

# Chef James Boyce

FEELS AT HOME IN DOWNTOWN HUNTSVILLE'S COTTON ROW

BY ERIN COGGINS

PHOTOS BY DOKK SAVAGE



*Pictured, private dining room at Cotton Row Restaurant in Huntsville, Alabama; photo by Dokk Savage*

**L**ucky. That is how chef James Boyce describes his journey throughout the professional world of being a chef.

Lucky to have been born into a family that gathered together every weekend in his hometown of Poughkeepsie, New York where cooking good food was the center of it all.

"I kind of enjoyed the get togethers and watching the cooking. It was automatic gratification," James said. "Here I am 30 years later still doing it. I still care and am passionate about it, but I think it all

goes back to my family and the gatherings we had as kids. It was about the next-door neighbors and the Sunday suppers."

James tried college only to find his passion for cooking was stronger than his desire for any other profession. He put himself through school, working in various culinary related jobs from waiter to baker to making omelets at private brunches as well as sharpening his knife at one of New York's most treasured French restaurants, Le Cirque.

James took that experience to the Culinary Institute of America in

Hyde Park, New York.

"You have to have basic skills to take with you to culinary school. You have to have the background and some kind of carnal knowledge of cooking," James said. "I went to school during the week and worked at Le Cirque on the weekends. It was a French restaurant and that was what they were teaching at the Culinary Institute. It was kind of funny because it was reinforcing everything I was doing at the other place."

While working at Le Cirque, James met Charles Keating, the owner of The Phoenician located in Scottsdale,

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*Pictured, second floor of Cotton Row Restaurant; photograph by Dokk Savage*

Arizona. He was looking for a few people to go out and open the hotel, so James signed on for the task, helping to open Mary Elaine's. After five years, he moved to Las Vegas and then onto the Loew's Corporation in San Diego, California, serving as executive chef of the Loews Coronado Bay Resort.

"This was a major change in my life," James said. "I was an executive chef of a 444-room hotel at the age of 28," James said. "It was a big responsibility. They did 18 million on food and beverage. I went from a restaurant that did a few million to a hotel that had in room dining. It sort of rounded out my career."

Searching to learn more, James returned to Mary Elaine's—a move he says allowed him to make a name for himself.

"We got all those accolades, every accolade you could think of. I loved it there," James said. "The only reason I left was because I was offered a job, I could not refuse."

That job was in Laguna Beach, California.

"It was for a new hotel and I had the



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opportunity to do a free-standing restaurant on the beach and all the things that I wanted to do at the time," James said. "I worked with a friend of mine and the owner had a value for what we wanted to do."

Lucky, again. Not only did James get to start something from the ground up, he met his wife, Suzan. They had two children. And then, they were presented the opportunity to start a restaurant in Huntsville.

"I have gotten every award that we could possibly think of, but you know after a while, I realized that awards were great on paper, but time and lifestyle was more important,"

James said. "I had two young kids and I was working a lot and I just didn't want to do it. Coming to Huntsville was a shot in the dark."

James says supporters like Jeff Sykes, the mayor and the governor at the time were supportive of their new endeavor of opening the Cotton Row Restaurant which the Boyces have made a staple of fine dining in the area. Cotton Row was followed by Pane e Vino Pizzeria, Commerce

Kitchen and most recently Grille on Main. James says the four restaurants are different enough where they do not compete with one another.

But Cotton Row is home. That is where he feels most comfortable.

"People ask me all the time how to describe Cotton Row. It's very hard when you are in it all the time," James said. "At Cotton Row we use world class ingredients. Our staff is very skilled in fine dining. The staff has been with us a long, long time. We probably have the best kitchen staff in the city."

The building itself is unique. The restaurant, located in a city square

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*Pictured, (left) braised black Angus beef short ribs; (right) classic martini; photographs by Dokk Savage*

building dating to 1821, is only 21 feet wide and 130 feet long.

"I think people like it. It's like, you don't have a lot of room, but it always feels comfortable," James said. "When you come in, you are like 'ah, I'm away from the real world.' You sit outside and it is like you are in an urban city. Sixteen years later and it is still going strong."

Grille on Main opened in 2021 in the landmark building at Providence

Village. Its website describes the restaurant as "your neighborhood place where you can sit back with friends and family, sip a drink outside while listening to live music and enjoying honest American fare." As the newest Boyce Restaurant, James refers to Grille 29 as a steak and chop house with a big menu in a big restaurant.

"It's spacious," James said. "You can go in and have great fish. You can have a great steak, a hamburger. You can have a composed salad of chicken or tuna or you can have a Caesar salad. We do shellfish platter which nobody around here does."

