



From forager
to community
activist, teacher to
restaurant owner,
Clark Barlowe
just might be
Charlotte's most
revolutionary chef

DIARY OF A CHEF

BY ALISON MILLER
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At seven forty five on a Monday morning in early December, Clark Barlowe stands in front of nineteen high school sophomores and juniors in an industrial kitchen, stirring rabbit stock into a pot of tomato soup.

"Is that from real rabbits?" asks a girl in black leggings and pink hoodie.

"Real. Rabbits." Clark answers with a wry smile.

Today, while his restaurant, Heirloom, is closed, Clark is teaching culinary arts to students at Independence High School in Charlotte, North Carolina. The lesson, how to make soup from preserved tomatoes, is peppered with stories from his robust career, which includes stints at world-famous restaurants such as The French Laundry and El Bulli.

"I figured out the eight best restaurants in the country and wrote letters to all their chefs," he explains. "Thomas Keller [chef of The French Laundry] was the only one who wrote back."

At twenty-eight years old, Clark has a small frame, kind eyes, and the inexhaustible drive of someone wholly dedicated to his craft. His cooking reaches new heights of experimentation while remaining rooted in tradition. One visit to Heirloom might afford you a taste of olive oil-poached grouper in white pine broth, another livermush topped by a quail egg, mizuna, and huckleberry gastrique.

Every ingredient, from the kumquats to the cardoons, comes from North Carolina. If it's not available here, it's not in the

kitchen or behind the bar, with exceptions so few you could count them on one hand.

But Clark's work regularly goes beyond the walls of Heirloom. When he noticed a pattern of Charlotte chefs complaining about the state's food code, he approached the County Health Department director with an idea: why not get chefs, health department leaders, and farmers around a table to talk about it? And so began the Mecklenburg County Food Health Coalition. He's a member of the Piedmont Culinary Guild, an open-source information share for Charlotte-area chefs, farmers, and other purveyors and supporters of local food. After being on the board of the city's Green Teacher Network, an organization that helps teachers integrate school gardens into their curriculums, he's now on the committee of Growing Entrepreneurs, which puts middle and high school students at the helm of schoolyard gardens that sell vegetables and herbs to local restaurants. He works with Charlotte's Fresh Look at School Food initiative to rethink foods served in public schools. He teaches Regional American Cooking at the Art Institute of Charlotte. He monitors rooftop beehives and forages for wild ingredients. He shops Charlotte's farmers markets every Saturday morning. And a few times a year he goes home to Lenoir, North Carolina, where his parents and grandparents still live, up the road from the family farm that has fed seven generations of Barlowes.

CHEF CLARK BARLOWE
GARNISHES HIS BAY SCALLOP
DISH WITH LOCALLY FORAGED
MOUSE-EAR CHICKWEED
AT HIS CHARLOTTE
RESTAURANT HEIRLOOM



"That's a pin oak." His eyes light up, reaching out to touch the tree. "It'd be really interesting to see if pin oak flavor differs from white oak or red oak."

No day in Clark Barlowe's life is typical, but this one is at least exemplary of his approach. A fruit or vegetable or free-growing edible plant is a starting point, a dollop of paint on the palate. It's impossible to predict where an apple, a pomegranate, or a potato might land on Heirloom's undulating continuum of flavor and technique.

Loads of canned vegetables, vinegars, powders, and jams line various corners of the kitchen. Deep in the back, a plastic bin of sweet potatoes is decomposing into itself.

"The idea is that it will turn into soil and new sweet potatoes will grow from sweet potato matter," explains Clark. "We think it's going to produce a super-sweet sweet potato—if it works out," he says, laughing.

In another bin, parsnips are buried in a pile of sand from North Carolina's Outer Banks—a bygone preservation tactic Clark is testing. On a wire shelf, a glass fermenter of fish sauce sits on a table above a row of mother vinegars.

