

15 MINUTES WITH: JAMES SIMMONS

On his rise to the top, from teenaged dishwasher to executive chef of Blossom



CM: You were born and raised on the West-side of Charleston. What was home like?

JS: My momma and grandmother cooked a lot—braised meat or broth-based stews thickened with a roux, usually served over rice. My mom used to say, “Don’t come in the kitchen!” But one day, when I was eight or nine, I just snuck in there without asking, and I guess I didn’t burn myself or anything, so she let me come back. She’s pretty proud of me and just always tells me to keep going. My momma raised us to work, work, work.

CM: When did you realize you wanted to work in restaurants?

JS: I wasn’t planning on being a chef, but the opportunity came up when I was too young to even know what I wanted yet. I had dreamed of being a lawyer or basketball player, but I ended up falling in love with being in the kitchen—and here I am 21 years later still doing it. I’m always up for a challenge, and I’m looking forward to seeing where this profession will take me.

CM: What was it like working in a professional kitchen at just 16 years old?

JS: First of all, I was just thrilled to have a job. That excitement motivated me to work and learn every day. I started as a dishwasher at Magnolias in 1997. From there, I worked my way up to the food preparation line, and they eventually promoted me to sous chef in 2010. One of the

PHOTOGRAPH BY [SIMMONS], LIZZY SMITH

(FAVORITE THINGS)



➤ **Grillmaster:** “If I’m cooking at home, you’ll usually find me barbecuing chicken or grilling simple fish with fresh herbs and butter.”



➤ **Full House:** “I spend most of my time outside of the kitchen with my four kids and my wife. We like going to Coosaw Creek and Hampton Park.”



➤ **Memory-maker:** “As a kid, my mom made the best baked beans over rice with fried chicken. She cooked the beans with sausage and bacon.”



➤ **Suds & Sports:** “I love a nice cold Budweiser, especially when I’m watching a game. I’m a San Antonio Spurs fan.”



➤ **You’re It:** “My little girl loves to play tag or hide-and-seek. My three boys like to shoot hoops on the basketball court in the park.”

first dishes I remember making was a Parmesan-crusted flounder with creek shrimp purloo and a crab citrus beurre blanc.

CM: What did this dish teach you?

JS: The biggest thing I had to figure out was controlling that fire. I needed the crust to stay crispy but the fish to stay tender—meaning, I had to learn how to find balance.

CM: You worked with your brothers Delon and Landice at Magnolias. What was that like?

JS: As the morning sous chef, I was basically their boss, but we've got the brother thing going where I never have to tell them anything twice—that made my job easy. Delon worked on the line, and he would knock that prep list out better than almost anyone I've ever seen. Landice was kitchen manager and would also help me come up with specials. It's a really unique bond—we were always close growing up.

CM: So who does the cooking when the whole family gets together?

JS: You know, it's funny. I have another brother, Nathaniel, who's a merchant marine chef, plus three sisters, so the kitchen can get crowded! Usually us guys cook or grill some meat or fish. Then my momma does the salads, macaroni, and all the other side dishes.

CM: What's it like being part of the same restaurant group for more than 20 years?

JS: When I first got to Magnolias, I'd never even grilled a chicken before, so chefs like Donald Drake, Donald Barickman, and Kelly Franz essentially taught me everything there. The whole crew is like a family to me. Now, when I see some of my coworkers' kids all grown up, it makes me feel old!

CM: Do you eventually want to open up your own place?

JS: I wouldn't mind giving that a try one day. Just like I said, I love a challenge. My mission right now is to do the best job possible here at Blossom, but I could see myself wanting my own spot down the road.

—Parker Milner

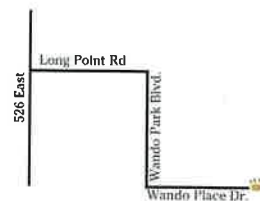


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