



CHEF MICHAEL OLBRANTZ'S PURSUIT OF GOOD FOOD TOOK HIM ALL OVER THE WORLD BEFORE HE FELL IN LOVE WITH MEXICAN CUISINE. NOW, HE PREPARES TO POUR THAT LOVE INTO A NEW KIND OF FAST-CASUAL EXPERIENCE AT GATHER GVL, GREENVILLE'S UPCOMING FOOD HALL.

CROSSING BORDERS

BY KATHYRN DAVÉ PHOTOGRAPHY BY JIVAN DAVÉ

“ULTIMATELY, IT ALL COMES DOWN TO THE FACT THAT I LOVE THINGS THAT ARE DELICIOUS.”

Chef Michael Olbrantz says. This is not the narrative anyone expects to hear from a young chef these days. I ask him how he got his start, where his love for food originated—and he doesn't have a tidy answer for me. “It just happened,” he says. Like love and babies and callings can just happen, it did. He was a high school kid watching Alton Brown, and now, after chasing his love of food around the globe, he's settled in Greenville, preparing to open his first restaurants.

Yes, *restaurants*, plural—four in fact, all in partnership with his friends and co-owner/chefs, Paul and Sarah Klaassen, and all located at Gather GVL, Greenville's first al fresco food hall slated to launch next spring. The Olbrantz and Klaassen lineup includes HenDough, a Greenville outpost of the Klaassens' popular Hendersonville chicken and donut shop; KO Burger; Al Taglio, Roman-style pizza; and Mercado, the Mexican restaurant most connected to Olbrantz's heart. He agreed to cook for our chat, pulling together a menu that hints at Mercado's cuisine and highlights some of his favorite flavors.

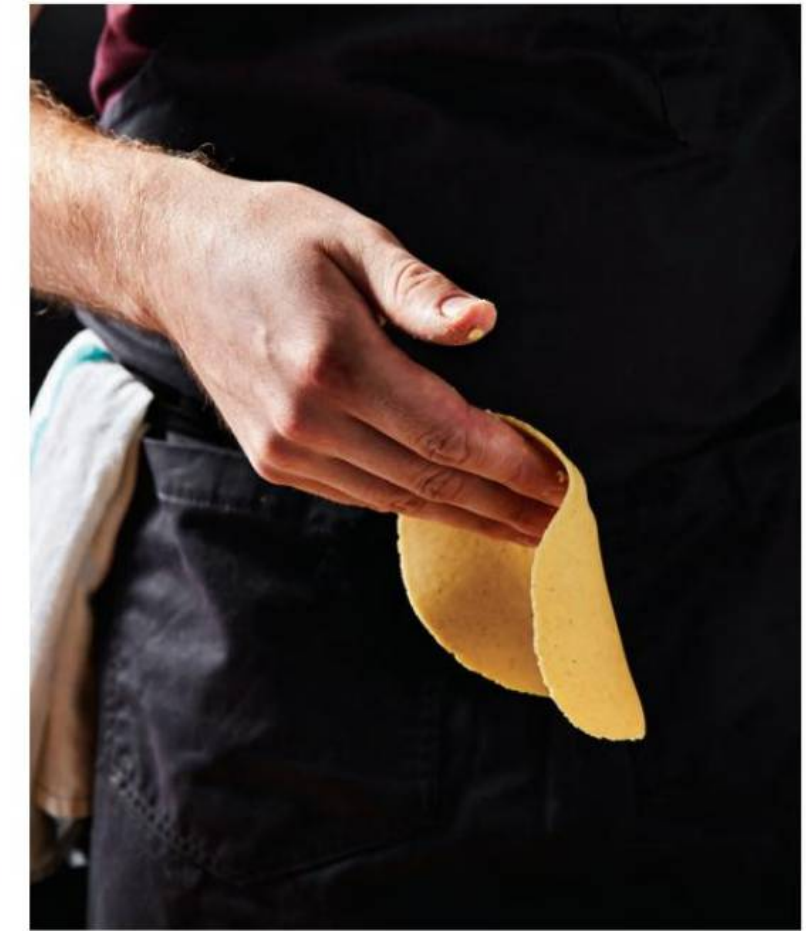
In a world where chefs are celebrities, restaurants are travel destinations, tasting menus are crafted for Instagram posts, and everyone's a foodie, we have come to expect, maybe even idolize, a certain kind of chef story. Cue the dramatic orchestral music and lush footage of a chef foraging at dawn, am I right? Here's the thing—Olbrantz did the fine-dining tweezer thing, has the European *stage* under his belt, and can geek out over some beautiful ingredients, but they aren't his story.



He was a regular teenager who fell in love with cooking and didn't look back. Born and raised in Asheville, his first serious culinary job was in the kitchens of the Biltmore Estate where he met Paul Klaassen—a sous chef at the time who became Olbrantz's mentor, friend, and eventual business partner. Come high school graduation, Olbrantz had a moment of doubt about cooking as a career, so he went to the University of Pittsburgh to study neuroscience or economics. And yet. “I missed cooking immediately,” he says. He was back at the Biltmore kitchens by next semester.

“Don't go to culinary school,” Klaassen advised him. “You can learn everything you need working in the kitchen.” Olbrantz took his advice, put his head down, and worked hard until he was ready for the next step—a *stage* in Europe. He found himself in Spain at Madrid Fusión, attending classes given by world-famous chefs and feeling generally underwhelmed, until he wandered into Chef Ricard Camarena's class on rice. The chef's passion was so electric that Olbrantz immediately asked if he could come *stage* at his restaurant, a Michelin one-star in Valencia.

