

BY CHERÉ COEN PHOTOGRAPHS BY ROMERO & ROMERO

There was a time when visitors from around the world were drawn to Acadiana for its unique Cajun culinary specialties. That fact remains true, but today what Acadiana's chefs offer is more a mix of the traditional, the innovative and the international. For the 2017 installment of our Best Chefs feature, we spotlight three chefs who learned the culinary arts in their communities at the elbows of family members and two who bring a special style from abroad. Some obtained their education from formal institutions and others by simply doing. It's a mixture that still makes Acadiana a unique culinary hub that attracts visitors to our region year after year.

BEST CHEFS



Chef Amanda Cusey loved living in Ireland, enjoying the vibrant culinary scene of Dublin and the 28 vacation days awarded every Irish worker — but her parents wanted to move back to the States and they chose Lake Charles for its warm climate and a job opportunity.

Cusey decided to follow family. Though she took her first summer off in Lake Charles, her new home took some getting used to. After starting work at The Villa, a new restaurant in downtown Lake Charles owned by longtime restaurateur Michael Sperandeo, a heavy rain flooded the business.

That's when Cusey discovered Acadiana hospitality.

"There was this awesome outpouring of support from the community," she said. "I was offered so many kitchens to work out of. People here are super nice."

Cusey hails from Flagstaff, Arizona, but received her Le Cordon Bleu training at the Tanté Marie Culinary Academy in Surrey, England. She spent her early years working in English gastropubs, then an American diner in Ireland, but longed for more upscale experience and veered into Italian cuisine while working under Kristan Burness and Brendan Ward at Fiorentina in Dublin where she ultimately earned the position of head chef. She worked briefly with Michelin Star Chef Oliver Dunne, helming his Italian-inspired pop-up restaurant, Eatily, in Dublin's city center.

"It's been fun," Cusey said. "The restaurant business took me all over."

Cusey cooks traditional Italian with Louisiana influences at The Villa, incorporating local seafood in dishes such as the crawfish Pappardelle — crawfish tails in a shellfish bisque with zucchini and cherry tomatoes. One of her favorite dishes is the crab cannelloni, which wraps chilled crabmeat in a tomato jelly with basil mascarpone mousse and roasted cherry tomatoes that's topped with an aged balsamic. Another favorite is Cusey's take on barbecue shrimp, utilizing jumbo Gulf shrimp, 'nduja salume that's equivalent to a spicy prosciutto, garlic, white wine, arugula and red and green peppers with toasted ciabatta for dipping.

"I'll take my French techniques and use Italian ingredients and do some kind of fusion food," Cusey said. "And we try to use local as much as possible."

The Villa opened earlier this year in the restored Noble Building in downtown Lake Charles by Sperandeo, who operated The Italian Villa restaurant across town for 20 years.

TIPS FROM THE CHEF



NEVER FEAR

1

"Don't be afraid of fat. Fat brings a whole bunch of flavor."

2

"Don't be afraid of weird — it can go either way, awful or awesome. If awful, it'll be good the next time."

3

"Don't be afraid of seasoning."

Beet risotto with marinated goat cheese at its center, accented with fresh oven-roasted beets and topped with an aged vinaigrette.



LAKE CHARLES

CHEF AMANDA CUSEY

THE VILLA
324 Pujo St.

337-436-6251 • thevillaonpujo.com

SUNSET

CHEF TROY BIJEUX

CAFÉ JOSEPHINE
818 Napoleon Ave.
337-662-0008 • cafejosephinesunset.com



Sea bass over a crab cake dotted with lightly fried onion rings.



There's a wavy career line for Chef Troy Bijoux. He spent time in the oilfield, then worked 20 years in flooring before opening the Napoleon Avenue Meat Market in Sunset with his wife, Melissa. Then there was the sideline job, cooking up plate lunches as fundraisers for Little League teams hoping to travel to the Little League World Series.

It all led to him closing the meat market and turning the space in the heart of Sunset into Café Josephine. Today, the restaurant he calls "fine-food casual dining" draws in customers from miles around — as far as Alexandria and Eunice.

TIPS FROM THE CHEF



WHAT IT'S ALL ABOUT

1
"It's not what you put in biscuits, it's how you stir the biscuit dough, how you fold them."

2
"It's important to talk to customers, to make them feel comfortable. Without my customers, I can't live my dream."

3
"It's about giving people quality fresh food."

"We are truly a hidden destination — people just enjoy the ambiance and the staff is incredible," Bijoux said. "We're their hidden gem, quality food for an average price."

