal of improving community health and environmental sustainability.

Sera's community work has earned her numerous awards, including the N.C. Governor's Medallion Award for Volunteer Service, the North Carolina Restaurant and Lodging Association's Ken Conrad Award for Service to the Community, and the Duke Energy Citizenship and Service Award.

A four-time competitor on Food Network shows, including Guys Grocery Games and Chopped, Sera was crowned the winner of Chef Alex Guarnaschelli's Supermarket Stakeout in 2023.

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BILL HARTLEY

Although born and raised north of the Mason-Dixon Line, Bill Hartley has always had a Southern soul. Growing up in New Jersey, he spent his childhood fishing with his grandfather along the Jersey Shore and working on a local farm—experiences that sparked an early appreciation for fresh seafood, locally grown ingredients, and the connection between food and place.

Cooking since the age of 12, Bill is a graduate of the Culinary Institute of America with more than two decades of experience in kitchens across North Carolina, South Carolina, Florida, New York, New Jersey, Virginia, and the Caribbean. His career has been defined by a passion for fresh seafood and locally sourced ingredients, blending refined technique with the approachable flavors of Southern and coastal cooking.

For eight years, he owned and operated Pittsboro's Postal Fish Company, where his menus celebrated everything from elevated seafood dishes to simple fish-house classics. Today, he brings that same spirit to J'Dubs Po'Boys, where New Orleans classics meet Carolina soul.

For Bill, food has always been about more than what's on the plate. Food is what brings people together and takes care of the community around him. He has generously shared his culinary talents in support of nonprofits, organizations and initiatives including Feed-Well Fridges, Roots for Reece, and Taste of Chatham, reflecting a deep commitment to using food as a way to connect, nourish, and give back.

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LYNN WELLS

Lynn Wells grew up watching cowboy movies on the black and white TV and loved “cooking” in the woods behind her house as a child. Little did she know, she’d fall in love with cooking over open fire professionally. “It’s watching the fire do its work without rushing it. It’s staring into the glowing coals as the embers rise, drift into the night sky, and slowly disappear like tiny stars. In those moments, time seems to slow down. The meal becomes more than food; it becomes part of the experience, woven together with conversation, silence, laughter, and memories that linger long after the last flame has faded.”

Owner of Thyme Well Spent – Personal Chef Services, LLC, since 2014, Lynn brings over 30 years of experience from the restaurant, catering and healthcare nutrition industry. With a degree in Nutrition Management from UNC–Greensboro and years working in culinary hospitality, Lynn has developed a following for her creative and flavorful Southern food, using the best locally grown and raised ingredients while keeping recipes simple. Lynn incorporates natural, whole foods and ingredients, enhanced by her creativity, passion and true knowledge for the art of cooking. Being an advocate for small farms and “Buy Local” is one of the reasons for her success.

In addition to owning and operating Thyme Well Spent, Lynn is a food writer, recipe developer, food stylist, and the face of Our State Magazine’s Supper Club video series on YouTube at ourstate.com.

Lynn also teaches cooking classes at Cone Health Cancer Center in Greensboro, North Carolina.