







# New café culture

Set amid a lush urban garden, Kentucky Native Café is a warm-weather gathering spot for food, drink, performance, and more

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By Jacalyn Carfagno  
Photos by Lee P. Thomas





The wooded setting, scattering of tables, twinkling lights, and simple food, wine, and beer add to the café's convivial atmosphere.

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obin Michler and his family really didn't envision the place they opened in 2015 as somewhere to eat.

The Kentucky Native Café was designed as an urban oasis, a respite from the busy streets that surround it, the huge university nearby, and the city core just a few blocks away.

"We sort of expected people to come for the ambience and order food if they were hungry," Michler said, sitting in the café one morning this spring. The only sounds were bird song and the thrum of a mixer as the café's signature pretzels began to take shape.

They were right about the ambience and wrong about the food. Yes, people came to enjoy the woodland retreat, but they loved what they found to eat, too.

"You can go back and find all the reviews of people saying we were sold out of food," Michler said of their first season. The Michlers adjusted, doubling food production by the second season while preserving the relaxed, natural atmosphere that draws people to







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the outdoor café from April through October.

By last year the café had drawn the attention of The Washington Post, which described it as “a place out of time” where “tables and benches are strewn under trees in a curated garden, and a small kitchen whips up seasonal salads and cheese plates along with beer and wine.”

There was no need for an urban oasis when Carl Michler bought several acres on the outskirts of the small city of Lexington in 1902. There, he and his sons built a flower business and greenhouse that flourished as successive generations expanded it and the city grew around it. For decades Michler’s at 417 E. Maxwell St. has been an anomaly in the residential neighborhood between downtown and the University of Kentucky.

Robin Michler wasn’t set on being the next generation to work at Michler’s. “Like a lot of kids in family businesses, I didn’t think I was going to come into the family business.” Instead he studied abroad, in Germany for two years and in Israel and the Netherlands, got an undergraduate degree in geography and a graduate degree in city and regional planning, and landed a job in his field in Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

Then two things happened: He and his wife, Lexington native Penina Goldstein, began to think about having children; and the Great Recession slammed florists particularly hard and many closed. Michler’s hung on but “had taken quite a hit,” he said.



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Top, Robin Michler helped his parents revitalize the family garden and greenhouse business with the addition of the café. The menu features salads, cheese plates, and the highly popular pretzels.



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Michler often talked with his parents, John and Claudia Kane Michler, offering suggestions about ways to revitalize the family business. “But at a certain point you want to stop telling other people what they should try and you want to just come do it,” he said. Plus, it would be nice to raise kids with family close by.

So, in the summer of 2011, he returned to Lexington and to Michler’s. His sister Jessamine joined the effort, and the two worked to help their parents push the family business into the 21st century and back to profitability. (Jessamine was named after the flower not the county: “The Jessamine plant was blooming when she was born and so the greenhouses smelled fragrant and that’s how she got her name.”) They computerized the accounting and checkout systems so Michler’s would know who its customers are and what they buy, and they initiated on-line sales. With the children on board, John Michler had more time and energy to devote to garden design. By late 2013 things were back on track.



Customers order at the counter, where the day’s offerings are described and the wines on offer are displayed.



Dogs and children are welcome.

Robin Michler had thought he might return to city planning once the family business was stable. But after a couple of years, he found a greenhouse more fun than an office as a workspace. Plus, he liked being able to plan and carry out his own projects, he said, “as opposed to doing someone else’s thing.”

In the back of Michler’s, behind the greenhouses and the florist shop, there was an acre that was mostly used for storing planting materials and composting discards. As the core business steadied, the family began to think of finding another use for that area.

Michler had an idea.

As a high school senior, he had spent a year in Munich, where he experienced a new way of living. Back in Lexington he said he “wasn’t necessarily super adept at arranging a social life in high school,” but found it much easier in Munich, where when the weather was nice, kids would just migrate to the local beer garden after school. “You don’t need a cell phone; you don’t need to call anybody; you don’t need to text anybody.” He found those same kinds of informal, outdoor social spaces in other places abroad but nothing like that in Lexington.

“I was lobbying for a neighborhood café from the very beginning,” Michler said.

The family had weekly meetings and considered other



ideas but in the end agreed with him.

That was just the beginning. There were hurdles anticipated and not. Michler's was founded before Lexington had zoning. It was grandfathered in as a non-conforming use in the residential neighborhood that had grown around it. That meant they had to get a zoning variance to open a café, a process that took about a year. The property hadn't been surveyed, or at least no one knew whether it had been, so there was that. They had to lease space from a neighbor to accommodate parking requirements. And they had to get a license to serve alcohol, a "particularly onerous" process.

