



fresh  
BATCH

A spirit of collaboration  
has sparked a culinary  
renaissance in Nashville,  
making Music City a  
foodie destination.

Red snapper crudo at  
Henrietta Red

MADDIE TEREN



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In 1997, Teresa Mason was a photojournalism major at Middle Tennessee State University while working as a server at the Hard Rock Cafe in Nashville. She planned to pursue both photography and hospitality—so she saved up and moved to New York City after graduation. But instead of the freedom she envisioned, she found herself tethered to office jobs, hungry for a change. Then, at age 30, while on a trip to Mexico, the idea hit her—like Newton's apple, but with tacos.

"I found myself daydreaming about running one of those taco stands or *fondas*—those little family-run diners in Mexico," Mason says. So she moved back to Nashville, where she lived in her friend's garage for \$80 a month, purchased her neighbor's band's tour bus, a 1974 Winnebago, and learned how to make two straightforward taco recipes and an *agua fresca*. "The big motivation for me was independence, so Nashville felt like the better option. Everything in New York is a big production. Here, I had family and friends. It was cheap to live. It wasn't so terrifying." A food truck would be an outlier for sure, but Mason had seen the craze taking off in New York and thought the concept was perfect for her low-key hometown.

So in 2005, Mason parked the Winnebago outside a few East Nashville bars and began selling tacos from the window. She called her new venture Mas Tacos Por Favor. Through time and practice, her menu grew into an inventive spin on Mexican finger food. Nothing cost more than three bucks. And while the ingredients were simple and the prices low, Mason's creations, like fried avocado tacos, citrus-infused chicken tortilla soup and grilled street corn coated in a sweet chili-lime sauce and white cheese, felt exotic and fresh—particularly when there were few other food options at two in the morning.



Mason took the winter off after her first year. When she reopened for the spring, she was surprised to find her lunch lines had multiplied. "It was kind of miraculous," Mason says. "People liked it enough that when it was gone, its absence created kind of a buzz." Within five years, Mason's four-wheeled taco dispensary became a restaurant located just a few miles from where she folded her first tortillas.

Mason's story is unique in its details, but it is part of a larger trend in Nashville that has developed over the past 15 years or so: risk-taking foodies elevating Nashville's culinary offerings to the high level of its music scene, surely the most prolific and creative in the country. The two cultures—pardon the pun—feed off each other. As with songwriting, collaboration is the backbone of cooking. Success in either field requires skill, originality, timing and maybe a touch of craziness.


"Music and food go hand in hand because the lifestyles are so similar," says Nathan Followill, the drummer in Nashville-based Kings of Leon. "All rock stars want to be chefs and all chefs want to be drummers." In 2013, Followill and his brother, singer Caleb Followill, along with Jonathan Waxman, author, restaurateur and James Beard Award-winning chef, founded Nashville's annual Music City Food + Wine Festival. It started as a way to implement the city's gustatory potential. After touring cities around the

world and sampling creations from the best chefs, the three friends wanted to create an event that celebrated the culinary achievements of Nashville. Plus, most of their friends were either in bands, worked in restaurants or some combination of both.

Internalizing the city's creative spirit was also the cornerstone of success for Nashville natives Benjamin and Max Goldberg, the two brothers who founded Nashville-based hospitality group and consultancy Strategic Hospitality in 2006. In just over a decade, Strategic Hospitality's portfolio has grown to 10 properties, each one moving the city's culinary

needle forward. As with Teresa Mason, the Followills and Jonathan Waxman, the Goldbergs are local entrepreneurs who've helped put Nashville on the national food map.

The Goldbergs' restaurants have some things in common—they're all creative spaces that offer excellent food—but each is distinctive. There's the Band Box, a seasonal eatery nestled in right field of First Tennessee Park, home to Minor League Baseball team the Nashville Sounds. There's the ultrahip Pinewood Social, housed in a vast warehouse by the Cumberland River, which, in addition to its dining room, has casual work spaces, six bowl-



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**Left:** chef Ryan Poli (front left) and team at The Catbird Seat; the restaurant's butterscotch custard and burnt caramel ice cream. **right:** Maneet Chauhan, who opened Chauhan Ale & Masala House in 2014. **bottom right:** Music City Food + Wine Festival, 2017



designed it to have a soft, feminine energy. Wood floors and lavender pottery give the dining room a homey atmosphere. And in the women's restroom, Japanese pearl diver wallpaper emphasizes the strength in femininity. "There's a whole sector of the market out there that is female-driven and craving something a little lighter," Sullivan says.

