

MOVING IT FORWARD

A tornado, a fire and some 162 years of wear and tear have pushed one of Little Rock's most historic homes to the brink. Here's how the Quapaw Quarter Association and the city are trying desperately to bring it back

BY MARIAM MAKATSARIA

PHOTOGRAPHY BY SARA REEVES

RHEA ROBERTS

walks up to a tired mansion on a quiet, crumbling stretch of East Eighth Street in downtown Little Rock, pulls a cordless drill from an orange neoprene case and—*bzzzzz*—buzzes screws from the whitewashed plywood sheets barricading the

front door. Her blond hair is pulled back in a messy, let's-get-down-to-business bun, and a pair of red-rimmed sunglasses sits on the top of her head. When asked if she needs any help, she declines the offer.

As the executive director of the Quapaw Quarter Association removes the makeshift barrier, we stand there waiting, exploring with our eyes, our expressions uncertain in the face of so much dereliction. We're a diverse group of people, each here for a different purpose—a painter searching for inspiration, a writer hoarding information for a novel and me. And there's a reason why we all think we're going to find whatever we're looking for here. Encased within the walls of this house is a century and a half of history. It was *Arkansas Gazette* founder William Woodruff's longtime home—a dramatically spacious private escape that has now become a rescue project not for the faint of heart. And in looking at the house—a wreck of its former self—it could easily be mistaken for an abandoned estate whose cry for help had once turned into a howl and has since dwindled to a soft whimper.

When the doors open, the aroma of old cigarettes, mold and something indiscernible wafts out of the house. By the light of flashlights, we examine the foyer. Inside, the Woodruff House's grandeur isn't immediately obvious. Instead, my gaze falls on the mounted wooden mailboxes, their doors unhinged or broken altogether, a bulky, unopened padded envelope resting atop the number "11." I look at the cracked, peeling paint, the coffee-colored stained ceiling whose corners seem to be held together by cobwebs, the gouged paneling, the thick layer of dust coating every possible inch of every possible surface. As we walk up the white-railed staircase, built in the 1920s (no one knows what the original staircase looked like, Roberts says), it wheezes and groans beneath the unfamiliar pressure. There are bathrooms and kitchens and more bathrooms and more kitchens on every floor, and it's hard to think that decades ago, when the house was split into apartment units, they were habitable.

Then there are other disheartening sights, ones not caused by mere inattention, but a lack of sympathy for this downtown jewel—an empty bag of Brim's Classic potato chips, soda cans and broken blind slats jutting at all different angles like the points of a weather vane. There are dusty bottles of J.W. Dant's Olde Bourbon and Italian Swiss Colony's California muscatel with grimy labels dotting the floors. And even if I look at it with as cool an eye as I'm able, I can't help but feel slightly deflated by these facts of neglect.

But in the midst of all the rubble, garbage and bits of glass strewn on the floor, there are glimmers of promise. There is a strip of accent wallpaper in the second-floor bathroom, a series



of teddy bear illustrations right above two beach-ball-sized gashes in the wall, where the guts of the house remain exposed. There is the white-brick fireplace, embellished with intricate golden appliques. And when we move to the third floor, where it's bright and throat-tighteningly humid, there is the stiff, brittle wallpaper in what I assume was once a bedroom, flaking to reveal layers of patterns that graced the walls throughout the years—162, to be precise.

It was in 1819 that Woodruff, a New York native, published the first issue of the *Arkansas Gazette*. Thirty years later, he ordered the construction of a Greek Revival residence on a 25-acre plot of land that he'd bought for himself and his family of 12. And when they moved into the house in 1853, the almost-7,000-square-foot manor had all the makings of an opulent mansion—13 bedrooms, a 40-foot hallway and a library (or the “father’s room,” as it was referred to back then). By the large fireplaces that were built in every room, Woodruff and his family gathered every winter, burning as many as 100 cords of wood. But you didn't have to go inside to understand its remarkable

IN 2005, A FIRE STRUCK THE ROOM JUST ADJACENT TO WHAT BRIAN MINYARD CALLS “THE PURPLE KITCHEN ROOM.” A RESULTING HOLE IN THE FLOOR WILL ENABLE MINYARD, A TERMITE CONTROL EXPERT AND A CONTRACTOR TO REMOVE THE PLYWOOD AND CRAWL UNDERNEATH THE HOUSE TO INSPECT ITS BEAM, HE SAYS. OTHERWISE, THE TEAM WOULD HAVE TO DRILL A HOLE IN THE FRONT PORCH.

lavishness. It opened to a circular carriage driveway, nestled in what was, back then, a piece of the countryside, dotted with an orchard, a poultry yard and beehives. On its east side, the Woodruffs tended to their vegetable and fruit garden; on its north side, the horses rolled in the stables and the pigs fed in their pens. At the time, the house faced south, and its circular upper-floor balcony overlooked Ninth Street (it would be later flipped to face north). In the heat of the Civil War, when Woodruff was banished for his support of the Confederacy, the Union Army commandeered the house to serve as a makeshift hospital, patching up combat wounds and recovering after sieging the surrounding land. And although Woodruff reclaimed it in 1865, the manor was sold out of the family six years after his death in 1885. Since then, it has been restructured to suit many purposes—a cottage home for out-of-town working women in the 1920s, a Colonial Club for Business Girls in the 1930s. For the following decades, it functioned as apartment homes. But in 1999, a tornado tore through the Little Rock area, and the stoic structure felt the toll deeply. It ripped the roof. It blew out 60 of the home's 75 windows. Its then-owners, Vickie and John Karolson—a North Little Rock couple who'd bought the house in 1986, renovating and restructuring it into 14 apartment units and then renting it out to low-income tenants—couldn't shake the disbelief. They decided to sell to Eric McDuffie, a Bank of the Ozarks vice president, and Mike Helms, an attorney, who spruced up the apartments, escalated the monthly rent and kept their fingers crossed that, upon the construction of the Clinton Presidential Center, the surrounding neighborhood—which McDuffie described as a “dump” in a 2000 article by the *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*—would somewhat improve.

But even though much of the land east of Interstate 30 was bought up after the presidential library's location was announced, says Brian Minyard, a planner with the city's Planning and Development Department, the land was never developed. And this surprises him. “I do think there was a possibility that [the house] could have been

demolished during that time,” he says in his cramped office on West Markham Street. “There are also people who demolish buildings just for the bricks, and this house is three bricks thick.”

McDuffie and Helms' efforts were only a temporary reprieve. (They ultimately sold the house to an LLC by the name of Allyn Ward Investments in 2003.) In 2005, the house suffered another blow from which it couldn't recover. A fire damaged a first-floor room, leaving a hole in the floor. And ever since, the house has remained vacant, lingering in real estate limbo, waiting for a new owner.

In 2007, the house made the list of Arkansas' most endangered places, raising alarm among preservationists and community members alike. That year, according to an article published by the *Democrat-Gazette*, it was on the market for \$428,000. In an auction held in November of that year, two dozen potential bidders crowded the foyer of Woodruff's home. Only one made a meager bid of \$75,000, which was not accepted. The Quapaw Quarter Association (QQA) kept an eye on the property, wanting to restore it but unable to afford it.

Seven years later, the city and the Arkansas Historic Preservation Program (AHPP) pitched in with \$99,500. After years of waiting, the association was finally able to get its hands on the property from Allyn Ward Investments for a significantly reduced price of \$107,000 in December 2014. The association also snagged a Certified Local Government grant of \$49,500 to restore the house. But to use such a grant, which is drawn through the federal Historic Preservation Fund and offered to city and county governments enrolled in the AHPP's preservation program, the home had to be a government entity, an obstacle the association managed to get around by donating an easement to the city (the facade) and an easement to the AHPP (the interior).

“I guess the big thing is that, since I've been at this job with the QQA, it's the only brick-and-mortar project that we've been able to [work on and restore],” Roberts says. Her soft voice echoes in the reception room of the historic Curran Hall (aka the Little Rock Visitor Information Center in which the QQA is headquartered), where she sits at an old dining room table on a wobbly wooden chair with a sunken cushion. There are Woodruff's belongings in vitrines around the hall and, most notably, his elaborately carved grand piano quietly rests in a corner. “It's exciting for me, to really get in there and do things. I've become quite familiar with the house, and I can see the potential, and I can see what it can be.”

Although things have been moving along slower than she likes, both the association and the city know what needs to be done: Fix the brick where it's falling out, the roof where it's leaking, the wood where it's rotting. In other words, the goal is to get the first floor to a decent, perhaps not excellent, condition so it can be listed in January for a price Roberts says they haven't determined yet. (Roberts says she wishes the same could be done with the second and third floors, but funding would be an issue). And once it's stabilized, it'll be stripped. Stripped of the walls that once separated apartment units. Stripped of the modern intrusions that disturb its historic appeal. Stripped of the unnecessary bathroom plumbing, the carpets, the chipped tiles, the nonhistoric doors and door frames.

When future buyers walk in, they should be able to envision themselves living there—or perhaps envision an office, or tenants cooking in their apartments, or a decluttered, airy space that could potentially be anything. (The historic tax credits they'd get for making it an income-producing property won't hurt, either.)

The house has already garnered the interest of many, Roberts says. If not to buy it, then at least to play a part in its rebirth. Many folks have reached out through social media, unwilling to let an important piece of Little Rock's history go. In August 2015, for example, community members and preservation devotees came together to help clean up the lot surrounding the house. But even after the effort, in which volunteers in closed-toe shoes and raggy clothes helped remove trash off the

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COZY UP

There are plenty of outdoor adventures to be had this winter at **ARKANSAS' STATE PARKS** (arkansasstateparks.com) such as hiking Lake Catherine's Horseshoe Mountain Trail for a view of downtown Hot Springs that can only be enjoyed after the trees drop their leaves. But our favorite winter activity at the parks is quite a bit toastier: Nothing beats snuggling up in a cabin, sipping a cup of hot chocolate and stoking the fire—an activity that can only be had at one of these 10 state parks.