It's all about freshness and consistency, Bijoux said. He uses Chicago prime beef, hydroponic lettuce from Breaux Bridge and brings locally sourced and Murder Points oysters for the restaurant's new snazzy oyster bar.

In addition to menu items that include such traditional South Louisiana dishes as gumbo, crab cakes and a seafood platter, Bijoux loves to shake things up. "Life's about choices," he said.

"On any given day, we have five to seven specials. That allows me to have my creative energy."

Café Josephine is known for Bijoux's biscuits that appear on the table in place of bread. The cheesy, soft-on-the-inside mini biscuits are cooked fresh and arrive on the table hot. Bijoux took a beloved biscuit recipe and "did a twist on it" to create this crowd pleaser.

"People come from all over to taste the biscuits," Bijoux said. "It's a little cloud of heaven."

One of the restaurant's specialties is the crackling biscuit topped with a fried chicken breast strip that's drizzled with a Steen's Syrup and bacon cream sauce. For meat lovers, the "Big Chop" grills a thick pork chop in an orange juice reduction and tops the dish with a fig sauce.

Bottom line, Bijoux insists, it's all about serving a quality, consistent product.

"And we put a lot of love in our food," he concluded. "It's about living a dream. I'll never work another day in my life because I'm living a dream."



Sweet potato-crusted trout, topped with lump crabmeat and served over asparagus in a lemon-basil butter sauce.

TIPS FROM THE CHEF



ACCORDING TO EMA

1

"Keep it simple. It doesn't take too much to create something. You don't need a lot of ingredients."

2

"You've got to have your own passion. I tell my kids no matter what you do, if you're not driven, if you don't have the passion, you're not going to be successful."

3

"At any time, don't give anyone a meal you wouldn't give to your mom. Make meals the best you can, like it's the last meal you're going to have."

Visit Bailey's Seafood & Grill and Ema's Cafe in Lafayette and you'll find walls filled with accolades, everything from the Louisiana Restaurant Association's "Restaurateur of the Year" award to the 1998 Best of Show award from the Louisiana Gold Culinary Classic. And yet when owner and chef Ema Haq arrived at the University of Southwestern Louisiana (now the University of Louisiana at Lafayette) in 1983, cooking was the farthest thing from his mind.

"When I first came here I didn't know how to cook rice," Haq said.

Haq moved to Lafayette from Bangladesh to obtain a mechanical engineering degree but he worked his way through college in a variety of restaurant jobs — experience which led him to open Bailey's fine dining restaurant in 1993. In 1999, he started an offshore catering business and later Emaco Food Services.

That engineering degree? He used it too, many years working at a drilling company by day and the restaurant business by night. When he won the Best of Show award, judge Chef Paul Prudhomme asked where he attended culinary school.

"I said, 'Chef Paul, I'm building rigs in Harahan and Belle Chasse,'" Haq said, adding, "I don't think I took a day off in three years."

Bailey's and the more casual breakfast and lunch restaurant Ema's are landmarks in Lafayette after all these years but Haq is also affectionately known for his Thanksgiving meals that he serves to the elderly, the

homebound and those in need. Haq and a large group of volunteers invite diners to the restaurant where they are served a traditional Thanksgiving meal, complete with white tablecloths and cloth napkins. For those who can't make it to the restaurant, volunteers bring them their meals.

This year marks the 25th anniversary of his Thanksgiving community service.

For Haq, giving back to the community that welcomed him is vital. When Hurricane Katrina ravished the area, Haq shipped food and supplies to the Hattiesburg American, a sister newspaper to Lafayette's Daily Advertiser. During the disastrous flood of 2016, he donated profits to the United Way of Acadiana.

"The goal is to make a difference, to make it a better place," he explained. "If you want to make a difference, you have to teach your kids, you have to make sacrifices."

His parents taught him well, Haq said, always helping others in his home country of Bangladesh.