James put his own personal life into Commerce Kitchen as it was designed after a New York tavern he frequented while living there. It was designed for patrons to go in, sit at the bar area, have a drink or go in the restaurant and have a meal.

"At first, I was like, I don't know if this is going to work. Then it slowly picked up and it now has its regulars," James said. It's a neighborhood restaurant—I would say because people can walk to it. We created a fun place with very comfortable food."

The "we" James keeps referring to is the business partnership with his wife—Boyce Restaurant Concepts. Suzan also attended the Culinary Institute and possesses the same passion for food and hospitality as her husband. The partnership allows him to be in the kitchen and she to be more on the experience and hospitality side of things. Suzan says the two collaborate creatively daily, whether it be about food, flavor, design or culinary experiences.

"Jimmy has an incredible culinary

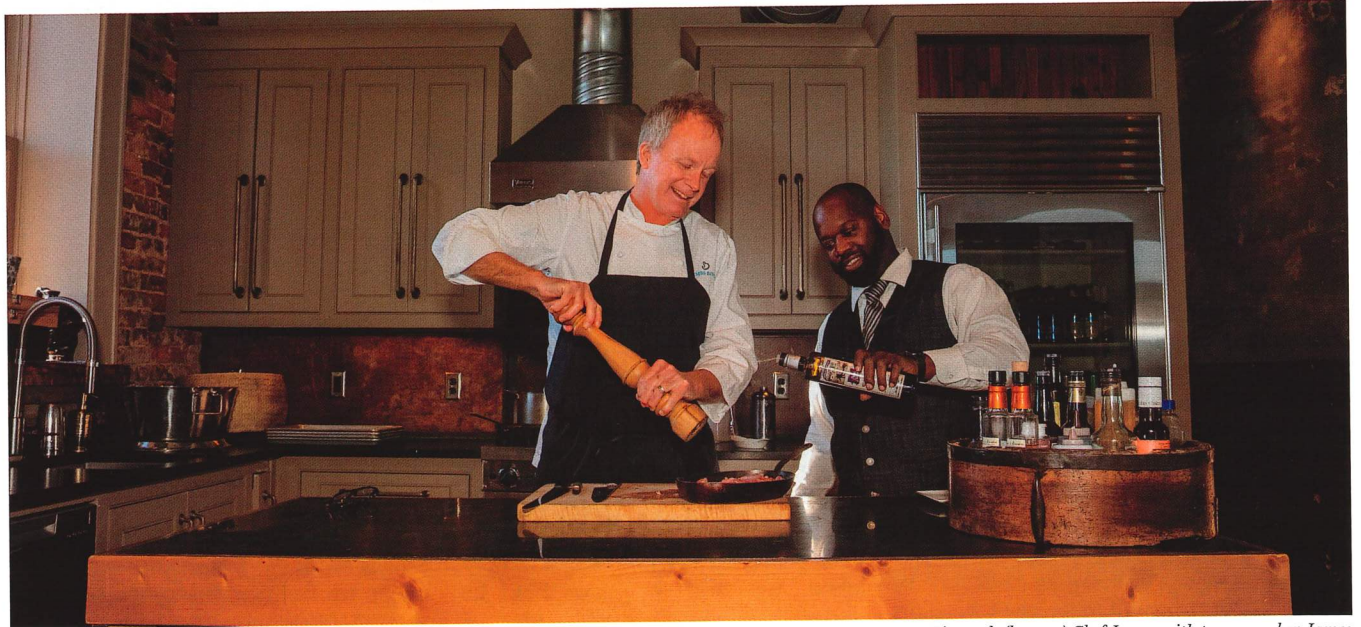
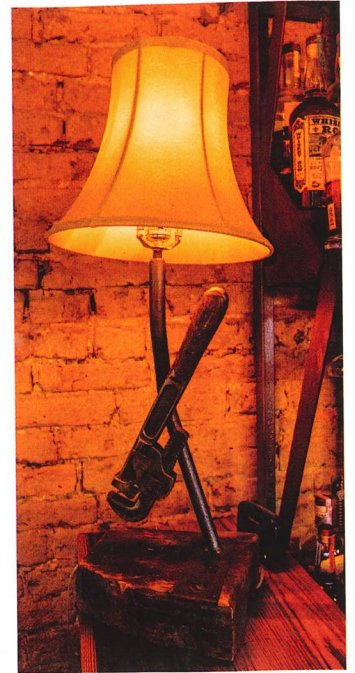
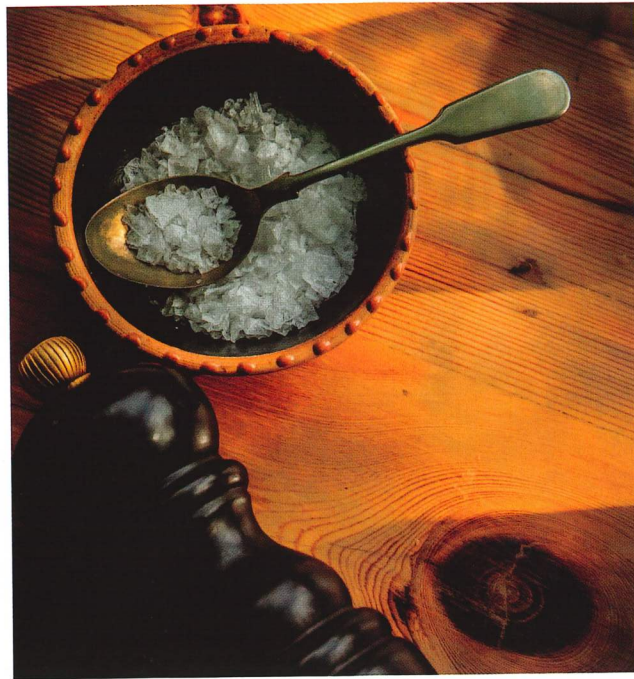
background with a love for food, cooking, entertaining and sharing his knowledge with others. I love creating experiences for people whether it be designing a restaurant, setting a table beautifully, surprising a guest with a rare bottle of wine or creating food and wine events," Suzan said. "We complement each other by building on our strengths and tackling our weaknesses as a team. We have always stayed true to ourselves and what we believe in. I think that is why our partnership has worked so well."