Just past the restaurant's front door in a sun-soaked vestibule, Meyer lemons, chamomile, eucalyptus, curry, and agave sprig from flower pots on the floor. Outside, six hyper-efficient Australian-style raised beds house strawberries, asparagus, lemon balm, mint, vanilla, woodruff, red vein sorrel, thyme, and sage.

"Anything we can't find growing in North Carolina we try to grow ourselves," Clark explains.

The dining room is festooned with ingredients too. Behind the host's desk, a bundle of organic tobacco hangs on the wall, drying next to a bunch of sumac. Nearby on a window sill, sit two jars of saltwater, each with a string dangling from a stick laid across the top. "This is our really in-depth salt project," Clark says. It's inspired by the work of Jeremy Umansky, the self-proclaimed ladder master of Cleveland, Ohio's forage-focused Trentino. "You take salt that you've used in something else—in this case we cured egg yolks with it—remove that product from it, and add the salt to water. Then, it's the same idea as rock candy. The water evaporates and the salt is slowly left behind on the string, taking on the flavor of that ingredient."

The next afternoon Clark, along with his girlfriend Gracelyn Cruden, and Claire Nagy-Kato, an Heirloom back server with a master's degree in sustainability, are foraging at Coulwood Park, a stretch of green space across the street from Heirloom that is sandwiched between a busy road and a housing development. Edible wild plants are integral to Heirloom's pantry, and Clark knows his way around the forest and its fruits.

"My grandfather taught me most of this," he says, his boots crunching fallen leaves. "When I was little, we'd go fishing. And when the fish weren't biting, we'd go walking in the woods instead. He always knew where to find ginseng. Along the way, he'd point out everything else."

Today, Clark is hunting reindeer moss, an important food for caribou and also, it turns out, for guests of Heirloom. Last year he and his staff candied the stuff—a tedious process involving rinsing, soaking, drying, and dipping—and served it alongside a fennel sponge cake with roasted strawberries, edible flowers, and strawberry purée. After nabbing several

clumps, he's distracted by another wild ingredient: sweetgum balls. "It'd be interesting to see what we could do with those," he says, pondering the thorny sphere in his hand. Then he spots a magnolia tree. "When you dry the leaves, they taste just like bay leaves."

Soon he comes upon a white oak with crisp, autumn leaves still on its branches. He grabs several handfuls, stuffing them into an oblong basket. A couple steps later he scoops again. "That's a pin oak." His eyes light up, reaching out to touch the tree. "It'd be really interesting to see if pin oak flavor differs from white oak or red oak."

Twelve hours later at Heirloom, foraged white oak leaves are steeping in a stock pot.

"The oak stock is insane. It tastes just like sweet tea," Clark beams. "I'm still playing around with the idea of doing three different types of oak, side by side. Maybe putting three jellies on bread with a cheese course. Since yesterday, my mind's been turning about how interesting it would be to have three different kinds of oak leaves in the same dish, how their flavors might differ."



OPPOSITE: BARLOWE HARVESTS HONEYSUCKLE DURING A FORAGING CLASS IN NORTHWEST CHARLOTTE. CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: COFFEE SUGAR (USING BEANS FROM LOCAL ROASTER, PURE INTENTIONS) IS PART OF HEIRLOOM'S PASTRY CHEF'S INFUSION PROJECT; BARLOWE HOLDS A MUSHROOM FROM THE BOLETE FAMILY—SPECIFICALLY, *ISALLUS PICTUS* (OR PAINTED BOLETE); BARLOWE INSTRUCTS STUDENT JENNIFER AGUILAR ON HOW TO PROPERLY DICE AN ONION; PORTIONING FORAGED PORCHES AT HEIRLOOM; APPLE VINEGARS ARE PART OF A LINE OF HEIRLOOM'S INFUSION AND MACERATION VINEGARS



“You just never know where inspiration will come from. That’s why I do so many things.”

Clark is a committed experimentalist who revels in building treasure out of what’s usually deemed trash. Strawberry tops become pesto. Seeds from undesirably large okra are reborn as faux Israeli couscous. Watermelon rinds evolve into jam. Tonight, he’ll turn a day-old loaf of homemade sourdough bread into a brown butter emulsion meant to mimic the flavor of succisson sec, and serve it on a salad of lettuce, cucumber, radishes, and nasturtium.