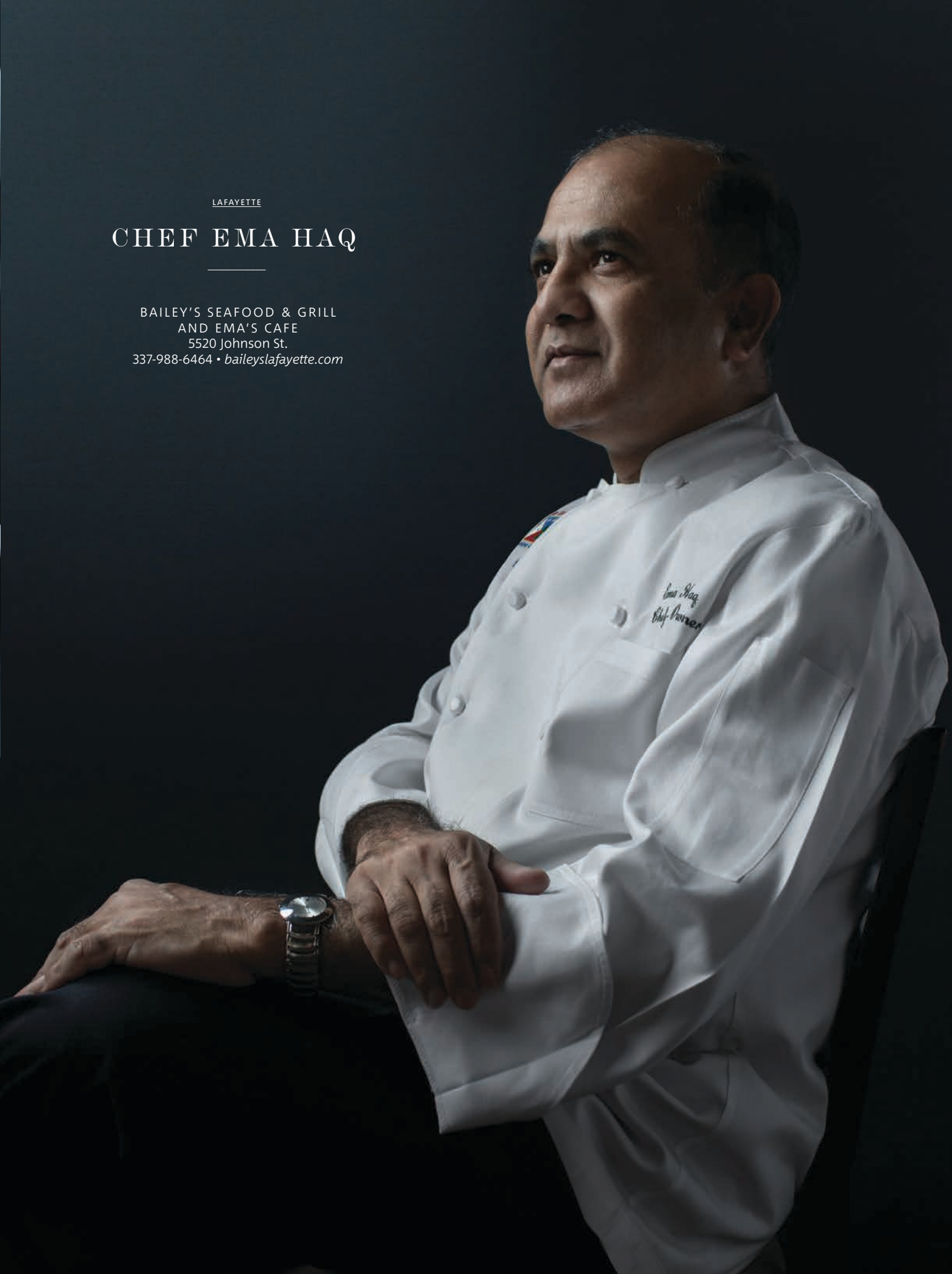
"I don't think we had a meal without sharing," he recalled. "If I do 20 percent of what my parents did, I'd be a saint."



LAFAYETTE

CHEF EMA HAQ

BAILEY'S SEAFOOD & GRILL
AND EMA'S CAFE
5520 Johnson St.
337-988-6464 • baileyslafayette.com





ST. MARTINVILLE

CHEF BONNIE BREAUX

ST. JOHN RESTAURANT
203 N. New Market St.
337-394-9994 • thestjohnrestaurant.com



Crackling-crust black drum with a fennel marmalade nestled on Abita Amber-infused Brabant potatoes and sautéed haricot vert, topped with butter-poached, jumbo-lump, Blue-Point crabmeat



Business was booming at St. John Restaurant in St. Martinville so Executive Chef Bonnie Breaux didn't think about applying for the 10th annual Louisiana Seafood Cook-off. She also serves as general manager so time is at a premium, but her bartender encouraged her and early this summer she made the cut.

"I was the last chef they called and I was the only female," Breaux said of the announcement. "Needless to say, I couldn't believe it."

For the June 20 cook-off, Breaux created a crackling-crust black drum with a fennel marmalade nestled on Abita Amber-infused Brabant potatoes and sautéed haricot vert, topped with butter-poached, jumbo-lump, Blue-Point crabmeat.

