

Main-Stay

*A chance to run his own restaurant
lures Lexington native back home*

By Patti Nickell | Photos by Shandon Cundiff



Cole Arimes has found the right fit at Coles 735 Main.



The bar at Coles is a cozy gathering spot that features its own menu.

Cole Arimes was 11 years old when he first became a sous chef. At that tender age he decided that he liked prepping in the kitchen with his mother and grandmother, both excellent cooks.

Fast forward 29 years and Arimes presides over his own kitchen at his eponymous restaurant, Coles 735 Main, which occupies the periwinkle-blue trimmed bungalow at the corner of North Ashland and East Main Street. Even in Lexington's wildly mushrooming restaurant scene, Cole's has carved out a niche that clearly surprises Arimes.

"We've become way busier way faster than I ever imagined we would," he said.

That's an understatement. In a typical week the restaurant — which is open only for dinner Monday through Saturday — averages 900 to 1,100 covers. That number balloons to between 1,200 and 1,400 during events such as Keeneland.

This good fortune might be enough to fluster someone with less experience than Arimes has in handling every aspect of the restaurant business. Over a 20-year career, he's done it all — waiter, bartender, front of house manager, sous chef, head chef — a true journeyman. It is all the more surprising when you consider that Arimes didn't start out to make his mark in the food industry.

He spent two years attending Centre College in Danville as an engineering major. But to quote a cliché, "the best laid plans often go awry" ... and the engineering world's loss became the culinary world's gain.

After he dropped out of college, his first job in the food industry — if



you don't count those early years in the kitchen with Mom and Grandmom — was as a barista and manager at the Joseph-Beth Bookstore Café here in Lexington. When the company opened a location in Cincinnati, Arimes went along to help get it started. He ended up staying in the Queen City for 18 years, although it wasn't until a stint at Don Pablo's Mexican Restaurant in Cincinnati's Hyde Park area that he began to see his future career taking shape.

"After about a year cooking Tex-Mex, I began to figure out that I could do this for a living," Arimes said.

Thus began his career trajectory with the city's esteemed Maisonette Group — first as sous chef at Chester's Road House, followed by his first head chef position at Baxter's, and then double duty as head chef at both Trio and Embers restaurants.

It was at the latter that he first heard of an opportunity that would be too good to pass up, thus bringing Cole Arimes full circle in his chosen profession. "My stepfather, Bill Turnbull, told me about a Lexington property that was about to become available, and as soon as he mentioned the location, I knew it was kismet," Arimes said.

While happy in his position with Maisonette, the lure of having his own restaurant proved too strong to resist. "Once you hear that siren song, there's no turning back," Arimes acknowledged.

The Little House That Could

Arimes may not have realized that he was a chef in search of a restaurant — at least not initially — but the bungalow at 735 Main was definitely a restaurant in search of a chef. Since it opened in 1938 as The Stirrup Cup, a popular hangout where horsey types enjoyed the traditional flavors of the commonwealth, the building has metamorphosed from one restaurant to another with what seemed like alarming frequency.

Some proved to be barely a blip on Lexington's dining radar (Le Café Francais, Hall's on Main, Onizim's); others settled in for a longer stay (Furlong's). The kitchen went from turning out French-inspired cuisine to Kentucky favorites to the flavors of the bayou. Diners dared not get too comfortable; blink and their favorite dining spot was gone.

It seems that Arimes, who signed his name on the lease in 2011, is here to stay. That he finally has found a home at the age of 40 clearly agrees with Arimes, who grew up in the nearby Kenwick neighborhood. As proof that he views this as a long-term endeavor, the first thing he did was enlist the aid of his mother, Bekki Turnbull, a former interior decorator, to transform the somewhat stark Onizim's into a welcoming oasis of French Country chic.

The dark green walls were repainted buttercup yellow and trimmed in blue, and the black ceiling was painted white. Frilly curtains and flower boxes, as well as banquettes lining both sides of the dining room, add to the ambiance.

"My mother has a fantastic eye, and her design philosophy is that just because things don't match doesn't mean they don't go together," Arimes said.