This holistic approach of running a restaurant doesn’t stop after dinner service. Heirloom sits in a decidedly un-hip corner of northwest Charlotte in a decidedly un-hip corner of northwest Charlotte deemed a food desert by the USDA. So Clark opens his door to area residents, selling them grains, produce, and even whole animals at cost price.

His support of the community goes beyond Charlotte’s city limits. On Thursday, Clark makes the nearly three-hour drive to Raleigh to meet with Nathon Hahn, founder of the Jamie Kirk Hahn Foundation, to brainstorm ways to bring higher-quality food to the city’s homeless population by utilizing farmer surplus. On Sunday, he’ll meet with Asheville chefs Elliott Moss and Justin Burdett to plan a wild-harvested dinner at the Biltmore Estate. And next week, he’ll brew a citrus beer with Jeff Alexander of Charlotte’s Free Range Brewing.

“I’m always trying to innovate,” he says. “And you just never know where inspiration will come from. That’s why I do so many things. I might be inspired by sitting down with a group of high school kids. Or by what I’m teaching my culinary students. Or by meeting another chef at a charity event. There’s just no other way to get all that perspective without doing all these things.”

On Wednesday and Thursday, before his eight-hour shifts at Heirloom, Clark grades a class of twelve students—some just out of high school, some servicemen and women recently back from Iraq or Afghanistan—on knife skills and chicken fabrication at Charlotte’s Art Institute. He started teaching two months ago after

the school’s culinary department director, Maria Marquez, approached him. And because he believes in community, in education, and in opening doors, he said yes. Which he’s been known to do, a lot.

On Friday, after butchering a fifty-pound swordfish caught off the North Carolina coast, he sits at a table in Heirloom’s dining room with two Art Institute students, Ashley Nightengale and Naomi Knox. He’s agreed to advise them as they prepare for a cooking competition in Perugia, Italy, sponsored by the Urbani Taruffi

Manager Shakeela Mays, Pastry Chef Ann-Marie Stefany, and Restaurant Manager Sarah Turner-Wells to talk about the less imaginative side of running a restaurant. Increasing awareness of brunch. Restaurant week. Staff vacations. Start times. Supply orders.

After twenty minutes, they break. With a mug of Sun Drop soda in hand, Clark heads to the kitchen. Every morning by 11:30 a.m., he tapes the evening’s twelve-course tasting menu on the wall. Guests can opt to share the entire dozen; choose nine, seven, five, or three courses; or order à la carte.

“My goal is to have the most approachable twelve-course menu there is,” Clark says. He and his staff reshape the menu for dietary restrictions. They’ve also been known to turn on a dime in the middle of service if they get negative feedback.

“You hear about chefs taking weeks to perfect something and then keeping it on the menu as a signature. I just can’t do that. I get so bored after two or three days.”

Which explains why the oak leaves entered the lineup on Thursday as a vinegar jelly tossed with roasted Brussels sprouts, then reappear today as an acidic companion to beef carpaccio.

“We’re not cooking for ourselves, we’re cooking for our guests,” he says. “And my goal from the beginning has been for Heirloom to be a



BARLOWE PLATES
A POPPIN FARM
RED FIFE WINTER
WHEAT DISH WITH
INGREDIENTS FROM
A FORAGING GLASS

company. The conversation volleys from truffling parma cozza to the symbiotic relationship between truffles and hazelnuts.

Not two minutes later, he sits down with Heirloom’s Chef de Cuisine Nathan Haas, Bar

figure of the community—a place to gather, to shop for ingredients—rather than just a restaurant. It’s difficult—and expensive. You don’t do it because you want to make a profit. You do it because you care, because it drives you.”



Hairy Bitterbress
Mouss-Ear Chickweed
Gremolata
Wild Onion
Apples from local Moss Orchards
Calico Bay Scallops from Wanchese, North Carolina

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