She beat 11 of the state's best chefs and was crowned 2017 Queen of Louisiana Seafood.

"The day after I won, the emails, the phone calls, it was amazing," she said. "I was numb for three days. I still pinch myself every day."

Breaux represented Louisiana at the 14th annual Great American Seafood Cook-Off held in July in New Orleans.

arts after a divorce. Her brother encouraged her to start a catering business and she operated Breaux's Cajun Catering in Covington for five years. She moved back to her hometown of Broussard to serve as executive chef at Clementine Dining and Spirits in New Iberia, but a visiting restaurant owner tasted her gumbo and invited her to become a guest chef at the Louisiana-themed Roux in Tampa, Florida.

"When I went, my dishes were best-selling so they put them on the menu," Breaux explained.

She remained at Roux in Tampa for 14 months, appearing on local TV shows, preparing a signature dish at the 2017 College Football Championship and cooking with 26 executive chefs for a James Beard Sunday Supper fundraising benefit.

In the end however, the lure of home kept whispering in her ear.

"I didn't pursue it," Breaux explained. "I waited for it to come to me."

And it did. St. John owners Chip and Lucy Durand offered Breaux a chance to run their kitchen and she headed home to the perfect job — and a crown to boot.

She came in fourth — one point from third — but was thrilled to have placed so high among the nation's best chefs.

"That was a huge compliment for me," Breaux said. "They loved my flavor and that was really important to me. The whole experience was amazing."

TIPS FROM THE CHEF



AT THE QUEEN'S BEHEST

1

"My mother's famous saying was 'If you over salt a stew or a gravy, cut up a russet potato and it will absorb the salt!'"

2

"A good cook is a clean cook. Clean as you go."

3

"If you cook brownies and cookies ahead of the holidays, place an apple slice in the tin and they will stay fresh."

Like many Cajun chefs, Derek Weisz grew up close to family in his hometown of New Iberia. He would often ride his bike to his grandmother's house, watching her cook South Louisiana specialties such as pork roast, red beans and rice, pork steak in gravy and a variety of breads stuffed with meat, sausage or cheese.

"I grew up down the road from her and I was always at her house," Weisz explained.

"She pretty much cooked everything. I learned a lot from her. That's where I got into cooking."

After graduating from New Iberia Senior High School Weisz wasn't sure what the future would bring. But his experience watching his grandmother at the stove and trying his own hand at cooking made him consider a job in the culinary arts. He perused many culinary schools and chose the Louisiana Culinary Institute in Baton Rouge.

TIPS FROM THE CHEF



FROM THE HEART

1
"Brown the meat inside the pot. It gives it that fond (meat remnants) on the bottom of the pot."

2
"Fish don't take long to cook, so don't overcook the fish."

3
"People who want to be chefs should follow their heart."

"I knew I wanted to go to culinary school in Louisiana because I love cooking Louisiana food," Weisz said. "I love anything seafood, Cajun. I love to cook gumbo, jambalaya."

Upon graduation, he returned to his hometown to work at the New Iberia branch of Café des Amis. Later, Mark Alleman, a Louisiana Culinary Institute colleague, hired Weisz to helm the kitchen of his new restaurant, Hook & Boil, located in the heart of Broussard. Weisz has been there ever since.

With a name like Hook & Boil, the menu is a given — lots of fresh, regional seafood. Most of the product arrives fresh from regional sources, such as the oysters from Houma, but the crawfish hails from the 3,000-acre Alleman Family Farm. The restaurant also serves boudin from Billeaud's Grocery of Broussard and tasso and sausage from Poché's Market in Breaux Bridge, plus a number of beers from Acadiana breweries.

Some of Weisz's favorite dishes are the shrimp and tasso pasta, which marries grilled shrimp and tasso with a house-made spicy alfredo sauce over penne pasta, and the boudin-stuffed chicken. The boudin eggrolls, comprised of boudin, pepperjack cheese, cane syrup and a pepper jelly glaze, are a popular appetizer, and the bread pudding at meal's end is a must.

Next year, Hook & Boil will open its second restaurant, in the former Filling Station restaurant site in downtown Lafayette. Weisz will oversee both establishments but mostly work out of the Broussard restaurant.



Grilled shrimp and Tasso pasta with a house-made spicy Alfredo sauce over penne pasta.

BROUSSARD

CHEF DEREK WEISZ

HOOK & BOIL
209 N. Morgan
337-330-8443 • hookandboil.com