The whole effect may be more Provence than Central Kentucky, but Arimes insisted on keeping one homage to the Bluegrass: the horse murals. Dating to 1949, these wall murals are the work of Theresa Newhoff, a for-



Above and right, the distinctive bungalow now has the feel of a French country inn.



Top, elegantly set tables and dishes such as Asian braised baby back ribs, above, keep diners coming back.

mer art teacher at Morton Junior High School.

Arimes said that the setting is the perfect canvas for his culinary art.

“I love fine dining coupled with a casual atmosphere,” he said. “I think of it as four-star dining with three-star ambiance.”

A Tale of Two Menus

No restaurant, however, can survive — let alone thrive — on design elements alone. At Coles 735 Main, the menu — make that the two menus — is paramount.

“We’ve created a Bar Bites menu at a lower price point, which entices folks to drop in on a Monday and spend \$15,” he said, “and the regular menu, which encourages them to come back on Friday for a more formal dining experience.”

Standouts on the Bar Bites menu include the artisan cheese plate with fruit chutney, red grapes, toasted macadamia nuts, and house-made toast points; P.E.I. mussels with sweet chili lime yuzu broth, scallions, and focaccia bread; and the wildly popular kobe burger on a Sunrise Bakery bun, with fries and house-made pickles.

The full menu is more robust, with the headliner being the all-natural, hormone- and steroid-free Black



you were yesterday," he said. "We've set a standard, and it's up to us to maintain that standard."

The conversation takes a turn from his restaurant to the state of dining in Lexington in general, which he said has experienced an evolution in the two decades since he left. He's impressed with the current restaurant scene, although he does have one criticism.

"Too many places are overly dependent on Southern or Kentucky dishes," he said. "I was guilty of it too when I first opened. I'd like to see more chefs open up and try something new and exciting ... keep their Kentucky roots but just add their own stamp."

As an example of a chef who is doing this, he cites Mark Wombles of Heirloom in Midway.

"He's one of the most creative people in the kitchen that I



Left, panko fried avocado with crab salad and seared diver scallops, above, are popular choices.

know," Arimes said. "I just wish he was open on Sunday, which is my day off."

Another whose kitchen wizardry he admires is Hidenori Yamaguchi of Yamaguchi Sake and Tapas.

"If I've been out 15 times in the last year, I've been there 12 of them," he said.

Finally, when asked about his culinary philosophy, Arimes doesn't hesitate, comparing his work in the kitchen to being in a laboratory.

"The chemistry of cooking has always fascinated me," he said. "When you strip everything else away, cook-

ing is just science."

Perhaps, but his legion of fans might disagree. They would argue that there's at least as much art as science in Arimes' food. 🍴

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Angus strip, although Arimes said diners also give high marks to the Asian braised baby back ribs, Moroccan butternut squash stew, and bourbon maple glazed Scottish salmon with gnocchi from the Lexington Pasta Co.

Both menus are ever-evolving — "although in small doses," Arimes said, "as there are fewer speed bumps that way." When asked if there are any dishes whose removal might create rebellion among diners, he laughed and acknowledged there are.

"Two of my original dishes, the panko fried avocado with crab salad and lemon saffron aioli and the shrimp and grits with roasted red pepper Weisenberger grits, truffle-infused lobster cream, and Midnight Moon goat cheese, will probably never go off the menu," he said. "I don't think my regulars would stand for it."

Those regulars have helped make Coles 735 Main one of Lexington's premier restaurants in less than two years. Customers range from those who walk over from nearby neighborhoods such as Ashland, Kenwick, and Mentelle Park and horse people who flock here after the Keeneland sales and race meets to famous faces such as University of Kentucky President Eli Capiluto and men's basketball coach John Calipari, actor and horseman William Shatner, and celebrity chef Bobby Flay.

On his recent visit, the latter ordered the pork flank, which came as no surprise to Arimes. "The flank has a distinctly Southwestern flavor," he said, "although it probably wasn't spicy enough for Bobby."

Despite the increasing popularity of Coles 735 Main with bold-faced names, Arimes' philosophy is that every diner is a VIP and that consistency is the hallmark of a great restaurant.

"A guest in your dining room today doesn't care how good

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