

'Bound to be delicious'

*Chefs toast to the past,
look to the future*

YEAR
IN
REVIEW

BY THOMAS CALDER

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Nothing lasts forever, and in 2023, Asheville's food and beverage industry made that abundantly clear: Bhramari Brewing Co., Buxton Hall Barbecue, Blue Dream Curry House and Sawhorse were among several businesses that closed this year. Other staples, such as Geraldine's Bakery in North Asheville and Gan Shan West in West Asheville welcomed a change in ownership. Meanwhile, one of the biggest surprise announcements within the local food industry arrived in October, when **Mike Rangel** revealed that he and his business partners were looking to sell Asheville Pizza & Brewing Co. after a 25-year run.

Along with these game changers, *Xpress*' weekly food coverage spotlighted a number of 2023 openings: Botiwalla, The Daily Grind, Little D's, Rabbit Hole, Regina's, Sweets & Seats and The Tiki Easy Bar were among this year's new arrivals.

Meanwhile, *Xpress* also launched a new monthly food feature, "Fresh Dish," wherein we speak with local chefs about Asheville's culinary scene — both its accomplishments and needs.

For this year's Year in Review, we caught back up with several of the feature's participants — **Katie Button** (Katie Button Restaurants), **J Chong** (J Chong Eats), **Steven Goff** (Taste Diner) and **Suzy Phillips** (Gypsy Queen Cuisine and Simple Cafe & Juice Bar) — to discuss some of the highs and lows of 2023. We also looked ahead to 2024.

Based on their responses, there's one thing for sure: Asheville's restaurateurs are very excited for **Ashleigh Shanti's** forthcoming Good Hot Fish, slated to open next year at 10 Buxton Ave.

What restaurant that closed this year will you miss the most?

Button: Buxton Hall for sure. I have lots of fond memories of taking my kids there and watching them draw on the menus and chow down on barbecue. I am sure the Chai Pani Group has great things in store for that space, though. I can't wait to see what they do next.

Chong: I was really sad to see Zia Taqueria close this year. Zia's was such a staple in West Asheville!

Goff: Supersad to see Sawhorse go! **Dan [Silo]** and his team were really good folks doing good things. We just don't have any other north-eastern Canadian-style restaurants in the area or in this part of the country at all. And meat pies! I love meat pies, but they're pretty hard to come by almost anywhere. I feel like Dan did a good job making this food fit so well here in our region, and the Sawhorse team as a whole did well supporting their local community.

Phillips: I will miss Executive Chef **Michelle Bailey** and General Manager **Kristie Quinn**, who are leaving their roles at Smoky Park Supper Club at the end of the year. I love and respect them both. Michelle's food is amazing.

What was your restaurant's most popular dish in 2023?

Button: This completely took me by surprise. In the restaurant upstairs at La Bodega by Curaté, our most popular dish was our salad. With a pistachio and caramelized shallot vinaigrette, it's practically addictive. The ingredients in the salad itself change seasonally, so you get a fresh take on it every few months. It is clearly a hit among the Asheville locals.

Chong: Aside from the pork dumplings being a popular item this year, I would have to say that there were two other items that were popular in 2023: My lo bak go and the woutine were a crowd pleaser for sure.

Goff: Hot chicken sandwich on a honeybun was our most popular dish for sure, followed closely by the beef chopped cheese sandwich. The hot chicken sandwich is straightforward enough for people to see how the flavors work and different enough to feel adventurous in your order.

Phillips: Our most popular dish at Gypsy Queen is the lamb and beef shawarma wrap, and at Simple Cafe, it is the avocado tempeh melt. More and more people are loving lamb, and



TABLE FOR FOUR: Chefs, clockwise from top left, Katie Button, J Chong, Suzy Phillips and Steven Goff share their thoughts on the 2023 food scene. Photos by Andy Hall

Middle Eastern food has been in the spotlight for a couple of years now, especially Lebanese food. We only use local meats. We trim our lamb and beef, marinate it and stack it on the shawarma machine. Everything on that wrap, except the pita, is made in-house with high-quality ingredients that deliver pungent flavors, and you can taste it from the first to the last bite.

For the avocado tempeh melt, from Simple, the cashew tamarind slaw delivers a punch to the palate. We use local tempeh, Smiling Hara, and we marinate it with our special marinade and cook it to perfection with melted cheese, or vegan cheese, plus the cashew tamarind slaw and fresh avocado slices. All that makes this a unique sandwich with memorable flavors.

What restaurant opening has you excited in the new year?

Button: Ashleigh Shanti's Good Hot Fish. I know she's been running a bunch of pop-ups, but I can't wait for the full restaurant concept to open up. Ashleigh is so talented and has such a

wonderful food perspective and story to tell. It is bound to be delicious.

Chong: I am superexcited about Good Hot Fish opening up this year with Chef Ashleigh Shanti!

Goff: Good Hot Fish! I can't wait to taste what Ashleigh has on offer. Ashleigh is an amazing chef that's seriously talented at providing an excellent guest experience. We are also sorely lacking in the fish camp department here in Asheville. And if you need even more reason, Ashleigh is a nationally recognized chef and also does a lot to promote the local food community, as well as Southeastern food as a whole. I've been waiting to see what her vision of a fish camp is because I'm sure it's tasty and different.

Phillips: As far as new restaurants, Tamaleria y Tortilleria Molina. Besides being next door to Gypsy Queen, they offer fresh tortillas and amazing tamales. They have been [selling those out of the shop] for years, but this year they opened up their taqueria in the back of the shop. It's authentic, fresh and delicious!

— with additional reporting
by Andy Hall X

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