CENTRAL

LAKE CATHERINE

If a crackling fire's not enough to keep you warm, all of the cabins at this lakeside park come equipped with spa tubs to soak the day away. (1200 Catherine Park Road, Hot Springs; (501) 844-4176)

LAKE OUACHITA

Book cabins 1 through 5 for that classic Civilian Con-



servation Corps charm complete with wood-burning fireplaces and nearby docks. (5451 Mountain Pine Road, Mountain Pine; (501) 767-9366)

PETIT JEAN

Many of this mountaintop park's cabins include wood-burning fireplaces, but trust us: Book the Honeymoon Creek Cabin. It's set apart from the other cabins and includes a hot tub. (1285 Petit Jean Mountain Road, Morrilton; (501) 727-5441)

NORTHWEST

DEVIL'S DEN

Once the leaves fall, three-bedroom cabin 8 offers one of the best views of the park's 17 cabins. Oh, and did we mention it includes a spa tub? (Notice a trend here?) (11333 Arkansas 74 W., West Fork; (479) 761-3325)

LAKE FORT SMITH

Built in 2013, these 10 modern cabins are some of the newest in the park system and include reclaimed-stone fireplaces and covered decks. (Shepherd Spring Road, Mountainburg; (479) 369-2469)

MOUNT MAGAZINE

Take in the view of the Petit Jean River Valley and Blue Mountain Lake from your hot tub at one of these 13 ridge-top cabins. (Lodge Drive, Paris; (479) 963-8502)

MOUNT NEBO

With mountain views, fireplaces and spa tubs, the rustic cabins at Mount Nebo are perfect for a cozy winter weekend. (16728 Arkansas 155 W., Dardanelle; (479) 229-3655)

NORTHEAST

CROWLEY'S RIDGE

Perfect for large families, the cabins at this small state park near Paragould sleep four to six campers. (For really big families, there's even a group-lodging area that can fit 60. (2092 Arkansas 168 N., Paragould; (870) 573-6751)

VILLAGE CREEK

While the weather likely won't cooperate for a full 18 holes, you can still enjoy the view from cabin 4, which overlooks the park's 27-hole golf course. (201 County Road 754, Wynne; (870) 238-9406)

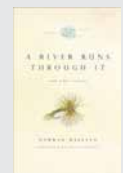
SOUTHEAST

LAKE CHICOT

The cold is a natural insect repellent, which means winter may be the best time to book one of the 15 cabins at this lakefront state park. (2542 Arkansas 257, Lake Village; (870) 265-5480) **AL**

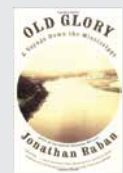


The Snow Leopard
by Peter Matthiessen
While this 1979 winner of the National Book Award is ostensibly about writer Peter Matthiessen and naturalist George Schaller's Himalayan search for the mysterious snow leopard, the book is also a meditation of life, death and our place in the world.



A River Runs Through it and Other Stories
by Norman Maclean

It's likely that you've seen the movie—it helped launch Brad Pitt's career, after all—but a copy of Norman Maclean's seminal work, poetic and profound, should be on everyone's bookshelf. Bonus: The book contains two other novellas about coming of age in Montana that are no less beautiful.



Old Glory
by Jonathan Raban

Arkansans will recognize the main character in this travelogue—the winding, muddy Mississippi River. Following it from Minneapolis to Morgan City, Louisiana, British writer Jonathan Raban not only explores the river itself but also the character of the people, the land and the way of life he finds along its banks.



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V-neck T-shirt and smokes a cigarette, his eyes lifted to the second story of the house where he's pulling the roof apart, gently pressing, nuzzling the six-pronged iron scoop into crevices and gently pushing the pieces of timber away as if they were pieces of straw or toothpicks. Walls swing out as if they were doors on hinges. For a time, the scoop looks as though it's trailing braided lines from a spider web, wispy things that hang from the prongs; it takes a moment to realize they're the wiring of the house. In every moment as the house comes down, something is revealed and then pulled apart, the layout combusted and allowed to crumble, made to crumble—the sick and the cathartic sound of destruction.

Around 9:30 a.m., a code enforcer from the city stops by, wearing khakis and a quasi-iridescent blue polo. He wears a badge and has two cameras, one for film, one for stills. He spends some time chatting with a guy from the demolition company who's spraying the house down with water to keep the dust from rising. After a few minutes, he walks to the front and stands with Smith, saying that he's going to send Tyler a bill for the demolition and the dump fee. They get to talking, and Smith says he's been trying to buy the land for the past few years—he'll later explain that he'd like to buy up the lot to the west and perhaps put in a pair of '40s or '50s-era style town homes—and then asks the guy from the city about how he'll be able to go about doing that once the house comes down.

At a certain point, what's dragged from the house ceases to be distinguishable from the rest. Everything is shades of brown: white brown, gray brown, red brown. The backhoe moves up and down the ramp that the house has become. And then the front wall comes down, and then all that's left is a portion of a hallway with a door that reads "private" and the banister of a staircase that now leads nowhere. And then the arm of the scoop comes through and pushes it over. And then the last bit of the façade is all that's left, and then he digs into the floor with the sound of a *crunch, crunch, crunch, crunch, crunch*. But it's more than a crunch. It's something that even at a distance you can feel in your chest—the move and violence of a bowling ball going step by step down a stairway. But not even that.

"Oh, he's going to town now," says the guy from the city.

It takes somewhere between 25 and 30 loads—7 to 8 tons each—to truck what's left to the dump. All told, it costs the city \$9,926 to do the demolition. A lien is filed Sept. 17, and Tyler is told that she will have to repay the city before it's released.

IN MID-DECEMBER, the upset soil at 1325 W. 12th St. is still there. And in a way, to look at the scene as well preserved as it is nearly six months after the house came down, the comparison that comes to mind is the surface of the moon—footprints made and left undisturbed in the absence of some outside force to clear them away. And while the plot will likely change—perhaps Smith will build his town homes; perhaps grass and weeds will continue to grow and fill the divots left by the demolition—what was there is gone.

But there's history in empty lots, stories in the stasis of memory near gone and fading. In some instances, there are plaques where the structures stood, and in others just memories parroted and passed down through the oral tradition of neighborhoods and hearsay—stories of those people who lived there and how they lived and how the places they called home eventually came down. But in terms of what of history is available there on the surface: When the structures are gone and the memories drained and faded, it's as if whatever had been there had never been at all. **AL**



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a cardboard box—remain scattered on grass that looks tired and withered with no prospect of a triumphant resurrection.

ON A SUNNY October afternoon, a tree is about to fall—and Minyard, Roberts and Paul Porter are there to hear it. Most of its limbs have been chopped off already, the open wounds resembling giant mushrooms. Sitting in the belly of the 70-something-foot tree, which is now beginning to look like a fondue fork, an employee of Giraffe Tree Service wraps a thick rope around a branch and, with a chainsaw, cuts it off. There's a moment of uncertainty when it finally lets go of the body it's been a part of for years, swings back and forth and grazes the roof of the house before it's lowered to the plush cushion of leaves ringing the trunk. And then, in the distance, as we hear the sound of a train chugging down the track, Porter, AHPP's easement coordinator, tells me about the diseased trees that have met an unfortunate fate today.

"When they started cutting into it, they discovered that the trunk was rotting all the way through," he says, suddenly speaking in a higher decibel as a Giraffe Tree Service employee begins to maneuver a growling mini skid loader, riding it as if it were an animal. "You kind of looked at the trees as—well, this one is an invitation to termites, and that one could potentially impact the house during a storm."

We're all squinting. Although the sun, no longer leaf-filtered, is a blinding disturbance, the fall weather carries a chilly note, and the occasional breeze sweeps the autumn leaves off the ground of the overgrown front yard and into a miniature twister of dust.

The house looks like a relic from the past—a display of grandeur and local history—wrapped in ropelike ivy that, over the years, has crept all the way to the top, and is surrounded by a metal fence. And as more century-old trees hit the ground, it looks more and more naked and vulnerable to a shift in the wind, a threat of decay, the passage of time. Although it has limped through times of uncertainty, there is one thing that's for sure—there are many hopeful faces staring up at its egg-nog-yellow facade, with its white columns and cactus-green shutters. And these are the folks who have not yet exhausted all hope in finding it a future that could be as grand as its past. **AL**

CENTRAL ARKANSAS' #1 MAGAZINE

GOOD TASTE



FIRST TASTE

SKYLARK CAFE

IN SMALL-TOWN LESLIE, THE, UM, SKY'S THE LIMIT

Arkansas Life

44,450

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34,949

AY

32,912

Little Rock Soirée

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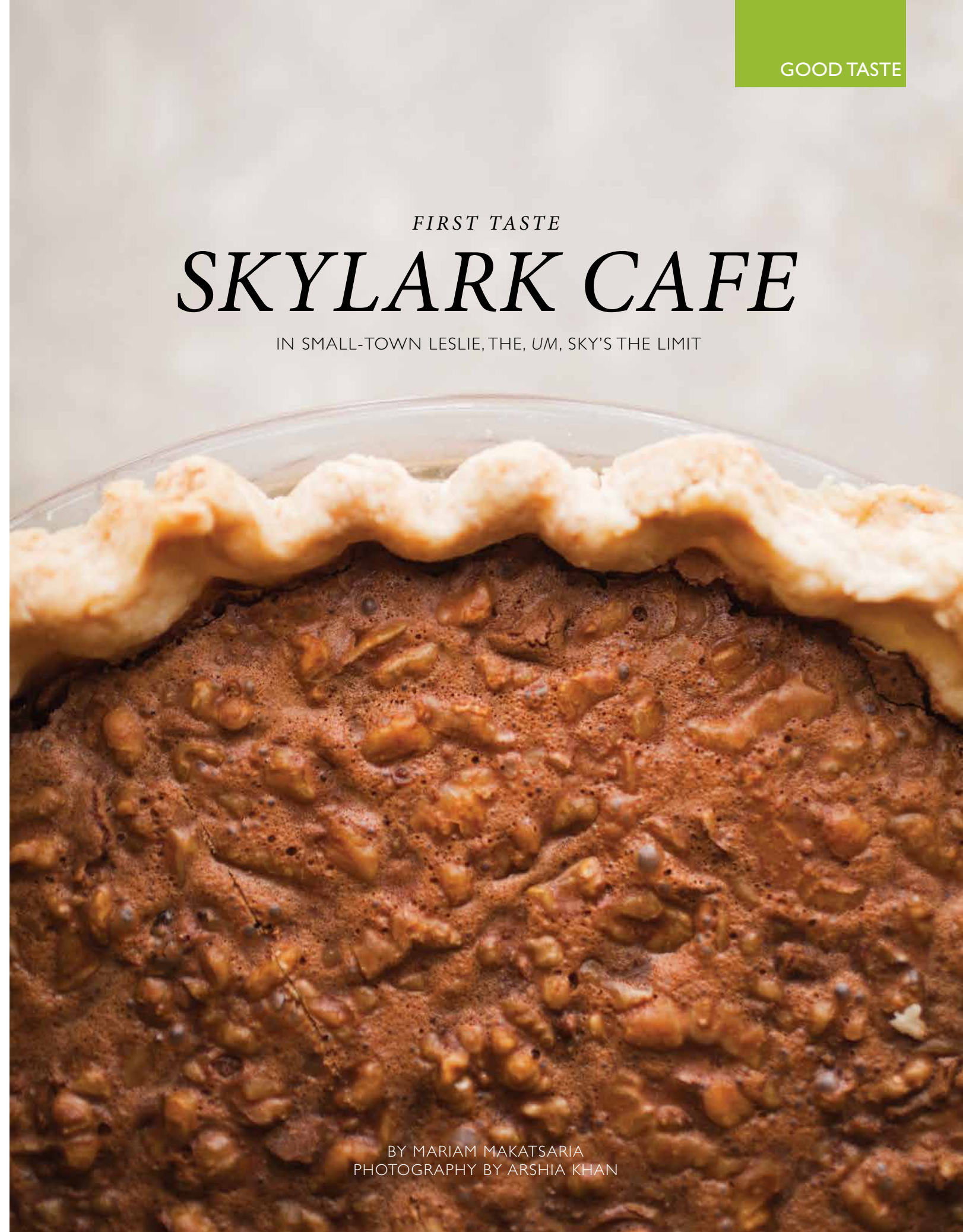
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ARKANSAS LIFE

BY MARIAM MAKATSARIA
PHOTOGRAPHY BY ARSHIA KHAN





The road to Leslie is strung along the kind of landscape that would be the perfect backdrop for a high-speed car chase—steep, hilly and beautiful, but unsettling. It’s starting to snow, and through the flakes, we can see the stretch of mountainous vistas broken by weathered houses and derelict barns.

