



Hands-on chef Jeremy Ashby guides a pizza into the wood-fired oven at Azur.



# IRONS

## IN THE FIRE

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Chef Jeremy Ashby finds many outlets for his talents

By Patti Nickell / Photos by Lee Thomas

**A**t first glance, Jeremy Ashby appears too nice to be a big-time chef. His wheat-colored curls and rosy cheeks are — for lack of a better word — cherubic. His voice is soft, and when an employee interrupts an interview — not once, but several times — to ask a question, the chef expresses not the slightest hint of annoyance.



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In today's celebrity culture of kitchen kings, known as much for their churlishness as their cooking, Ashby doesn't fit the stereotype perpetuated by television. He lacks the volatility of Emeril Lagasse, the histrionics of Gordon Ramsey, and the condescending attitude of Mario Batali.

In the midst of chaos, Ashby is as serene as a Sunday school teacher.

Yet, to dismiss Ashby as bland would be a grave mistake. It's just that he lets his food rather than his personality deliver the punch. Try the scallop and shrimp ceviche with berber, an Ethiopian spice, at Azur, his restaurant in Beaumont Circle, which has been a staple on the Lexington dining scene since its 2006 opening. Or the beef picadillo empanada with chipotle lime aioli at Brasabana, his new Cuban restaurant in Commonwealth Plaza on Lane Allen Road, which opened in January.

Where other chefs curse and intimidate, Ashby smiles and ingratiates, and Lexington diners love him. Jeremy Ashby's rise as



Above, Ashby's creativity is expressed in dishes such as lobster crepes. Working at Azur allows him to "really put my stamp on the food."

one of the city's most respected chefs and his evolution from culinary school graduate to co-owner of a progressive restaurant group — not to mention his roles as a television cooking celebrity and avid supporter of Kentucky Proud products have been nothing short of phenomenal.

### From a culinary seedling to a star

Jeremy Ashby's culinary talent has its origins in the cozy kitchen of his maternal grandmother, Sallie B. Clines.

"Our life centered on that kitchen, and I

can't remember a time when I wasn't a part of it," said Ashby. "I guess I was about 3 or 4 when I began testing the pasta to see if it was done."

He describes his grandmother, who was from Eastern Kentucky, as "poor in everything except her love for family and friends and the spread she laid out in her kitchen."

That meant goodies such as fried chicken, dumplings, green and dried beans, stewed tomatoes, fried corn, biscuits and cornbread — the bounty of the South, as Ashby describes it.

"She might not have known it at the time, but Granny was one of the early proponents



Above, grandmother Sallie B. Clines inspired Ashby's love for food.

of farm-to-table," he said.

His grandmother died when he was 12 and Ashby claims he didn't taste real food again until he was 18 and a new enrollee in the College of Culinary Arts at Johnson & Wales University in Charleston, S.C.

He had an epiphany while going to school in this city known for its sophisticated approach to southern cooking. He enjoyed watching seafood being unloaded on the docks and aromatic rice ("not Uncle Ben's")

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coming in from the fields. He tried stone-ground grits and juicy produce. Charleston proved a revelation for the newly minted chef.

“When you taste food that gives you a sense of place and time, it’s altogether a transcendental experience,” said Ashby. “It took me back to those times I had cherished in my granny’s kitchen.

“I really got my chops as a cook in Charleston,” he added.

Those chops served him well as he set out to carve a niche for himself in the restaurant industry. With a mixture of confidence and bravado, he eschewed the typical career path of most Johnson & Wales graduates, declining a placement and paying out of his own pocket to be apprenticed to Miami-based Norman Van Aken, often credited with inventing fusion or New World cuisine.

“What I learned from working with Norman, coupled with what I had already learned in Charleston, was invaluable,” said Ashby. “I learned how to layer ingredients to give each dish a distinctive and provocative personality.”

Still, he found the world of haute cuisine was a long way from the comfort of Granny Sallie’s kitchen, and at the ripe old age of 21 he set his sights once again on his old Kentucky home.

### Back to his roots

At an age when most are happy for an entry-level position, Ashby was executive chef at Merrick Inn, his first job in Lexington. During his time here he earned the confidence (as well as a degree in hospitality and business from the University of Kentucky) to carve out a career path.

“I realized two things,” said Ashby. “First, that while I was good at producing other people’s food, I didn’t have a style of my own; and second, that with a new wife-to-



COURTESY JEREMY ASHBY

Ashby's early years centered on the kitchen.

be, it was time to take stock of my future.”

