

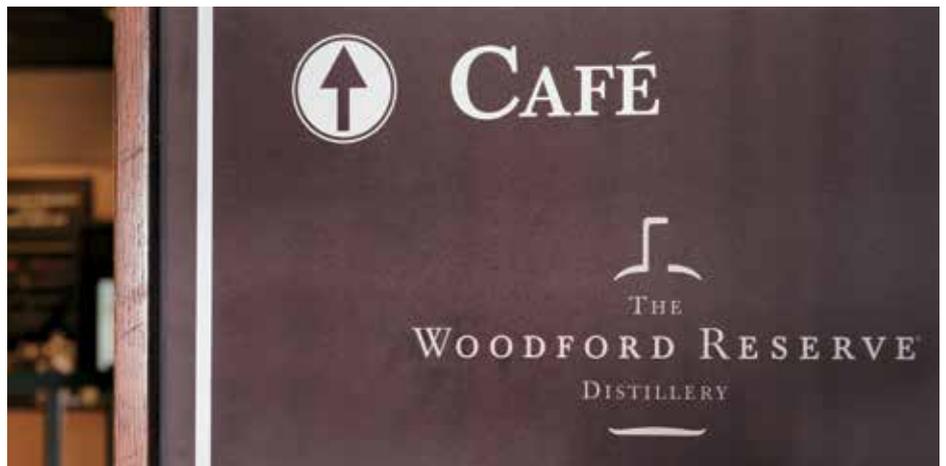


FOOD

NETWORK

Chef/impresario Ouita Michel, a change agent of the regional dining scene, is planning her most ambitious restaurant yet

By Louis Guida / Photos by Joseph Rey Au



Clockwise from far left, Holly Hill Inn is the foundation of the Michels' restaurant empire. The other eateries are Smithtown Seafood, Windy Corner Market, Glenn's Creek Café at Woodford Reserve, Wallace Station, and the Midway School Bakery. The latest venture, Honeywood, is in the planning stages.

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While expanding her restaurant reach, Ouita Michel has remained at the forefront of the food-to-table movement.

On a Wednesday morning in January, with the sky over central Kentucky pale blue and the air cracking with cold, Ouita Michel was surveying her empire, existing and planned, restaurant after restaurant.

Michel, a nationally celebrated chef who has helped transform Kentucky's food and dining culture in the past decade, began the day at a 10:00 a.m. staff meeting at Windy Corner, the restaurant she owns on the north side of Lexington's famed horse country. It would be evening — and after hours spent reviewing her latest and most ambitious venture — before she would be home in Midway, 20 miles west of here.

But now, there's Windy Corner. Six employees (two more arrive later) sit with her around a table in the main dining area. "I've got enough anxiety for all of us," Michel said with a laugh. She clicks apart her red reading glasses. Her approach is open and the atmosphere collaborative.

Topics range from special events — Mardi Gras and Valentine's Day were coming up — and a water leak to helping a part-time employee maintain health insurance. There's an extended discussion about food costs, inventory pricing, and using computers to track expenses that ends with Michel telling her managers, "You have to be as good at an iPad as using a smoker. Tackle it. Be aggressive. You have to master that."

At a nearby table, not part of the meeting, sits Roger Solt, Michel's business partner, who is chauffeuring her around part of the day. He's reading Anthony Birley's *Marcus Aurelius: A Biography*, a book about a good Roman emperor, as the staff conversation wafts around him.

Solt has known Michel since the 1980s, when he was the debate coach at the University of Kentucky and she was on his team. Now retired, he followed Michel's early culinary career and became a "silent"

partner when Michel and her husband, Chris Michel, opened their first restaurant, Holly Hill Inn, in Midway in 2001. "I make a few suggestions now and then," he said. "We have six different locations and another on the way, and getting everything to work right is the first priority."

The meeting ends around 11:00, and Michel rushes — Solt driving — to WTVQ-TV for a live two-minute segment. With a brown rice salad show plate, she promotes a kaiseki (small-plate, multi-course) dinner at Glenn's Creek Café, her restaurant at Woodford Reserve, a historic bourbon distillery a few miles west of Lexington. "We're exploring the culinary world of bourbon," she told host Lauren Gawthrop. "We're showing how our natural spirit goes with foods from all over the world. There are lots of kinships in the flavors."