Twenty minutes and a right turn later, a hand-painted sign enthusiastically welcomes us to Leslie. We’ve arrived in the town—it just takes us a minute to realize it. On this wintry Saturday afternoon, with abandoned-looking century-old storefronts and bare streets, the place looks forgotten. *Maybe it’s the weather*, I think to myself. But as I step into the mint-green Skylark Cafe, I feel at ease—that sense of relief you get when you slip into the warmth of your home from the outside cold. It’s that familiarity. It’s that comfort. And it’s that prospect of sitting down to a plate of something delicious.

“May all who enter leave as friends,” reads the sign above the door. Surely that’s possible, for there’s a lot here to stir a conversation. Pastoral paintings and still lifes of sunflowers and daffodils hang everywhere on the green walls. Shelves are lined with antique plates, and knickknacks dot every nook and cranny of the restaurant. No two

tables are the same; no two patterned fabrics are similar. An exposed-brick fireplace radiates heat.

“Booth or a table?” the waitress asks us with an affable smile. We’re booth people. And we’re lucky because all but one of the padded, plastic-covered cocoons are available.

The menu is as much of a hodgepodge as its surroundings. There are tacos, but there’s also baked brie. There’s hummus, but there’s also pasta tossed in rich and creamy Alfredo. I can’t quite figure it out. That is, until I go up to the counter and meet the husband-and-wife duo behind this endeavor. Chef Denver Ellis is rinsing his hands by the sink in front of a large chalkboard menu, and as soon as he asks me how my food was, his wife, Joy, pops out from behind a beaded string curtain.

“When people ask me about our cuisine, I don’t know what to tell them,” she says, stretching her dark-gray cardigan and wrapping it around her pregnant belly, one side over the other. “It’s a little bit of everything. It’s food that we love.”

It all makes sense now. The tacos? Drawn from many evenings spent feasting (excessively, Joy adds) on them in Austin, Texas. The baked brie? Inspired by the French bakery where she worked in Austin. The barbecue pork in the quesadillas? A nod to Denver’s days operating a food truck

SKYLARK CAFE

401 High St.
Leslie | (870) 447-2354
[facebook.com/skylarkcafeleslie](https://www.facebook.com/skylarkcafeleslie)

BEST DISHES

Regular menu: brisket-and-brie sliders, green chile pork tacos, the Cuban, the Jumping Chuy. Friday dinner menu: shrimp skewers, garden pasta, seared pork chop

KID FRIENDLY?

Absolutely. We have yet to see a table without a child or two

PRICE RANGE

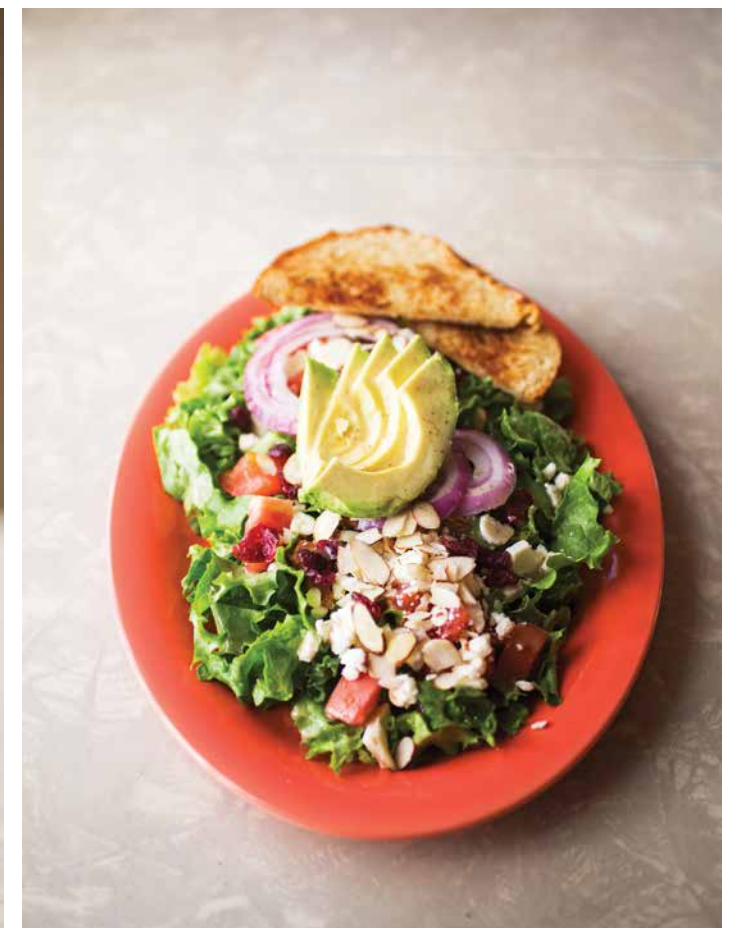
\$7-9 for lunch entrees; \$10-16 for Friday-night dinner entrees

RESERVATIONS

Accepted for parties of six or more. Otherwise, not necessary

HOURS

11 a.m. to 3 p.m. Monday through Thursday; 11 a.m. to 8 p.m. Friday through Saturday





in Oklahoma. The Cuban? Well, they're not sure where that came from—just something Denver has always loved.

"It's a little confusing because we're not, like, any style," Joy tells us after she's accompanied me back to our table. "On Facebook, people were asking me what style of food we are, and I was like, *We're not any of these.*"

"It's what *we* like to eat," Denver chimes in over his shoulder, clad in a black chef jacket, his hair tucked under a purple bandana. They do this a lot—complete each other's sentences as they enthuse about their food, their farm-to-table approach, their future plans, how they want to do *this* and then *that*, and perhaps something else if they have the funds, or if they win the next Powerball.

And as we sit in an adjacent dining area, with wooden booths and strings of lights running along the ceiling, Skylark seems set in its ways, as if it's been like this forever. Which, in fact, is far from the truth. This room at the rear of the building? They just opened it up for customers this past September, along with a second bathroom and some space for refrigeration. The warm air seeping through the vent? They just installed their central heating system a couple of weeks ago. (They'd previously relied on radiators.) The kitchen? All decked out with new equipment the couple recently funded through Kickstarter—seven years after Joy first opened the cafe as 19-year-old.

Originally from Leslie, Joy fondly recalls pursuing her business

aspirations as a teenager, when she first bought the house, spent seven months renovating it with her family and eventually launched the restaurant in 2009, a year after meeting Denver (who was then enrolled at Le Cordon Bleu culinary school) in Austin. The couple kept in touch, and in 2014, they tied the knot and decided to make the move to Austin, "where it all started." She sold her restaurant to her sister, whose paintings take up the majority of wall space.

"Everybody was like, *Why would you marry a chef and then sell your restaurant?*" she laughs.

Turns out Austin wasn't quite for them, she says. Joy's sister was overwhelmed by running a business. Not to mention, Joy felt drawn to her hometown. "It seemed like Skylark might not make it without us, and that was hard to accept," Denver says. "People love it. It's a part of this town." And so the two moved back to Leslie and put roots down. (Like, literally—their garden out back spans three and a half city blocks.) Although Joy always kept a small garden at Skylark, it was merely as a hobby, and it was only in Austin—more specifically, while working at the now-shuttered Bess Bistro—that she felt inspired to duplicate the restaurant's 1-acre garden back home. If a metropolitan city like Austin could do it, so could she.

For the past couple of springs, Joy has planted a variety of vegetables, and those that she doesn't plant she buys from the local farmers' market or her friends' local farms. But now that the chilly bite of

winter has marked the end of fresh fruits and vegetables, Joy can only harvest kale and cabbage. "My broccoli isn't doing so well," she says.

But really, everything tastes so fresh that you'd never suspect as much. My Jumping Chuy sandwich arrives on a Fiestaware plate with chunks of grilled chicken crowned by rings of red onion, slices of tomato and lettuce jutting out like a tutu, and a green chile sauce filling the gaps. I push down its height, like I would an overstuffed suitcase before zipping it up. Struggle as it is, it's worth it.

Then there's the Cuban. A crowd favorite, the waitress tells us with a nudge. Think pulled pork and thin-cut slices of grilled ham sandwiched between pressed French bread. (Better yet, imagine *smoked* pork and thin-cut slices of grilled ham sandwiched between pressed French bread.) One bite into it, and you know why it's special—thin strands of gooey cheese stretch out into a lips-to-crust rope bridge, the mustard adds a much-needed zing, and Skylark's homemade pickles elevate it with a sweet tang.

These are some of the couple's favorites off their everyday lunch menu, which carries over to dinner on Saturdays. Fridays, however, boast a different menu—one that the couple implemented when they moved back. The focus of this special menu is Denver's handmade pasta, which requires a lot of prep on Denver's part, as he whips up and cuts the silky-smooth fettuccine by hand. The fresh garden pasta, for example, features basil from their or their friends' gardens. Whole-leaf spinach is mixed in with mushrooms, tomatoes and your choice of

chicken or shrimp. A thick slice of crispy garlic bread rests on the side.