That future would be at Azur, an unassuming spot in a small shopping plaza, tucked between a sushi restaurant and a business that provides granite overlays. If Azur was unremarkable on the outside, its contemporary interior and Ashby’s innovative menu soon captured the attention of

Lexington’s discriminating diners. On this particular day a tantalizing aroma wafted through the restaurant’s small dining room. It turned out to be an Ashby specialty — fried chicken marinated for two days in buttermilk and bourbon.

Other dishes on the menu prove equally memorable — a golden tilefish over a pearl hominy croquette; woven shrimp with coconut sweet corn risotto, red chili and honey; and a carbonara combining Lexington Pasta spaghetti with country ham.

“Being at Azur has offered me the chance to really put my stamp on the food,” said Ashby.

Sylvia Lovely, who along with her husband, Bernie, is one of the restaurant’s co-owners, said that Jeremy’s heart and passion define his culinary talent.

“Jeremy doesn’t just cook; he creates,” said Lovely.

If there is one thing — other than his cooking — that Ashby is passionate about, it’s cooking with local products, the kind he was exposed to as a toddler in his grandmother’s kitchen.

“We’ve been Kentucky Proud since the day we opened,” said Ashby, “and I’ve developed a relationship with so many local growers.

“I’m incredibly proud of our farmers and what they’ve done in making the transition

from tobacco to sustainable agriculture and aquaculture.”

As testimony to that pride, Ashby opened his own farmers market on the patio at Azur. Every Saturday from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. from May through October, anywhere from four to 10 growers set up booths on the patio. Shoppers can find everything from heirloom green beans and paw paws (mango-shaped fruits with the texture of bananas) to eggs, free-range chicken, and local beef.

What you won’t find, according to Ashby, are pineapples or tomatoes out of season.

“We’re all about pushing Kentucky products,” he said, adding “people love the idea of getting to know their farmers.”

One of those farmers, Billy Webb of Sheltowee Farm in Salt Lick, the commonwealth’s largest gourmet mushroom farm, is a frequent participant in Azur’s Farmer’s Market. He sells mushrooms — both those he grows and those he forages — and, in



Azur's sleek interior reflects the sophistication of the food.





Ashby and Sylvia Lovely interview Alltech founder Dr. Pearse Lyons on the KET series *Food News and Chews*.

season, blueberries, peaches and asparagus.

"I can tell you this about Jeremy Ashby," said Webb. "He has a true local farmers market. What you get from him is 100 percent produced in Kentucky."

## From public television to a Cuban restaurant

Ashby claims that while he likes to mystify diners with the often disparate flavor profiles in his dishes, he also wants to demystify those dishes "in the sense that they taste familiar and provide comfort," as he explained it.

He had a chance to do that on a large scale when Clear Channel Radio came calling with the offer of a one-hour Saturday morning radio show. That was followed by a KET series *Food News and Chews*, a 30-minute segment he co-hosts with Sylvia Lovely.

If you're expecting a perky Rachael Ray dishing up easy-to-prepare meals, you might be disappointed. Ashby and Lovely are the culinary equivalents of Charlie Rose and Rachel Maddow. On their show the two tackle weighty subjects such as a recent topic on how to feed more people with less land and fewer resources. Ashby has even brought history into the mix with a program on the agricultural contributions of famous Kentuckians such as Henry Clay.

Not to worry. While Ashby wants to educate his viewers on current trends, he knows what his audience expects.

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"I always follow up with a recipe related to the topic," he said.

One might wonder when a man who is already an acclaimed chef, television personality, and cheerleader for the Kentucky Proud label would find the time to open a second restaurant. Yet, that's just what Ashby and fellow chef and partner in Azur Food Group, Miguel Rivas, did when they opened Brasabana.

Ashby and Rivas, a native of the Dominican Republic, wanted to introduce the Bluegrass to the bold, unapologetic flavors of the islands.

"Miguel and I share many of the same interests in what we refer to as the dishes of sunlight — garlic, chilis, and citrus — that we don't see a lot of here," said Ashby.

"We also both have the philosophy that a meal should be a dining experience, not a feeding frenzy."

Executive chef, businessman/entrepreneur, television personality, supporter of Kentucky's agricultural heritage — quite a resumé for a 34-year-old. Ashby, however, remains modest about his accomplishments.

"Being true to my raising — that's what it's all about," he said.

Granny Sallie would be proud. **KM**



Ashby and Miguel Rivas, left, are partners in the new restaurant Brasabana, which serves Latin-inspired food such as chicken chicharron, above.



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