After a "great job" from Gawthrop, Michel heads to downtown Lexington and Smithtown Seafood, her restaurant at the Bread Box, a sprawling, repurposed bakery that's anchored by a craft brewery and includes an aquaponics (tilapia, lettuces,

and microgreens) farm, a nonprofit help center and artists' studios. She's here for a lunch meeting about her newest restaurant, Honeywood, set to open next year in an upmarket Lexington development.

Honeywood is Michel's highest-profile and most challenging culinary project to date, and she's built a career — and spent life experiences — determined to make it succeed.

Culinary calling

Michel, 54, was born in Thermopolis, Wyoming, a town of 3,000 that claims the world's largest mineral hot spring and the only *Archaeopteryx* dinosaur fossil outside Europe. Ouita was a family name that she's been told means "little robin" in Cherokee. Her surname was Papka. When she was young, her family moved to New Orleans, where her father attended graduate school at Tulane. In 1972 he was hired to teach at the University of Kentucky College of Medicine and they moved to Lexington, where she grew up. "I had a great childhood," she said, although her parents' separation when she was in high school and their later divorce were difficult. (Her mother died in 2014. Her father retired from teaching and is a mixed media artist living near Midway.)

She attended the University of Ken-

"We had a sense that in New York we'd have a lifetime working for others. Kentucky felt right. Our dream of opening a restaurant seemed possible here."



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tucky, where she was in the honors program, a Gaines Fellow in the humanities, and a competitive champion debater, winning the intercollegiate National Debate Tournament in 1986. After she graduated with a political science degree the next year, her father wanted her to attend law school, she said, but while on debate team visits to cities across the country, she'd become interested in food and cooking and decided to pursue a culinary career.



"I packed up all my belongings and moved to New York to see if I could make it in the restaurant business," she said. She found an apartment in Manhattan with two close friends from the debate circuit (they'd attended Dartmouth) and within days answered an ad in the New York Times and was hired as a prep cook at a new restaurant called Health Pub.

"It was providence that I was led there," she said. "I absolutely loved it." Motivated to learn as much as possible, she took on more than prep cooking. "I always liked to work. I got to do a lot because I did a lot — that's how you make it in the restaurant business."

Before long she was hired at John Clancy's, a top seafood restaurant, after telling Lynne Aronson, the chef, that she knew how to cut fish. "I totally lied about that, and Lynne said, 'I really should fire you,' but I talked my way into staying." Again, she had a great experience. "It was an amazing, high-energy New York kitchen."

A year at John Clancy's convinced her to attend the Culinary Institute of America in Hyde Park, about 80 miles north of Manhattan, where on her first day she met fellow student Chris Michel, her future husband and business partner. In two years she completed the CIA's program (which for her included a four-month internship at the Upper East Side's trendy Arizona 206 restaurant), and mastered the art — and business — of cooking and was back in the job market.

After working briefly at an upscale East Hampton restaurant, she and Chris (who was from Manhasset, on the other end of Long Island) left for a drive across country, stopping along the

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Left, diners can take home Kentucky-made products after enjoying lunch at Windy Corner. Above, bread and other baked goods make the Midway School Bakery a destination.

way at wineries and Frank Lloyd Wright houses — and in her childhood stomping grounds in Wyoming — before ending up in Lexington.

“We needed to replenish,” Michel said. The couple, who married in 1993, soon rethought their plans for returning to the New York restaurant scene. “We had a sense that in New York we’d have a lifetime working for others. Kentucky felt right. Our dream of opening a restaurant seemed possible here.”

Stints in kitchens at Dudley’s (as a line cook and then sous chef) and at Lexington catering companies led to a position as head chef at Emmett’s, a new, 250-seat restaurant, where Michel worked from “build out to menu development,” and Chris was

“We all want the best restaurant possible. We want this restaurant to sing. We want the most beautiful restaurant in the whole region.”

general manager.

In 2000, after seven years of looking, the couple found the “perfect property” for their own restaurant when they bought the historic Holly Hill Inn. They gutted the kitchen down to the dirt floor and spent several months working on the circa 1845 property. They moved in and for four years lived on the second floor. (They now live in a house adjacent to the inn with their 11-year-old daughter, Willa.)