Friday nights are the busiest, they say. At dinnertime, Joy and Denver are usually hard at work in the kitchen. New customers pour in every 15 minutes or so—families, to be more precise. On Friday nights, you can hear their chatter, the clatter of silverware, the squeak of the wooden floorboards as waitresses rush in and out of the kitchen.

But this afternoon, it's quiet. And despite that fact (perhaps even because of it), it's easy to kick back and relax with a cup of tea and dessert. The waitress sweeps the strawberry pie from inside the glass case and walks it to our table, the tall heap of whipped cream doing a little hula dance atop the crust. Chopped strawberries bound by a syrupy nectar sit on a bed of graham-cracker crust so soft that it crumbles, seemingly, before the tines of our forks even hit it. It's far from cloyingly sweet and very close to perfection, and we're already silently judging ourselves for eating so much of it (and so quickly) when we had so little room.

We were right about the booths because, frankly, we need all the space to stretch our limbs in every which way. We lean our heads against the wall. Although the place is still empty and the snow is still falling, our stomachs are full to the brim. And it's clear why we're putting off going home. Forget the chilly, short walk to our car. Forget the long drive home. We still want to linger here in the comfort of this place—perhaps with another slice of pie. **AL**



PHOTOGRAPHY
BY ARSHIA KHAN

MADDIE'S PLACE CHEF
BRIAN DELONEY KNOWS
THERE'S ONLY ONE WAY TO
CELEBRATE THE WEATHER
TURNING WARM—AND
THAT'S BY BOILING UP A
POT OF MOUTHWATERING
MUDBUGS, *CHER*

BY
MARIAM MAKATSARIA

WORTHY CRAWLS



FROM LEFT Even though a crawfish boil is typically a stand-around affair, a festive table is set on the rooftop patio of Argenta Place in North Little Rock. Nearby, chef Brian Deloney preps his haul for the big moment.

HE STRIDES DOWN

the open terrace on Argenta Place's rooftop, through the chattering guests, all the way to the railing, and lights a cigarette. He's engaged in a conversation with his father, a clean white dish towel clutched between his pinkie and palm. Brian Deloney—amicable, casual, the kind of guy you'd expect to see behind a grill next door—is the man of the evening, the chef of this meal his friends and family have come to enjoy. But in looking at them as they stand elbow to elbow, in hearing the sounds of bottle caps and corks popping open, in listening to Brian's country music blaring through the speakers, it's clear this is more than just a bunch of people congregating around a well-planned, well-cooked and well-prepared meal. This is an *event*, a simple one at that, an entire-evening affair of food, booze, conversation—and very little else.

It's spring in the South, and for Brian,

the chef at Little Rock's Maddie's Place and a one-time resident of New Orleans, that means one thing: crawfish. Although his bona fides include stints at fine restaurants in NOLA and Las Vegas, and working with the likes of Emeril Lagasse for all of 10 years, Brian's no stranger to throwing a gratifying "crawfish party" (as he calls it). And when he's not having a crawfish boil, he's at one—even though you'll never see one taking place at his restaurant. Because to Brian, it's not a "restaurant, sit-down-type thing." It's not something he can ladle in a fancy bowl. And just like gumbo in New Orleans, there are no hard-and-fast rules as to what makes a good pot of crawfish. Everybody's a little bit different somehow. And you never know why, he says. It's just the way they were taught—recipes passed down, tweaked or, perhaps, changed altogether.

Brian makes his way back to the aluminum stock pot, which sits on a four-legged patio

CONTINUED ON PAGE 59



BOIL UP SOME MUDBUGS THE BRIAN DELONEY WAY P. 54

"IT'S ALL ABOUT FAMILY AND FRIENDS AND, OBVIOUSLY, GREAT FOOD," BRIAN SAYS. "IT DOESN'T GET ANY BETTER THAN THAT."



BLACK-EYED
PEA HUMMUS
P. 54



BRIAN KEEPS APPETIZERS LIGHT AND MELLOW—LIKE THE CRAB CAPRESE SALAD (P. 54) BELOW—AT HIS "CRAWFISH PARTIES," SO HIS GUESTS' PALATES AREN'T OVERWHELMED WHEN IT COMES TIME TO DIG INTO THE SPICY MUDBUGS. FOR DESSERT, HE RELIES ON SIMPLE, COOLING TREATS, LIKE A TRIED-AND-TRUE BANANA PUDDING (P. 55).



JUMBO LUMP
CRAB CAPRESE
SALAD
P. 54



"Sometimes too much to drink is barely enough."
Mark Twain

BLACK-EYED-PEA HUMMUS

By swapping out chickpeas in favor of good ol' black-eyed peas, Brian puts a Southern spin on this picnic-friendly favorite.

Serves 12

- 4 cups black-eyed peas, cooked (or substitute 3-4 cans)
- 1/4 cup ground cumin
- 1/4 cup lemon juice
- 1 tablespoon Creole seasoning
- Salt to taste

Combine all ingredients in a food processor, and process until smooth. Serve with pita chips—Brian likes to fry his, then spice them with Creole seasoning.

JUMBO LUMP CRAB CAPRESE SALAD

Tossing a pound of jumbo lump crab into Brian's take on a Caprese amps up a simple, spring-y salad. "It's hearty, but not too bold," he says, "which is perfect before things get spicy with the crawfish."

Serves 12

- 1 pound jumbo lump crab meat
- 8 vine-ripened tomatoes, diced
- 1 red onion, diced
- 10 basil leaves, sliced into a chiffonade
- 6 ounces fresh mozzarella, diced
- 2 tablespoons balsamic syrup*
- 1 tablespoon olive oil
- Salt and pepper to taste

Toss all ingredients together until mixed well.
Serve with grilled toast points.

*To make balsamic syrup, simmer a cup of balsamic vinegar over low heat until reduced by half. Allow to cool.

CRAWFISH BOIL

The first rule of crawfish boils is that there are no rules, Brian would be quick to tell you. But there are some guidelines, like the ones the chef abided by for this celebration. "Everyone kind of makes it their own way, you know?" he says. "And that's the fun part."

Serves 12

FOR SPICE MIX:

- 4 cups Creole seasoning
- 3 cups kosher salt
- 2 cups black pepper
- 2 cups cayenne pepper
- 1 cup granulated garlic

'TIS THE SEASONING

No two families do a crawfish boil quite the same. Some purge the mudbugs, others don't. Some use pre-made seafood-boil seasoning products, others make their own. It goes without saying that there is no right or wrong way to go about doing it. But to prepare his seasoning mix, Brian pours granulated onion, granulated garlic, black pepper, salt, creole seasoning and cayenne pepper in a white plastic bucket with halved lemons and onions. And lastly, he trickles Crystal hot sauce into the vessel, splattering the sides and painting the lemons and onions a vibrant orange-red.



- 1 cup granulated onion
- 5 jumbo white onions, peeled and quartered
- 20 lemons, cut in half
- 1/2 gallon Crystal hot sauce

FOR BOIL:

- 50 red bliss potatoes (plan for 3-4 per person)
- 1 40-pound bag live crawfish
- 5 pounds andouille sausage, cut into chunks (plan for 2-3 sausage chunks per person)
- 15 ears of corn, shucked and cut in half (plan for 2 halves per person)
- 30 garlic cloves, peeled
- 5 pounds gulf shrimp

FOR SPICE MIX:

In a large container, combine the spices. Toss in the lemons and onions. Drizzle the hot sauce over the top, and mix to combine.

FOR BOIL:

Fill a 40-gallon boiler 3/4-full with water. Add spice mix and bring to a boil. Once boiling, add potatoes and cook for 10 minutes. Add corn, sausage, garlic and crawfish and cook for 15-20 minutes. Turn off heat and add shrimp. Let sit for 15-20 minutes to soak up seasoning. Drain and spread on a paper-lined table.

M.J.'S BANANA PUDDING

A good friend of the Deloney's—the eponymous M.J.—makes this on the regular for gatherings and get-togethers. "It's great for parties," says Brian, "because it makes a lot. And the leftovers are just as good!"

Serves 12

- 1 5.1-ounce box of instant pudding mix (vanilla or banana)
- 1 box vanilla wafers
- 2 cups cold milk
- 1 14-ounce can Eagle Brand sweetened condensed milk
- 1 16-ounce container Cool Whip
- 3-4 bananas, cut into rounds
- Caramel sauce, either store-bought or made ahead of time

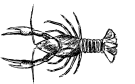
Combine pudding mix and milk in a large bowl. In another, mix condensed milk and Cool Whip.

Fold together. In a 13-by-9-inch pan, begin layering wafers, then bananas, then pudding mix, ending with pudding mix on top. To finish, crumble vanilla wafers on top, and drizzle with caramel sauce. Chill 2-3 hours before serving.



THE
BEST BREW
FOR A BOIL?
"LOUISIANA-MADE
ABITA," SAYS
BRIAN.

TIP: There usually aren't many crawfish remaining at the end of a boil—it's surprising how many of those crustaceans you can put away—but if you do have leftovers, Brian says to shell them, keep the tail meat, and save it for a crawfish pie or a chowder (which would also put those potatoes and corn to use).



HOW TO EAT A CRAWFISH:

- 1 Make sure you're holding the crustacean correctly, with the head between your index finger and thumb, and the tail between your dominant index finger and thumb.
- 2 Twist the tail (to the left or right) until it comes off. Discard the head.
- 3 Peel the first, widest layer (closest to the meat) of the tail's shell, like you would a shrimp's.
- 4 Pinch the tail, and pull the meat. Again, like you would with a shrimp.
- 5 Not satisfied? Try sucking the juices out of the mudbug's head. And if your crawfish is on the larger side, its claws can be cracked open for some more glorious meat.



"AFTER ALL THIS COOKING, I WIND UP NOT EATING ANY OF IT," BRIAN SAYS.

EVENT DESIGN CREDITS

LOCATION: Argenta Place Rooftop by New Argenta Fund LLC
STYLIST: Rosemary Hallmark
FLORAL: Becky Clement, Inspired by Nature
DECOR: Sweet Home | Clement, Mid-Towne Antique Mall
TABLES: Hank's Event Rentals

"THE DELONEYS ARE NEW ORLEANS PEOPLE," SAYS BRIAN'S FATHER, PHIL. "WE USED TO GO DOWN THERE ALL THE TIME. WE HAVE FAMILY THERE. HE'S GOT IT IN HIS BLOOD, TOO."

stove 2 feet from a propane tank and 3 feet away from a purple mesh sack hefty with close to 40 pounds of beady-eyed crawfish crawling on top of one another, feisty claws jutting in and out in a way that's more than a little unsettling. Reaching for a metal paddle, he lifts the hot lid off the pot with his towel and stirs the broth. A bright-orange foam has already begun forming on the surface around the bobbing halves of lemons and onions. It's a delicious moment. The air, already laden with spice and citrus, becomes even heavier with the aroma. He replaces the lid, and the steam continues to seep around the dented edges.