James' perception of the partnership is one of thankfulness. Thankful for being able to focus on what he loves most—cooking, but more so just for Suzan.

"I have a great partner, my wife, who is a guiding influence for me. People say that they couldn't work with their wife, but I could never work without my wife. I'd be dead. She's the owner," James said.

His passion for creating the perfect dish comes from years of experience, but also in knowing the

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*Pictured, (bottom) Chef James with team member James*

best ingredients in the kitchen. For James that is as simple as salt and pepper—two things he was trained to use effectively.

“You have to season to make things perfect,” James said. “My favorite tool in the kitchen is my pepper and salt mills. I have a bunch of them in my house and I have them in the kitchen here [Cotton Row], too. Fresh herbs are the next best thing.”

James says he has never been good with following a recipe, relying on spontaneity instead. It is the “controlled chaos” he thrives on in the kitchen. “I do gourmet gatherings. And it is kind of funny because it is almost like one of those game shows where you have this

whole grocery list in front of you and you have to create, and you do seven courses and that is when it works best,” James said. “It’s when you have to put one egg and two cups of sugar and this and that—it never works out for me.”

According to quora.com, the average career longevity for a chef is between 18-20 years. James has exceeded that with 38 years in the business. He says there really is not a key to being successful in the restaurant industry; it is more of staying away from certain things that come with the territory, including alcoholism, drug addiction and dealing with mental health issues.

“You can acquire some awards and I had great success with that, but you also have negatives with this industry too. You go through downers where you have too much to eat, perhaps too much to drink, so you really have to have a balance in life,” James said. “If you can keep a happy balance and understand what you need to do and the principles of what you have to do, then you can be very successful. People do not understand that it is a lot of hard work.”

James finds his balance by traveling hiking, exercising and watching his teenage daughter play tennis and his teenage son play golf.

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And of course, cooking at home. “We have two children that love to eat. We don’t really go out to eat a lot,” James said. “It’s not fancy food, but it is full flavored food.”

These times are savored a little more. James battled cancer in 2020 and his restaurants survived the COVID pandemic. Yet, he still finds the excitement and passion in his work and Huntsville has been a huge part of that.

The Boyces were told that moving to Huntsville to start a restaurant like Cotton Row was a horrible idea. Fifteen years later, they consider themselves fortunate in that decision.

“We sat here as a corner restaurant for years and then slowly everybody surrounded us with all these great places,” James said. “Now we have world class restaurants around here.

Fifteen years ago, you could name all the restaurants on one hand. Now, you have a variety of great bakeries, pastry shops.”

James now sees Huntsville as home. In the past, he would move his career location every five years (except for his last restaurant) to improve his skills and learn something, to see something more viable. His career continues to flourish, but he credits that to all the positions he has held

from working in a private restaurant to a hotel to being a sous chef and an executive chef. It is all full circle now as an owner of restaurants.

“My wife and I say that we were very, very lucky because it all could have gone the other way,” James said. “I think when you say I own the place, that you never really own the place. Your staff, your friends that come to eat. They own the place. We are just here to guide, to help nurture, hopefully.” 🍷



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