Earning recognition

Holly Hill opened in May, 2001 and soon established Michel as a leading Kentucky chef in the forefront of the farm-to-table movement with a commitment to — and passion for — local and seasonal ingredients. National recognition followed. In the past decade Holly Hill has been written up in the *New York Times*, *San Francisco Chronicle*, *Chicago Tribune*, *Wine Spectator*, *Southern Living*, and *USA Today*, and Michel has been a James Beard Foundation nominee for best chef in the Southeast multiple times and for outstanding restaurateur this year.

Although Michel didn’t plan it, Holly Hill became the hub of a culinary empire. In 2003, after driving by and considering the property for months, she and Chris opened Wallace Station, a historic country store near Midway, and made it a deli. Their reputation soon grew, and others — distillers, horse farm owners, developers — approached them with proposals. The results, since 2003, have been new businesses at Woodford Reserve, Windy Corner, Midway Bakery, and Smithtown Seafood. Their expansion, in a bottom-line sense, has been serendipitous. “Nothing was strategized,” Michel said. “It was by the seat of our pants.”

They own and operate each of their satellites and lease the buildings or spaces. Michel’s title is executive chef except at Woodford Reserve, where she’s chef-in-residence. She’s in the kitchen regularly only at Holly Hill Inn, working at her other locations on special occasions.

Michel’s business has grown from \$500,000 a year in gross sales at the Holly Hill Inn to \$5 million today at all of her

entities combined. It has more than 100 employees, 50 of them full-time. It’s organized as three separate LLCs, but Michel is folding those into a single umbrella company this year.

Honeywood, named for a previous owner and resident of Holly Hill Inn, will exponentially change those numbers. A 150-seat, 4,500-square-foot restaurant, it’s expected to generate \$4 million to \$6 million in annual gross sales after it opens next year and employ 30 people. Owned and operated by Ouita and Chris Michel, the restaurant will be a tenant in The Summit at Fritz Farm, a new, upscale regional mixed-use center (with businesses, offices, apartments, and a hotel) in Lexington developed, owned, and managed by Bayer Properties, headquartered in Birmingham, Alabama.

When approached by the Bayer family about opening a restaurant in The Summit, Michel at first wasn’t interested in taking on a venture that large. But the financial arrangement was attractive, she said, and it was an opportunity to improve her family’s economic future and to make a consequential impact on Kentucky food and agriculture.

“I feel I have something to prove about local purchasing in volume,” she said. “Honeywood should drive a half to three-quarter million dollars in local food purchases a year, maybe more. That could make a pretty big difference for the



OUITA MICHEL’S CULINARY EMPIRE

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wallacestation.com

THE MIDWAY SCHOOL BAKERY

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Midway, KY 40347
859.846.4336
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region. I want to be innovative about agricultural policy. The best way I can contribute to the local food movement is to create demand. That's what I'm trying to do with Honeywood."

Restaurant with "soul"

So, there's much at stake. And, although the restaurant won't open for a year, plans for it need to be finalized soon and there's still a great deal to work out. That makes Michel's January lunch meeting at Smithtown Seafood important.

The meeting includes Ouita and Chris Michel, Brent Bruner of EOP Architects, and interior designer Matthew Carter. Bruner presented his latest drawings. The design process is fairly far along, and several previous meetings have led up to this one. Discussion topics include elevation levels, booth and table lighting — "You just want the whole place to glow," said Carter — traffic flow, entry area, return wall, bathroom location, fire exits, color scheme, and more.

"We need to give it a soul," Michel said, "so it's not all shiny and new." She likes how the design will work for her cooks. "I'm always trying to make cooks feel good because when cooks feel good, your food tastes good."

Last-minute questions come up about an exterior design modification, and the group moves to a large conference table in another section of the Bread Box to



Ouita Michel reviews plans for Honeywood, a restaurant set to open in The Summit at Fritz Farm in 2017.

make a conference call to Scott Bloomston with Bayer Properties. The call results in a back-and-forth about how much flexibility Honeywood has to modify the developer's specifications for the restaurant's exterior perimeter, and the sides agree to work together to resolve the issue. But it means a delay as the design goes back to a drawing board.

"We all want the best restaurant pos-

sible. We want this restaurant to sing. We want the most beautiful restaurant in the whole region." Michel told her group after the call is over. "This is the first conversation. We're going to take it to the last conversation. We'll get it figured out."

It's late afternoon when the meeting ends. Michel heads west to Midway and a staff meeting at Holly Hill Inn and after that, sometime around sunset, home. **KM**

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