"It's all about family and friends and, obviously, great food. It doesn't get any better than that," he says, punctuating every other sentence with a short, abrupt chuckle. *Simple, good food.* He throws the phrase around like most Southern chefs do when describing their dishes, which are, to say the least, not so simple at all. "It's about getting away, getting to see people, 'cause life can get hectic."

The sleeves of his pastel-blue shirt are rolled up, revealing four tattoos, two on each forearm. A cap emblazoned with the letters "PK" (from a PK Grills steak cook-off he's just participated in) and that he doesn't take off the whole evening, sits on his head, and the floppy ends of hair at the nape of his neck look either wet or gelled. Brian's daughter, Madeline, after whom his restaurant is named, scampers by, a blur of purple pants and bright-pink bow on top of a high ponytail. The guests occasionally hover near the pot, beckoned by the siren call of the intoxicating smell. After a sniff and a "this smells great," or a "that looks good," they retreat to the bar tables at the far end of the rooftop, dipping Brian's creole-style pita chips into the black-eyed-pea hummus he has whipped up as an appetizer, or going for beer number two—or six.

For 30 minutes, Brian allows the slurry of seasonings he's prepared himself to soak into garlic cloves, andouille sausages, corn, potatoes and shrimp (for those who don't like or don't want to like crawfish). Then it's time. Brian and a friend, Jon Honeywell, lift the strainer basket and haul it to the table, the broth drip-drip-dripping a path. It takes two people to spread the mountainous heap of the bright-orange crustaceans on a brown-paper-lined table. Someone yelps as a couple of stray shrimp and potatoes tumble to the floor. Another shouts, "Five-second rule!" And "Incoming!" And "Hot stuff, right there!" There's more vapor waft-

ing from the scene than you'd see around a small bonfire.

After 10 minutes of incessant photo-taking, the guests start digging in. *Twist, snap, peel, pinch and tug. Repeat.* "You gotta suck the juices from the head," says Brian's friend Vince Foster as he throws his head back and takes it like a shot.

"The Deloneys are New Orleans people," says Brian's father, Phil Deloney, who's done his part to be festive by wearing a lobster-patterned shirt—but lobsters look like crawfish, so tonight it's a crawfish-patterned shirt—he'd gotten at a crab boil in Louisiana some years ago. His wife, Brian's mother, is sporting an identical shirt. "We used to go down there all the time. We have family there." Pointing at Brian, Phil adds, "He's got it in his blood, too."

But it's not just the Deloneys who pay homage to their Cajun roots. Hang around by the table enough, and you'll hear Louisiana-native Kellie Whilhite talk about the last time she and her husband Michael hosted a boil and gobbled down 32 pounds of crawfish—just between the two of them—before the guests had even arrived. It's easy to see why. Being from Louisiana, Kellie and Michael were weaned on annual crawfish feasts. She eats them at lightning speed, the way some people crack, pull apart and nibble on sunflower seeds—without much thought, almost second nature. "It's

funny, but the one sack that we do between our family, it's like the ritual, the rejoice of the season, you know?" she says, her fingers glistening wet. "We want to make that time the best. We want to make the next boil the best that it can be. That's our trial, for the right seasoning, the right spice, the right combination of everything. It's a time for us to celebrate, just the two of us and to bring the Louisiana tradition up here. We just indulge. Completely indulge." And when the real feast begins, Kellie and Michael, completely full and satiated, kick back and watch their entourage have at it.

A few hours on, the sun has already slinked out of sight. The patio heaters have kicked in. The cafe lights are on, shining against the dark sky. At the dining table (one of two tables on the rooftop), the candles are glowing but the chairs are empty.

"See?" Brian chimes in, glancing over at the crawfish table, which has slowly become more of a discarded-crawfish-shells table. He has finally let go of his dish towel. It now sits on the outdoor kitchen's countertop, splattered with orange stains. "This is where a crawfish boil winds up. Every single time." **AL**

TO PURGE OR NOT TO PURGE?

A lot of crawfish enthusiasts will tell you that the cardinal rule of a boil is to purge the mudbugs, which, simply put, means to rinse the crawfish in salt and water before cooking them to cleanse them of mud and debris. But there are others, like Brian, who think it's an old wives tale and that the saltwater bath doesn't do much at all. "I read a lot of articles that said [purging] doesn't do anything," he says. "I just wash them real good without salt. Everybody's got their own opinion on it, though. I just think it's an extra, unnecessary step."

LEFT A craft-paper-lined table loaded with the good stuff beckons just beyond the diners. Eventually, it's just too much to resist.

TOP FLIGHT

DID YOU KNOW RACING PIGEONS CAN BE TRAINED TO FLY UP TO 90 MILES PER HOUR—TO RETRACE THEIR PATHS UP TO 700 MILES? DID YOU KNOW THERE WERE RACING PIGEONS? NO? WELL, THEN YOU CLEARLY DON'T KNOW BUBBA WILSON

BY MARIAM MAKATSARIA | PHOTOGRAPHY BY WESLEY HITT



THERE IS A SWEET, BREADY, DAMP smell that hits me like a punch in the nostrils. There is a burble, too—a low, soft cooing. I step on tufts of gray fluff and twigs, and avoid the two oblong blocks of mouse poison set on a plate and which look deceptively like tamales ready for eating. For a few seconds I stand in the space, taking in the silence. And then, from the man at my side, there comes a piercing, singsongy whistle that punches a hole in the silence. The man is tall and big with a long white beard that thins out into wiry strands colored by one or two brown strays. He's clad in camo shorts and worn-out, dusty Crocs, which he taps on the wooden floorboards of the loft. His name is Bubba Wilson.

He's the one I've come here to see, a retired Vietnam veteran slash every-sport-you-could-think-of coach slash caterer slash trucker (the man has held many jobs) living in the comfortable ordinariness of a home smack in the middle of rural Alma, Arkansas. More specifically, I'm here to see his loft. And his pigeons. But these birds are not your average public-square scavengers or pavement dwellers. And as much as I hate to admit it, they're nothing like my childhood couch-lounging pet pigeon, either, (more on that later). These gray-feathered columbidae are homing pigeons—racing birds selectively bred and trained to fly up to 90 miles an hour over distances as far as 700 miles. And Bubba, the person behind the Arkansas River Racing Pigeon Club, Arkansas' only such club and one of some 5,000 registered lofts spread across the country, whips them into shape, turns them into champions.

"Hey, guys!" he says to his birds, as we make our way through the corridor and into the loft. "Y'all go back out now." The five or so birds waddling around near the door take off. The loud, clapping noise of beating wings is disorienting in the not-so-well-lit space. I come close to one that's managed to creep closer to the entrance, who's staring at me like a child curious to see who's come to visit past midnight. "Yeah, yeah, come on. Go on. You know you're not supposed to be in here," Bubba says, and it scurries off, head bobbing erratically.

It gets brighter as we walk farther into the loft—but also, hotter. There are 15 wooden compartments, each about the size of a modest bathroom, fully decked out with perches and platforms. And there are pigeons. Lots and lots of pigeons. Everywhere. Sitting and gazing at us with wary, beady eyes. These are the Young Birds, Bubba says, telling me there are actually two different seasons when it comes to pigeon racing. There's Young Bird, which races less-experienced, typically under-a-year-olds—like these guys—over distances of, at most, 300 miles.

There's also Old Bird, which flies more seasoned, conditioned birds up to 600 miles.

The cocks and the hens are separated, Bubba adds. They'd be trying to raise babies if they weren't, he puts it in a cutesy way. Every morning, he lets the males out to the aviary (a fenced-in, penlike area at the very edge of the loft), then the females, then the males, then the females. "It takes sometimes all morning just to let the two groups exercise. And then you do the same thing again until you get them into shape."

He says this as if it were an easy, everyday-type thing. But Bubba has about 150 birds, and that's not counting the champion birds housed in the nearby "breeders loft"—his studs, if you will. He compares it to the quality breeding of the finest thoroughbreds in horse racing, mentioning that some of his prize-winners are worth up to \$5,000. He's been cultivating his own line of birds for the past 15 years, too. The Bubba Janssen, as he calls it, a crossbreed from the famous Janssen strain—big, stout and broad-breasted—introduced in the 1870s by the legendary Belgian brothers: Louise, Charel, Arjaan and Sjef Janssen.

"Do you name them?" I ask, half-expecting him to say, *Are you crazy? Who can remember 150-ish names?*

"Yeah, there was one cock that I called Paris," he says, nodding. "He beat 1,600 and some birds at 350 miles. And it was a race out of Paris, Texas, so I called him Paris. I've got Miss Bubba, Babette, Miss Babberie, Miss Barbie." We pass by a particularly groggy-looking bird, who seems to eye us bitterly as if we'd woken her up from a siesta. "I've got 526 right here. That's her band number." Well, you can't name 'em all.

The heavy bands look so clunky around their legs. I imagine it's the equivalent of sprinting with ankle weights for humans, but the bands are slipped onto their feet when they're babies, Bubba explains. Maybe they don't feel it at all, I think. But awkward or not, the bands carry their identity. The band tells you a pigeon's bloodline, and with Bubba's birds, you can trace them back five generations. Most importantly, it's the band that, after crossing and triggering an electronic timing system, helps record the exact time a bird arrives to its home loft (or the finish line) during a race. The information is then downloaded and entered into a program that calculates yards per minute based on release and arrival coordinates. The fastest bird wins.

"I race them, but they are my kids. I treat these pigeons better than a lot of people treat their kids," he says, sweat glistening just below the line of his red baseball cap. "I can come in by myself, and not all of them, but when I go feed, I've got two or three, they'll be on my shoulder. I'll give



WITH 7,000 MEMBERS AND 400-500 CLUBS SPREAD ACROSS THE COUNTRY, PIGEON RACING IS NOTHING TO SQUAWK AT. EACH CLUB WILL GENERALLY HAVE EIGHT RACE WEEKENDS IN A SEASON, WITH A FINAL CONVENTION RACE OFFERING NEW CHAMPIONS A CHANCE TO HIT THE HOME STRETCH.



them a little bit to eat. You don't want them real tame. You try to ..." He pauses, distracted by the pigeon that rudely cooed her way into our conversation. "Whaaaaat! I don't think so!" he yells, then turns his head back toward me. "I had a cock. He was 14 years old. He raised his last group of babies and died before the next year. But every time I came into his section, wherever he was at, he'd start that hoo. He always talked to me." Bubba breaks into a deep, throaty hoo-hoo-hoo of his own.

