

DINNER WITH SIMON

Going bananas

How a Texas café away spawned Charlottesville's signature dessert

In 1987, a young Dallas software engineer grew so fond of a local café that he'd travel 45 minutes to eat there as often as he could. Thus was born the signature dessert of a Virginia city more than a thousand miles away.

Since then, Charlottesville restaurants have produced no shortage of renowned desserts. The coupe maison sundae at



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C&O, profiteroles at Petit Pois, sticky toffee pudding cake at Ivy Inn, Mr. Rech at the Alley Light, Linda Steiner's sweets at Duner's and, of course, the Corner tradition: Grillswith.

Yet above them all, one stands out – the exclamation point to thousands of Charlottesville meals for more than three decades.

The engineer was longtime Charlottesville chef Tim Burgess, who credits the Dallas café for inspiring his career switch to cooking. What a blessing for Charlottesville. After leaving his job, Burgess moved to Charlottesville and co-founded what would become its most influential restaurant, Metropolitan, which he opened with Vincent Derquenne in 1991, changed the way Charlottesville eats. The unfamiliar foods they cooked expanded Charlottesville's palates, paving the way for other chefs to do the same.

For dessert, Burgess reached back to a discovery from that Dallas spot, Deep Ellum Café. Named for the diverse neighborhood tucked deep down Elm



THE SPACE

Charlottesville chefs Tim Burgess, left, and Vincent Derquenne, right, have been the dynamic duo behind many of the city's more popular eateries, including Bizou, Bang! and Luce.

Street, the café's cooking was as eclectic as its surroundings. "When I discovered this restaurant that was unique from anything that was going on at the time, the food preparation just blew me away," said Burgess. One was a creation he had never seen: grilled banana bread, served with warm ginger sauce and ice cream. The best dessert he had ever had.

Instead of tracking down the chef for the recipe, the former engineer reverse-engineered it. Burgess realized that "grilled" meant griddled – like a grilled cheese – and after perfecting the banana bread itself, he seared thick slices in unsalted butter until golden brown. He swapped the ginger sauce for warm caramel, then crowned the whole thing with a scoop of vanilla ice cream, just like at Deep Ellum. The result was grilled banana bread – a hot, crisp, buttery, caramel-drenched contrast to cold, creamy ice cream.

What Burgess didn't know

was that his Dallas-inspired dessert had historic Charlottesville roots: at heart, it was an ice cream sundae. Deep Ellum chef Brian Hennington, the dessert's creator, made his own ice cream, and his idea was to create a sundae from it, replacing hot fudge with ginger sauce and warm brownie with the banana bread he had made for years from a Maida Heatter recipe.

As a sundae, the dessert's magic lies in contrast, which Hennington amplified by cooking the banana bread a second time. When two elements of a dish differ in texture or temperature, each becomes more vivid. Slicing and heating the bread does not add flavor by caramelizing the exterior, Hennington says, it also dries and warms it, creating contrast with the ice cream: dry against moist, hot against cold.

That contrast of ice cream and warm pastry, as it turns out, circles back to Charlottesville. Thomas Jefferson, who helped introduce ice cream



BIZOU

Grilled banana bread first appeared on the menu at Charlottesville's Metropolitan restaurant. Today, it can be found on the menu of its successor, Bizou.

to the U.S., served the duo at his home in the early 1800s. Guests marveled at the pairing; one described "warm pastry, exhibiting a curious contrast, as if the ice had just been taken from the oven." Two centuries later, the same formula still runs through Charlottesville's most beloved desserts: sundaes, profiteroles, sticky toffee pudding, the Grillswith (a grilled donut topped with ice cream) and, of course, grilled banana bread.

What distinguishes Burgess and Hennington's product is longevity. Decades after Burgess introduced it to Charlottesville, it is still here, enjoyed night after night. Even Metropolitan's closure in 2002 could not stop it, as it simply leapt onto the menu of the restaurant's successor, Bizou. At a time when few restaurants last one decade, the restaurants of Burgess and Derquenne are now in their fourth, allowing the dessert's impact to grow beyond measure.

Thousands of lives and

memories would be different had Hennington never created the dessert, or had Burgess never discovered it. First dates, weddings, anniversaries and everything in between. For decades, Hennington had no idea how deeply his dessert had touched a city. When told, he was moved. "I find it just incredible," said Hennington, now retired. "It makes me feel good."

Thirty-five years on, the legacy of grilled banana bread is a tribute not just to Hennington's creativity or Charlottesville's history, but also to the persistence and passion of two chefs who carried it forward for so long.

And Charlottesville is still bananas for it.

Simon Davidson is a restaurant critic for The Daily Progress. He also is founder of the Charlottesville 29 food website. He has written about Charlottesville food for more than a decade. He lives in Keswick with his wife and two children.

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