The most popular entree at Henrietta Red is the steak—the pistachio-crusted cauliflower steak, that is, which Sullivan crafted in honor of her mother, who is a vegan. The clean design mirrors the culinary direction,

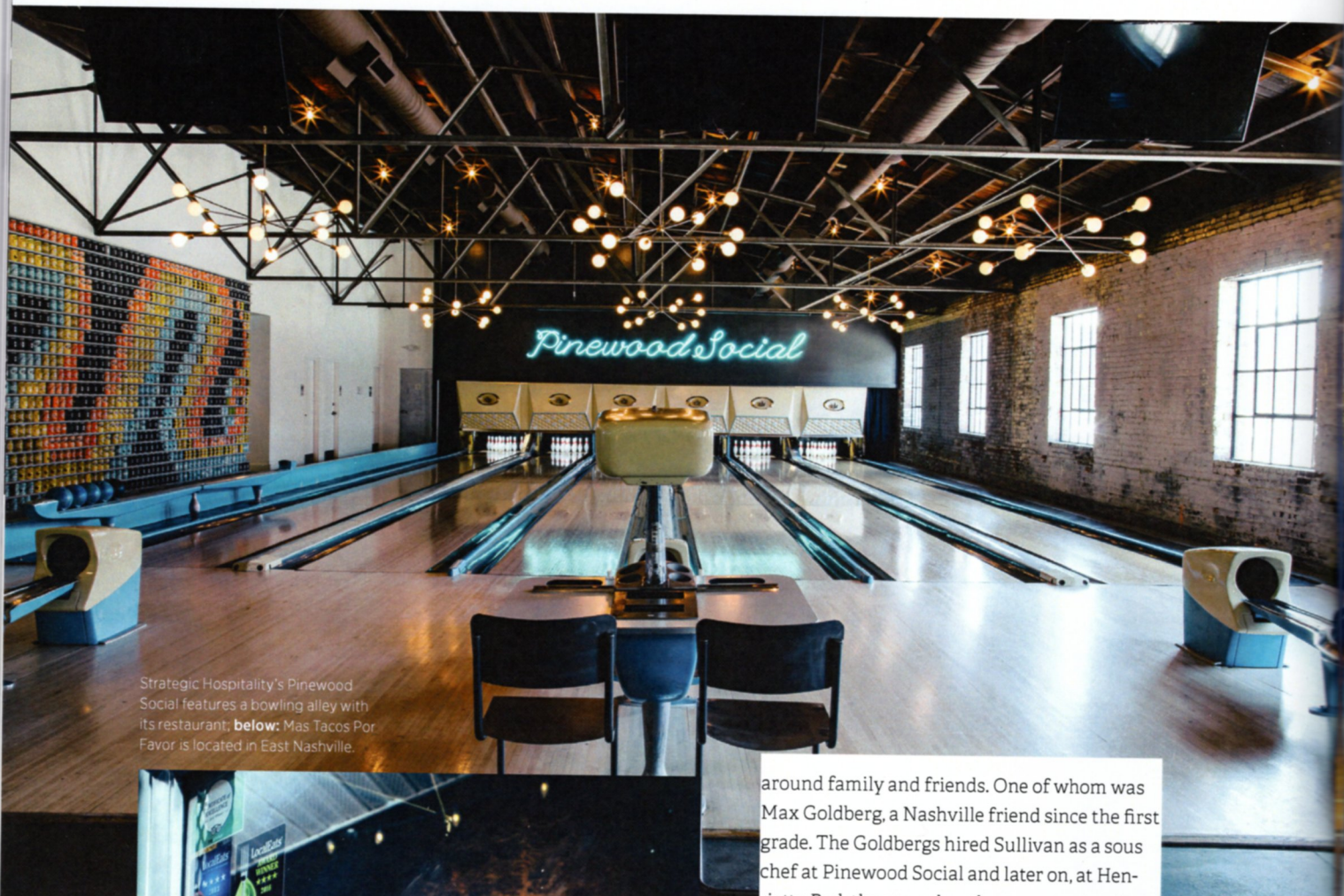
which is influenced by seasonality more than any single cuisine.

Sullivan's menu also draws from her experiences in fine dining. She worked as a personal chef in the Hamptons and in celebrated institutions such as Thomas Keller's Per Se in New York City and Blue Hill at Stone Barns, a high-end farm-to-table restaurant in New York. For someone making it in New York's fiercely competitive food world, moving south was an unorthodox choice. But Sullivan wanted to open her own restaurant and, like Teresa Mason, thought she would have more resources—and more fun—

ing lanes and two outdoor "dipping pools." And then there are gentler, upscale offerings like Le Sel, a playful take on a French brasserie, and the intimate foodie mecca The Catbird Seat.