As we make our way outside the loft, he tells me about the process. When training the birds, he loads them into a crate, drives to a release spot and tosses them—first from 2 miles away, then 5, then 10 and farther out. More often than not, they find their way home, thanks in part to their remarkably powerful memories. On their flights, they recognize and remember landmarks—mountains, rivers, highways, even—developing an intricate cognitive "map" that they use to navigate. Eventually, with their keen sense of direction, they can fly from any distance to their nesting place.

They're reliable enough, he goes on to explain, that during World War II, noted psychologist and inventor B.F. Skinner thought it a good idea to use pigeons to guide

missiles for bombing Nazi Germany. He called it "Project Pigeon," building a glide bomb with a guidance section in the nose cone where one to three pigeons would sit and wait for their target to pop up in the center of a screen. They would be, of course, conditioned to recognize said target and peck at it, steering the device in the right direction. There was so much faith in the project that Skinner managed to snag \$25,000 from the National Defense Research Committee to fund it; however, with the invention of electronic guidance systems, the system was rendered obsolete. On a more romantic (and less violent) note, carrier pigeons were used to transport messages—written on lightweight paper, rolled into a tiny tube and tied to their scaly little feet.

But Bubba's interest in homers started out on a less ambitious note. He's kind of always had them, he says. As a child, back when he lived in Goldsboro, North Carolina, he'd "hang out" at feed mills, where the pigeons gathered around grain spilled from 2-ton box trucks. When Bubba was 10 or 11 years old, a hen wandered into his house. It had a race band around its foot, which Bubba tracked and researched, and which ultimately led him to its owner—a man who lived about 100

miles away. The man told Bubba the pigeon was a Fabry of the Belgian Georges Fabry lineage—a racing dynasty well respected in pigeon circles, the creme de la creme of all fanciers throughout the early 20th century. Noticing Bubba's interest, the man sent him a copy of the *Pigeon Journal*, a magazine that cataloged homing birds, their pedigree, strains and breeds. "I wore the pages out," Bubba says. "Of course the pictures were a little small, but it would have pictures from Belgium or something like that. I always dreamed—of course, I was a poor kid—of what it would be like to have a bird like that."

Sometime after that—after serving as a senior medic in Vietnam, getting a history degree from what used to be College of the Ozarks, working in the trucking business, catering and coaching, his dream came true. "When I retired, I had a lot of health problems and stuff," he says after we'd walked out of the musty heat of the loft. "I went to the doctor, and he told me that if I didn't, you know, get a hobby or something that I wouldn't be around."

Tomorrow morning, Bubba's pigeons—the Young Birds, so to speak—will go on their first training session. "I'll load them up, I've got



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a crate over there, and I'll drive out there in the middle of that field and let them loose," he says with an accent that can't hide the South. "It'll just get them used to being loaded and moved and then turned out. I'll do that a couple of times. Next time I load them up, I'll let them in the crate all night and turn them out the next morning. It don't take more than four or five times of me loading them up, and they learn it. I tell them, *We're getting ready to go, guys!* And by the time I get down there to where they're going in, there are going to be four or five of them standing there already when I get there. Once you get into the routine, they know it."

He was itching to start today, but it's too hot. There's the occasional wind, which makes it tolerable, and even the slightest breeze forces the wind chimes to sing mild, telltale notes. We're now sitting on his back porch that overlooks the white-and-red-paneled loft. From where I am, I can only see a dozen birds, max. They're teetering around the aviary like uppity little girls, occasionally stopping to pluck something off the floor. "They are very intelligent. We just don't give them enough credit, and they have personalities that are unbelievable," he says.

"I know," I tell him, to which he reacts with an "Oh?" "I had a pet pigeon growing up," I say, explaining that I rescued the orphaned squab from being eaten by a cat or whatever stray animal wandered the streets of Cairo, Egypt, where I lived for 16 years of my life. I was 8 when I picked the pigeon up with one cupped hand, its plumage fluffed, one wing drooping, its tiny, pathetic body quivering. Veterinary help was out of the question. This is a country where a gently braised pigeon stuffed with cracked wheat is considered a

national dish (also known as *hamam mahshi*). So I stroked its feathered head, took my new pet home and nursed it to health. For years, it would free-fly around my old apartment, out the window, into the city and then back home. So Bubba didn't have to tell me—I know they're intelligent. It's the folks who call them "rats in the sky" who need some convincing.

So here he is, day after day, doing the same thing: feeding, training, cleaning. But in looking at where he is—the sprawl of the surrounding landscape in the company of these birds that can go anywhere, but choose to stay—I wouldn't complain, either. He points out that kids these days don't play outside anymore, and that back in his day, he'd wile away the hours scouring the outdoors. I want to chime in, to say that even now, retired yet so invested in this hobby that's more like a full-time job, he's out in nature, experiencing that sense of relaxation and camaraderie that participating in a racing club provides. This is why he does it.

"[Pigeon racing] is dying because it's so demanding," he says. "People nowadays have no patience. It's 365 days a year. It's like a child, except the only difference is that every year I've got another 80 to 100 children coming home." And just like that, as if on cue, a dozen of them take off at once. It's so beautiful that I gawk. When I glance over at Bubba, he doesn't seem fazed. It's a sight he's used to—the birds flapping their wings, every twist and turn in perfect synchrony against an expansive backdrop of trees and hills and grassland. They disappear for a couple of seconds, and just when I wonder if they'll come back home, I hear the whir, whir of feathers—a thumping sound of feathers drumming on the air. **AL**

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The First Step

When Ben Davis first started walking across the country, ocean to ocean, it was to change himself. A few months after he started, however, he found he'd changed someone else

BY MARIAM MAKATSARIA

March 22

It's Day 25. A nervous wind bellows and huffs. It stomps its foot like an angry child and sends everything on the ground flying into the air, then settling on Ben's skin, clothes and inside his shoes. Here in Arizona, there are a few resilient shrubs and a carpet of sand. Dust, thick as fog, drapes over the horizon like copper-colored garland. He can't see them, but behind the veil of orange, there are cliffs and rocks and vistas he'd likely enjoy if it were any other day. The temperature hovers around 30 degrees, and the wind cuts right through his red sweater, blue waterproof North Face jacket and olive-green knit hat.

A gust of wind catches his breath, the sand pokes at his eyes. He trudges through it, squinting. His brother, Jed, who's joined Ben for a week during his ocean-to-ocean walk across the country, is pushing a yellow stroller packed to the brim with the basics: water, granola, a portable charger, an extra pair of socks and underwear, a tent and the like. They stop by the side of the road often, rub their eyes, wash their faces with water. This is Jed's third day on the road—and also, the brothers' worst. Besides the storm, the blisters on his heels—not to mention the aching, sore muscles—are becoming an annoyance, the way Ben's were his third day, just over three weeks ago when he set off from Los Angeles.

In the close-to-225-mile arid stretch of highway across northern Arizona, there's only a handful of towns the brothers can stop at, and they're all spread apart. When they reach Tuba City, Ben locates the closest hotel and, though reluctant to drop \$200 for a room, decides that a long hot shower is a must after the day's 21-mile walk. He scrubs the grit off his skin with one wash cloth after another. The water turns brown. Next, laundry, to rinse the only clothes they have.

That night, he and his brother sit down at the adjacent Denny's, chatting about the difficulty of the day's walk. *That was awful*, Ben says. *That's as bad as it can get*. The waitress takes his order: eggs, sausage and toast. Behind him, a television bracketed to the wall flickers with images of chaos. Ben glances at the reports of bombings at an airport in Brussels. He frowns, then looks away.

Warm food arrives on a plate in front of him. He's hungry and worn out. Twenty-five miles a day is the goal—that's 65,000 steps on average. Sometimes, if he sees a town up ahead, he'll go an extra mile or two, just to get some proper sleep at a hotel or an inn. The walk was never meant to be arduous; hence the hotels, the restaurants, the days off that Ben allows himself to take advantage of. (It was very much a 21st-century walk, he later says). But other times, he camps just off the road—something he tries to avoid if possible. He's not afraid to admit that he's afraid—of the dark, the murmur of the wind, the faint rustling of leaves, potential murderers hiding in the shadows. Maybe he's spent too many hours watching *Criminal Minds*.

Quite often, he's alone, but he is never lonely—not in the full sense of the word. He is always in the company of Charles, a modified double baby stroller, which has father's friend engineered to hold extra weight. (A couple of times a week, random passersby stop to ask why he is pushing a baby in a stroller in the middle of nowhere.) On social media, strangers offer him their couches to crash on, and others drive for hours to deliver care packages. Some just join him for a drink or a slice of pizza whenever he crosses their neck of the woods. Others ask if his feet are OK, if his knees are holding up. But he likes that.

So when Ben posts photos of the storm in Arizona, his followers chime in with some motivation. They urge him to keep going, offer a place to crash and a home-cooked meal should he pass by their town and call him a "rock star." That night, per the recommendation of an Instagram user, Ben buys a pair of goggles at a nearby trading post, only to realize that he won't be needing them. On Day 27, the weather clears up, and the brothers take to the open, flat road and walk

until 10:30 p.m., their headlamps illuminating the way. They camp and sleep on the rocky, uneven ground, and at sunrise, they wake up and start walking again.

May 30

Tick tock. Tick tocks the lonely watch. Watch as it sits there on the bedside table, unscratched. Unscratched, like it's never seen disaster, like it's never felt a man's pulse weaken and wane against it. It sits there next to a pocket knife the same man sometimes wore on a chain around his neck

when he went hiking with his wife. His wife, Cameron Cain, is now curled up in the man's T-shirt—white, soft and down to her knees—on the bed beside the watch that's still ticking. Ticking, because there's no stopping time. Time, or at least the concept of it, is lost to her. Her meals are brought up and consumed in bed; the shades are drawn.

She drifts in and out of sleep, and the hours pass by, but she doesn't know it. Everything barely mattered, and then no longer did. Bad things happen to good people, she knows. She can count the events leading up to the tragedy like pearls on a string. A call from her mother-in-law—the kind that divides a life into a before and an after. Then the news anchor, talking about bombs going off in the heart of the airport in Brussels, where her husband, Alex, and her sister-in-law, Sascha, were about to board a plane to New York. A confession to her family—she'd married her Dutch fiance in October 2013, quietly, at


the city clerk's office in lower Manhattan. A flight to Amsterdam and a three-hour drive to Brussels. The three-day-long search. A trip to the hospital. A look at the list of survivors, where her husband's and sister-in-law's names were absent. Then another look, just in case the paper changed its mind. Again, and again, 10 more times.