Finally, John Michler was able to begin designing the space into informal outdoor "rooms," using the Kentucky native plants he'd been studying and nurturing for years. They went to Rockcastle County and found large boulders to mark the spaces and kept a lot of trees that weren't straight to add to the natural feel. Traditional beer garden tables long enough for groups to



Robin Michler lends a hand to staff in the small Craftsman-style kitchen that was designed to blend in with the natural setting.

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meet after work or for a birthday celebration are at the center, and smaller tables occupy the “rooms” on the periphery for people who want more privacy. And there are small hills, which Robin Michler said are the remains of “thousands of unsold plants” that are now covered with sand and Tonka trucks. A small Craftsman-style kitchen was designed and built to blend into the natural setting.

The Kentucky Native Café opened in the spring of 2015, a month after Robin and Penina had their first child, a son. Jessamine had a son about the same time, and now there are often “a couple of cousins running around here.”

“I wish I had created the Native Café,” moaned Lynn Winter, a regular there. Winter lives in Lexington after 23 years of operating Lynn’s Paradise Café, a quirky neighborhood place in Louisville that drew attention from the likes of Oprah and Bobby Flay and articles in *The Wall Street Journal* and *The New York Times*. The Michlers “have the patience to not be trendy,” she said. “They do just right and no more ... which is harder than anything.”

Although they have a license to sell liquor, Kentucky Native doesn’t want to be a bar and so limits itself to wine and local craft beers. There are sparkling water, fruit spritzers, and draft lemonade, but don’t look for soft drinks and colas. The food is restricted to some extent by the kitchen itself, which Robin Michler describes as “sort of like a large food truck on a foundation.” All the dishes and salads are made there to be served at room temperature. There’s no walk-in freezer, no fryer. Hardy grains like quinoa are mixed with roasted vegetables. Burrata cheese is served with seasonal fruit. In the spring there are wild ramps and leeks; in the summer, local tomatoes. Always, there are a goat cheese and olive plate and cheese with Bavarian pretzels made in that tiny kitchen.

Pretzels require many steps. The dough rises once as a mass and then again after it’s portioned and formed into



Kentucky Native Café provides a venue for local musicians and occasional performances, such as this workshop production of a Greek play.



John Michler designed informal outdoor “rooms” using Kentucky native plants.

pretzels, which are refrigerated overnight before they’re dipped in boiling water to get that distinctive crisp crust, then finally salted and baked.

That first season the demand for pretzels was so great the Michlers searched for a local bakery to outsource production. No luck, Robin Michler said. They’re just too time-consuming to make. But at Kentucky Native Café the Michlers find the time to make them.

There’s no sound system at the café, but every Sunday local musicians entertain from noon to 2 p.m., and this season there will be a series of talks on Tuesday evenings





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about food, plants, and other topics in a restored potting shed. And then there are the occasional performances, such as the workshop production of a translation of an ancient Greek comedy last summer. As it turns out, the translator, Diane Arnson Svarlien, lives around the corner from the Michlers. She needed a free place to perform where she could ask for donations to pay the actors, and her neighbor obliged. So her translation of Aristophanes' "Women at the Thesmophoria" had its world premier at the Kentucky Native Café one warm weekday night. The audience laughed at the comedy, a sendup of one of Aristophanes' favorite targets, his contemporary Euripides. "It was very convivial, being able to drink a beer or eat while you're watching the show," Arnson Svarlien said. "It was a really perfect setting."

For Winter, that's the genius of the Kentucky Native Café. "Robin holds a space open to let great things happen," she said, whether that's an ancient Greek comedy, an extended family gathering where the kids can run free on a sand hill, or simply a couple who want a quiet interlude over a pretzel and beer.

Michler plans to keep it that way. They often get requests to close for private parties but always turn them down. "We don't want people to come and find a 'we're closed for a private party' sign on the door; it's not what we're going after."

What they're going after is what Winter has found there. "There's always a friendly face," she said. "It's not like a bar; there's something else: a sweetness that's hard to define." **KM**



Robin and Penina and the latest generation of Michlers: sons Simon, left, and Ira



A lighted sign beckons customers to enter a woodland retreat.



## KENTUCKY NATIVE CAFÉ

Monday – Friday  
4 p.m.-10 p.m.

Saturday – Sunday  
11 a.m.-10 p.m.

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