"Every decision we make depends on pretty specific circumstances," says Max Goldberg. For example: the decision to work with Julia Sullivan, the award-winning chef of Henrietta Red, an eclectic Germantown barroom and restaurant that the Goldbergs opened in February 2017. Henrietta Red is in several ways the antithesis of classic Southern comfort. The space is bright, open and tidy, and Sullivan and her business partner Allie Poindexter





Strategic Hospitality's Pinewood Social features a bowling alley with its restaurant. **below:** Mas Tacos Por Favor is located in East Nashville.



around family and friends. One of whom was Max Goldberg, a Nashville friend since the first grade. The Goldbergs hired Sullivan as a sous chef at Pinewood Social and later on, at Henrietta Red, they gave her the opportunity she and her business partner sought: significant equity and full creative control over everything from the menu to the floor plan.

Avant-garde chefs like Sullivan are cultivating an authenticity in Nashville cuisine by offering experiences that stem from their own lives—and that authenticity dovetails with a musical culture rooted in personal storytelling. Food Network celebrity chef Maneet Chauhan opened Chauhan Ale & Masala House with a menu that pays tribute to Nashville's traditional "meat and three" with ingredients inspired by her native home in India's Punjab province. Sara Nelson, a punk rock bassist who co-owns the bar Duke's in East Nashville, is part of the team opening Nashville's new Korean bar and restaurant, Babo. And Sean Brock, the James Beard Award-winning chef and founder of nouveau Southern Husk restaurants, announced he is leaving the Charleston, S.C.-based Neighborhood Dining Group and, after seven years of being away, is returning to Nashville where he formerly worked at the

“Nashville is a pretty casual place. The people here are **MORE INTERESTED IN the QUALITY** than the **PACKAGING.**”

Barista Parlor opened its fifth location in mid-2018. **Right:** Strategic Hospitality owners Max and Benjamin Goldberg



created the logos and art for Barista Parlor. McCloud did the same for Mas Tacos owner Mason, whom he met while working with her at the Hard Rock Cafe. “I wanted to help friends who had passions to succeed in whatever they were doing,” says McCloud. “I wanted to contribute a layer of art and design just to make Nashville a richer, more open, more accepting and wondrous place to live.”

This September, McCloud and Mumma will unveil their latest art and design collaboration, Chopper. Located on the other side of Barista Parlor’s building in East Nashville, Mumma describes it as a “fantasy, art-forward space” that will blend traditional tiki drinks with the imaginative backstory of an ancient civilization ruled by robots. “The idea was for it to be fun and affordable,” Mumma says. “I want it to be something that kind of takes me away from whatever I was thinking about all day.”

While Modern Zero broke up, Mumma’s Barista Parlor has thrived, and in mid-2018, he opened his fifth location in Nashville. And musicians—people like Robert Plant, Billy Gibbons, Dan Auerbach and Jack White—are regular clients, all part of the ongoing love affair between Nashville’s food and music scenes.

Capitol Grille. In true Music City style, he’s not only committed to developing his culinary projects, but his classic guitar collection too.

There are other ways in which Nashville helps support its restaurateurs. In New York or San Francisco, a negative review from a local critic could shutter a fledgling restaurant—if you can even find space to open it, or afford to pay employees a wage they can live on. Nashville’s relatively low cost of living and abundant real estate make it easier to open a restaurant, and the city’s collaborative community gives restaurants a little more time to develop before the final verdict is in.

“Where else can I have a 3,500-square-foot garage with four huge roll-up doors and just sell coffee and biscuits and be able to pay the rent?” says Andy Mumma, who opened

his first coffee shop in such a place six years ago. Mumma’s Barista Parlor was a faint idea he had while working as a barista in Nashville, trying to get his band, Modern Zero, off the ground.

Five months into construction, Mumma was scraping his bank account and undergoing a painful divorce. A month later, he lost his mother to cancer. “I just didn’t know if I could finish,” he recalls. But he was helped by support from suppliers, contractors, friends and fellow merchants throughout East Nashville. “I’m forever in debt to those people,” Mumma says. “They helped me out when I needed it. It’s a testament to Nashville and to how great people are here.”

Many of them were musicians from his former band days and people he met from those circles. One was Isle of Printing designer Bryce McCloud, who