It's been two months and eight days. And between the lavender pink walls of her childhood bedroom in Raleigh, North Carolina, there is no forgetting. The watch is still ticking. She wears both of their wedding rings on one finger on her left hand—his, a little dented, probably from when he fell that day. A clutter of condolence cards and photos blankets her dresser and two desks. There's the stack of grief books people have sent her, unopened except for two. There are the two candles her mother saved from the funeral. There are the stones from Jerusalem where her husband was born—those, too, from



Cameron Cain and husband Alexander Pinczowski on a family trip to Scotland in August of 2015, just seven months before Alex and his sister were killed in the Brussels airport bombing.

She feels a tiny surge of something a lot like hope. How many people out there have an idea like his and actually go out and do it?



the funeral. On the dresser, there's a stack of index-card-sized notes he'd written while playing a board game. The night before the funeral, she'd played the game one last time and found the cards lying in the box.

But there are other things, too. Things she tucked away because she couldn't bring herself to look at them, like a love letter she had written to him after they'd been dating for six months that she didn't know he'd kept. His mom had found it in his charred wallet, blood-stained. Even this king-sized bed, where she sleeps next to her greyhound and white Lab mix, Winston, under a white duvet, is a reminder of him. His legs were far too long for the twin bed she'd had as a little girl, so they'd swapped it for a king. It seems so much larger now.

Then there's New York, of course, where she's lived for the past five years—in an apartment that's now lifeless. It's a hive of memories, Cameron later confesses, which is the reason she's staying with her parents, and in certain moments, the reason she struggles to summon an interest in life. Scrolling idly through the front page of Reddit helps her sleep at night. But today, something changes. Something catches her eye. An Arkansan by the name of Ben Davis, who's chronicling every day of his walk across the U.S. on foot, taking nothing but a stroller full of the bare necessities.

She feels a tiny surge of something a lot like hope. *How many people out there have an idea like his and actually go out and do it?* She watches a video Ben posted to YouTube back in 2010 about learning how to run and losing 120 pounds, a video that documented a very particular journey that spoke to the more than 1 million people who watched it and became proud of a man they had never met. She listens to an hour-long podcast in which he talks about his mastery of Mario Kart, his struggle with weight loss and, of course, his trek across the country. The interview was one by Chris Crosby, who had been a devout follower of Ben's weight-loss blog since it was launched in 2009. At first, Ben reminds her of Alex. Something in the way he speaks about health and food (she had met Alex at a weight-loss center), but also his eagerness to dive head-first into big, ambitious plans. But there is something else that resonates when he talks about the strangers who opened their homes, pulled out chairs for him at their dinner tables and offered him money when he ran out of funds. Something to do with the

notion of kindness in a world that, to her, at least in this moment, seems cruel and bleak. And then she gives in to an impulse. In the subject line of a blank email, she types, *My husband was killed in the Brussels airport terrorist attack—he wanted to do what you are doing.* And then the rest flows:

Hi Ben,

I wanted to write to tell you first of all that you are an inspiration to me.

Second of all, it was one of my husband's goals to one day cross the country, too, but by recumbent bike. He always hoped to get to his goal weight and be fit enough to complete that journey, along with so many other dreams. He was killed in the terrorist attack in Brussels this March at the age of 29, along with his sister. Their names are Alexander and Sascha Pinczowski. My world is shattered, but when I saw your post, it made me smile. It isn't Alex walking across the country, but someone is.

He and I spent a lot of time on Reddit together. I know I would have emailed him your post and commented on us doing this together one day. I would make a joke about how I would probably drive along beside him instead.

I know you didn't know him, and you don't know me, but because you shared a similar dream with him, I think you would have gotten along well. If you could do me a favor and walk a couple of steps for him, or think of him for a brief moment when you look at a sunset while on your walk, it would mean so much to me. If he had made that walk or ride, he would have traveled with every small survival tool imaginable. He would have listened to audiobooks (Audible) the whole way. He would have played "Englishman in New York" very frequently. He would have loved the adventure.

I've attached a picture of him and me, and one of his sister, Sascha.

Stay safe, good luck, and thank you for reading my message.

All my best,
Cameron Cain

Tick tock. It's 5:41 p.m., the watch says.
Click.
Sent.

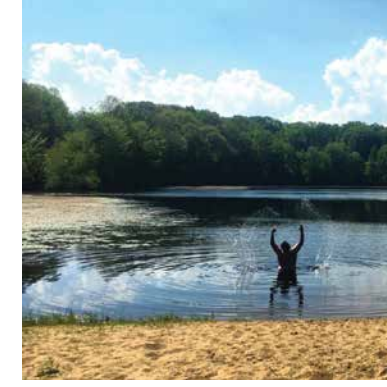
May 29-31

It's the last week of May, and Ben is wending his way through Missouri. It'll be two months before he gets to Boston, the endpoint of this audacious journey. The sun beats down his neck every day. He wears a trucker's cap that he's convinced makes him look youthful. He lathers himself with sunscreen every hour, coats himself with bug spray—the two congealing into some sort of sticky film by the end of the day's walk. But he pushes himself to get to St. Louis sooner, anticipating a week-long break from the walk, a little vacation with his friends and girlfriend who planned to drive up from Little Rock to meet him.

Every day, he gets messages and emails—from folks who want to be him and folks who want to be with him. Talk with him and listen to his tales from the road. The truth is, Ben had developed

Ben's 3,100-mile journey, as documented on Instagram

148 days
6,975,000 steps
430,000 calories
222 gallons of water
55 hotel stays
12 flat tires on Charles,
the stroller
5 pairs of shoes



a following long before he started his cross-country walk—people who had found inspiration in his blog, in his YouTube video, in the pages of November 2011's issue of *Runner's World*, where he posed with a smile so big it practically leaped off the glossy cover. "He looks like Bradley Cooper, the guy from *The Hangover*," the article said. It even claimed that Ben got marriage proposals through his blog.

But not every post on his blog is a motivational weight-loss anthem. The majority revolve around the minutiae of Ben's daily life: what he ate, what he's done that day, his annoyances, his weight that's gone up and down like a piston in the years since *Runner's World*. And it's all very candid, like this post from February 2013: A picture of Ben with a runny nose, blood trickling down his lips to his palm, cupped underneath his chin as if he were about to blow a kiss. Ben doing his taxes. Ben's encounter with a guy at Subway who once asked him how many cookies he'd like. ("Heh. I want 1 million. I won't take any, though, thanks.") If there's one thing Ben is honest about, it's his ravenous appetite.

In fact, if he swerved from the diet lane and ate a can of Cheddar Cheese Pringles one day, he'd snap a photo and post it on his blog, saying, *I'm not proud. But it was so good.* He would go from a months-long habit of clocking in his workouts and photographing the numbers on his scale, training for marathons and the like, to a months-long silence.

But in May of 2015, Ben had a new plan: He would trek across the country, California to Boston, on foot. The timing was convenient. His two-year marriage had just ended. He'd gained weight he said he could stand to lose, and he thought, *If not now, then when?* The idea of the walk had been brewing in his mind for quite some time. A friend of his had attempted to walk from Los Angeles to New York back in 2005 and didn't make it, and Ben wanted to see if he could do it. At its core, though, it was more than just that. Sure, it would be a testament to his endurance, patience—man versus the country, or at least a 3,035-mile stretch of it. But it would also be a sobering reminder of what it's like to give something—or in Ben's case, everything—up: his job, his family, his dog and even the smaller things, like Friday-morning drives to Waffle House for bacon-and-egg sandwiches. But three months before he sold his car, broke his lease and hit the road, something happened. He met a girl.

Leaving his new girlfriend, Alexis, especially in the midst of the so-called puppy-love phase, was just another obstacle. They'd make it work, he decided—a feat that required him to be even more connected to his phone, even more plugged in, even less alone.

On Day 91, he makes it to St. Louis after a long day's trek. The next morning, he sleeps in until 10:30 a.m. at his hotel, which sits a few hundred yards from the Mississippi River (he can even hear it churn and burble when he opens the window), the fatigue catching up to him. On May 31, Ben and Alexis decide to spend their time together at the St. Louis Zoo. His phone beeps. Another message from a stranger.

But there's something different about this one. *My husband was killed in the Brussels airport terrorist attack—he wanted to do what you are doing*, the subject line reads. Ben scans the email, and it hits him. The dust storm in Arizona. The dinner at Denny's. The news anchor reporting the tragedy. He had given it such little thought, and it suddenly guilted him. *Too many disasters happening nowadays*, he remembers thinking. Paris, San Bernardino, Syria. Passing his phone over to Alexis, he mulls things over. *What can I say? How can I respond to something like this?* He gets back to his hotel and rereads the email. It's a little past midnight when he types a response into the little keyboard on his iPhone screen:

Cameron, thanks so much for this email. It hit me hard, and I just want you to know I haven't stopped thinking about you or Alexander since I read it. I will for sure continue thinking about you both. Do you mind if I write about the email? In the book I'm writing or on Instagram or both?

Thanks again, so much.

June 1

It begins with the tap of a single step and the thump of another to form a rhythm—the rhythm of something as simple and elementary as walking. Cameron's mind works with her legs, wandering. The memories resting somewhere in her head need only a light touch to awaken, a small cluster of neurons to fire up and bring Alex and Sascha to the forefront of her brain.

She breathes deep and thinks of Alex—of how much he loved the outdoors—and also of herself, of how strange this feels. All this light and all this air. This tiredness, this good kind of tiredness. Earlier, she'd hooked a leash onto Winston's collar, hopped into her dad's silver Cadillac and drove here by herself. It didn't come easily after three months of immobility, so that alone was progress.

It's only two days after she sent her email to Ben. The temperature is in the mid-80s on this Wednesday morning. The park, a place where people go canoeing, kayaking or fishing from the boardwalk, isn't as crowded as usual. Cameron had read Ben say on Reddit that he prefers not to listen to music while walking. (Only partly true, since Ben has posted a video of himself lip-syncing to "I'll Make a Man Out of You" off of *Mulan*'s soundtrack for some much-needed motivation). She decides not to listen to music either, because there is a possibility of noticing more, more of everything, the sounds under other sounds—the things that whisper and stir around her. She listens to the tags on Winston's collar jingle, the soft pitter-patter of her shoes treading the ground, and the occasional giggle of children playing with their parents.

She walks the paved trail lined with oak and pine trees, stopping midway at a spot by the lake where Winston likes to swim. She throws a stick into the water, and he fetches it. She had always been the one to take him out to parks, and it feels good to have him outside again instead of at the foot of her bed. Throughout the past three months, the smooth-coated dog—or her best friend, as she calls him—has comforted her in the way that only dogs can. Two birds glide over the lake, and she wonders if it could be some sort of sign. Lately, she's become aware of these little things, hoping, despite logic telling her otherwise, that they were sent from Alex and Sascha.

Toward the end of the walk, her foot begins to throb. Cameron's hammertoe—a foot deformity that causes the joint of the middle toe

to bend and curl like a claw—has been a stinging pain for years. Every time she'd tried to wear tennis shoes or heels or even flip-flops, they'd rub and hurt. But today she plows on, and when she loops back to where she took her first step, she thinks, *This is going to be the thing that helps me.*

That day, Cameron schedules a long-overdue surgery on her foot so she can walk properly again. And that night, she writes back to Ben—a long and open email, considering that Ben is still, somewhat, a stranger. A stranger who sometimes reminds Cameron of someone she knew so well. Ever since her husband died, Cameron has felt compelled to tell everyone she meets—folks who never knew Alex—about his life. *People have to know*, she'd think. It's a little past midnight when she types this:

Hi Ben,

Thank you for your email. Absolutely, you have my permission to write about him. Thank you.

Some more background on Alexander: He was an avid reader, writer, photographer and travel enthusiast. He loved to create things with his hands. He was an independent thinker and a gentle soul who was kind to everyone he met. He challenged everyone he touched to be a lifelong learner. He was the guy who had all of the answers. You could ask him any question, and he could answer it, with great passion. I knew life would always be exciting with him. He treated me like a queen and made me feel like I was the sexiest woman alive.

He loved animals, as did his sister, and he had recently adopted his first dog, Nelson, three years ago (Instagram @nelsontheviza). He was Dutch by birth but lived all over

Toward the end of her walk, her foot starts to throb. But today she plows on, and when she loops back to where she took her first step, she thinks, *This is going to be the thing that helps me.*

the world. He thought of himself as a true nomad. It was his dream to work for NASA, and I do believe that given the chance, he would have reached that goal. A biology professor once told me, "Man, your boyfriend has such a mind for science." He loved Carl Sagan's "Pale Blue Dot." Check it out if you haven't read it. I started a NASA space camp scholarship in his memory, and we've raised enough so far to send four underprivileged kids to science camp this summer in his memory.

We had both struggled with our weight our entire lives, and in love, we pushed each other to be healthier. I have lost my life partner, my adventure companion, the love of my life. I am hoping to do right by him by doing many good things in his memory, starting with myself. I'm having foot surgery in the morning so that I can start running again. I took my dog on a 5-mile hike this morning and thought of you, walking somewhere, too.

All my best,
Cameron

July 12-19

It's July 12, Day 137, and Ben is sitting on the edge of a planter by the steel double doors of a brownstone building on East 71st Street in Manhattan. He's waiting for Cameron's friend to deliver a key to her apartment. She's late, but he's never in a hurry. In fact, just resting and passing time has become the norm, and this is no different than any other break he's taken during the walk. Cameron, on the other hand, is uneasy. She texts him from Key West, where she's now staying with her grandmother after recovering from surgery, saying, "I even told her that you're a celebrity, so please be on time," and he laughs at that. After an hour, her friend arrives with the key.

The space is small, but cozy. A one-bedroom, 20-something-year-old's place with exposed-brick walls and modern furniture. It's quiet, and Ben has the place all to himself—at least for one of the two nights he's staying in the city. At this point, he's bedded down on couches in countless living rooms and dined with strangers who opened their doors to accommodate him. So when Cameron's parents stop by for a day on their way from the Hamptons to their home in North Carolina, it doesn't really faze him that they have never met before. In his cargo shorts and T-shirt, he joins them for dinner (at what he now remembers to be an upscale restaurant), enjoys crab cakes and good conversation.

The next day, Cameron's father—a former U.S. ambassador to Denmark and the former president and CEO of the Carolina Hurricanes—joins Ben on a 4-mile walk from Harlem and into the Bronx. Cameron's dad pushes the stroller, Charles, for all of those 4 miles before sending him

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WHERE FAMILY
HEIRLOOMS BEGIN



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off with Ben to Connecticut. A few days later, about 125 miles into rural Connecticut, Ben slows down on the road alongside an open, grassy field.

Every day, Ben tries to document what he sees on the road, whom he meets, what he learns, scribbling thoughts in his journal with the goal of compiling a book out of them someday. Whenever he sees a ramshackle house or an old, dilapidated barn, he stops, whips out his phone and takes a picture. He sends it to Cameron, if there's internet, and they ponder the last time the structures were "used and vibrant," and, as Ben later mentions on social media, "how nature just sort of eats them up and returns the land to its original habitat after a while."

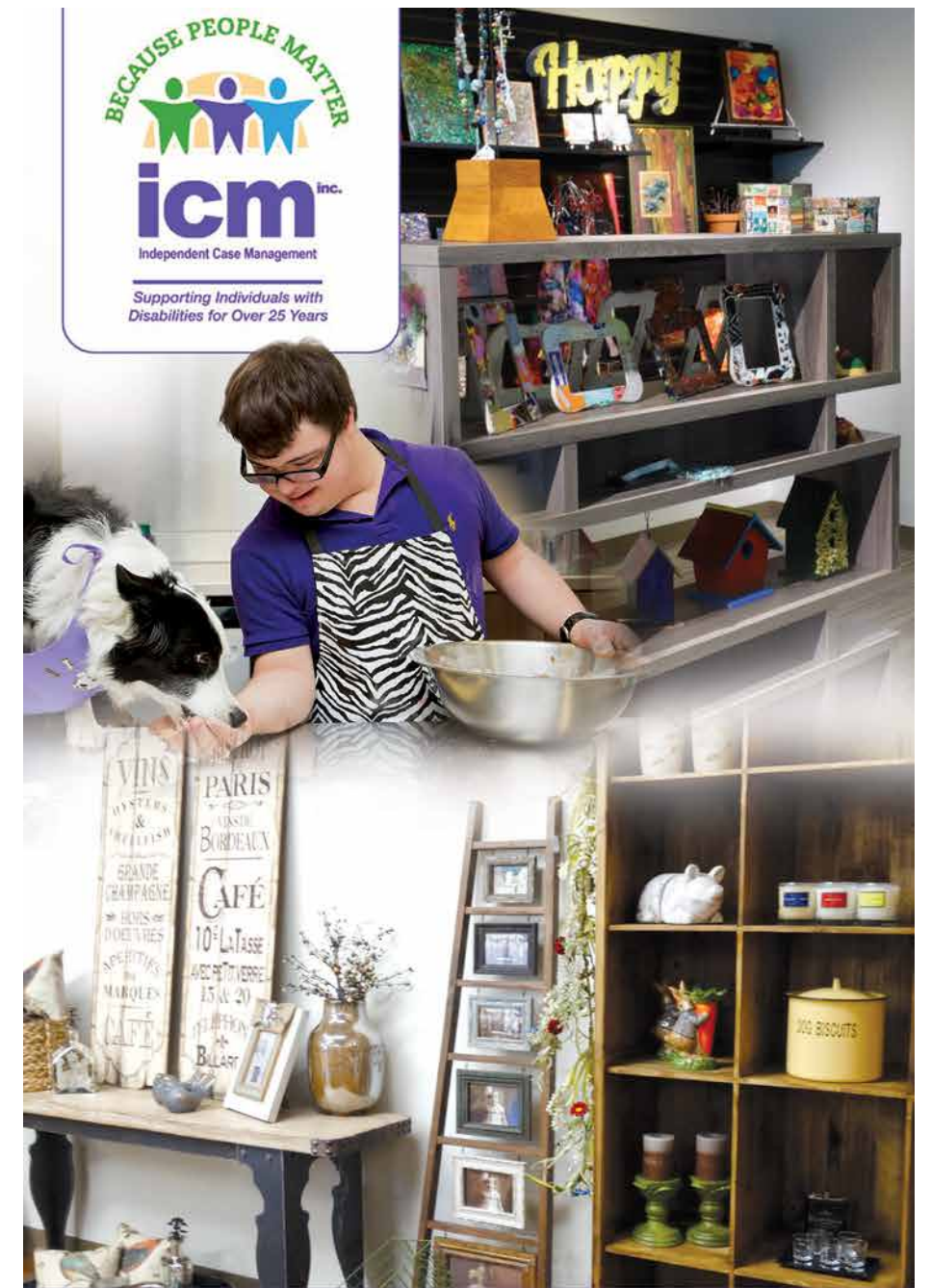
The images make Cameron think of her grandfather, of his stories about sleeping in the barn and watching over the tobacco as it fire-cured on his farm in North Carolina. Last Thanksgiving, she drove up there with Alex, her father and grandfather to see the old barn. Even though she left North Carolina at 15, she felt at home there, surrounded by pasture, on the land that nurtured her parents and grandparents. Her grandfather's house had been flattened and rebuilt, but the barn still stood, tired and gutted. Alex bent down and picked up a rusty nail from the ground, as a reminder of sorts. Now, if there's ever a run-down, cool-looking vehicle or a weathered, decrepit building that she passes on her walks in Key West, she, too, pauses and captures it. Like Ben, she finds beauty in broken windows and walls scrawled with vines.

Ben pauses because he knows this. An abandoned red barn sits by the side of the road, the barn's color striking against the background of blue and green. There's a gaping hole in the roof, slabs of wood pressed in and broken, as if a giant fist had thrown a punch to its side and knocked the breath right out of it. Ben scans the structure before raising his phone and framing it in the shot.

September 13

The sky brightens, and everything is golden, as if someone flicked a light switch on. The long branches overhead trap the sun, like a yolk caught between spindly fingers. A ray drapes over her forehead, which glistens with sweat. Her face is vaguely similar to something you'd see in a Renoir painting—luminous, a little flushed, framed by a cascade of blonde curls, the same thickness as those captured in the painter's *A Girl Crocheting*. Cameron's almost-neon pink blouse is darkened a shade or two by a ring of sweat on her abdomen.

They sit at a picnic table—Ben straddling his seat like a motorcycle—here in the shadow of Pinnacle Mountain, which towers behind them inside a frock of trees, surrounded by the static of cicadas. Here, in Little Rock, where circumstance had thrust them. And in looking at them from afar, it seems like they've known each other for years—as if they've weathered grubby knees and hormones together, celebrated many firsts and pulled through the lasts. But until yesterday, they had never



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