The *stage* was transformative. Educational. Eye-opening. “I realized that this wasn't the kind of food I wanted to be cooking. Standing over a plate and putting 15 different kinds of little flowers and herbs on a dish that already has 20 different vegetables in it . . . I thought to myself, I don't know if this is



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—CHEF MICHAEL OLBRANTZ



EARTH TONES:

The traditional techniques and ingredients Olbrantz discovered during his travels in Mexico show up everywhere in his cuisine, from the tortillas he hand-rolls and presses to the dark cones of unrefined sugar cane that inspired his dulce de calabaza (previous spread).



FRESH START: Olbrantz swears that chilaquiles, a simple dish made from tortilla chips that have been fried and tossed in salsa verde, is the world's best hangover cure. You won't need a hangover to appreciate his version, however, which he layers with crema, queso fresco, and shaved onion before topping the whole pile with a sunny egg.



cooking," Olbrantz laughs. Such an epiphany was a bit dizzying. After all, fine dining had been his goal, the path that led to multicourse menus and Michelin stars.

The first dish Olbrantz serves me—*sikil pak*, a traditional pumpkin seed dip from the Yucatán peninsula of Mexico—was worlds away from the ones he carefully plated in Spain. Similar to hummus or guacamole, *sikil pak* is not a looker. There is no asymmetry or edible flowers, just smooth swirls of the creamy dip and a pile of fresh tortilla chips. But the flavor! Smoky, roasted pepitas and the zip of habaero. He says he could imagine offering this at Mercado, and I can imagine eating it there, with a basket of chips steadily disappearing and a beer sweating in the sun.

How he got from Spain to the Yucatán is a long story, but once again, credit is due to his teenage self. The years of Spanish he studied in high school and his early admiration for Jonathan Gold, the famous *LA Times* food writer known for elevating ethnic cuisines, had made an impression on him. After wrapping up a job in a Portland restaurant, Olbrantz decided to get serious about exploring the food that interested him. He went to Mexico. A two-month tour turned into a whirlwind two years of traveling, learning, tasting, growing as he ping-ponged from Mexico to America and back again. In the Yucatán, Olbrantz fell in love. "I can't get enough of the balance of Yucatecan food. It's spicy, with a lot of acid—meats marinated in bitter orange or lime, lots of use of smoke and underground cooking, pickled onions, and habaero salsa everywhere. I think it's one of the most vibrant, bright cuisines of Mexico," he says.

I understand what he means when I taste the next dish he sets in front of me: a Yucatecan specialty, *panuchos de pavo*, which are small tostadas stuffed with beans and fried, topped with *achiote* turkey, pickled onions, and fiery habaero salsa. Spicy and earthy and meant to be eaten with your hands, the *panucho* is a good example of the kind of food Olbrantz wants to cook now—simple, but precise in its balance and technique. Simple, but treated seriously.

It's the kind of food he started cooking when he fired up his food truck for the first time. It was early 2016, and Olbrantz decided that Asheville needed a little "vitamin T," as the saying in Mexico goes (tacos, tortas, tamales, tostadas, etc.—you know, the good vitamins). For almost two years, Vitamina T

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rolled from brewery to brewery, building up a loyal following and delighting people with Olbrantz's take on Mexican food. Bolstered by his success with Vitamina T, Olbrantz was excited when the opportunity to partner with the Klaassens in Gather GVL arrived. "The more I worked in finer restaurants, the more I realized as great as that food is, it's not something most people can eat every week, or even every month. I like the idea of as many people as possible being able to try amazing food, especially different food at a place like Mercado, without having to spend a lot of money to do it," he says.

Mercado is inspired by traditional Mexican cantinas, the casual places you can find all over the country where you go in to have some drinks and stay for a while, snacking on little bites with every round. The spirit is the same as that of the classic tapas bars Olbrantz experienced in Spain: relaxing, sharing, warm hospitality. Like a true cantina, Mercado will have a full bar, and Olbrantz and the Klaassens plan to emphasize Mexican drinks such as *micheladas* (beer, lime juice, and tomato juice), tequila, and mezcal. (Non-drinkers, no worries: Olbrantz also envisions a rotating line-up of *agua frescas*, including the *agua de jamaica* he pours me, a sweet, tart, hibiscus-flavored refresher.)

When Olbrantz plates his *chilaquiles* for me, his brow wrinkles in focus. *Chilaquiles* is a humble dish, designed to use up leftover tortilla chips, but his version gets his full attention and skill. It makes a good picture of Olbrantz's approach. Mercado, along with the other three restaurants he's co-creating, is fast-casual, or "accessible" food as he calls it. But it's fast-casual from the mind of a fine chef—a chef who pours all his creativity, passion, and technique into tacos rather than tasting menus.

While Olbrantz starts work on the last course, *dulce de calabaza*, he briefly laments the underlying racism in how the food world has long misunderstood or ignored the beautiful, complex cuisines of Mexico—a tide that has only recently begun to turn. Chefs like Olbrantz are part of the change.

He spoons some squash—the *calabaza*—onto the plate. The squash has been soaked in water and *cal* (pickling lime) so that it can be poached at length without disintegrating. The results of this ancient technique are deceptive: vibrant orange squash slices that hold their shape, only to give way to a blissful, custard-like inside with each bite. Olbrantz finishes it with a dark, cinnamon flavored syrup made from *piloncillo*, cones of raw Mexican cane sugar, and curls of *queso de bola*.

Is it sublime and surprising and yet, somehow, simple? Yes. The technique is ancient. The presentation is not fussy. But the taste has taken me somewhere—and that's what Olbrantz hopes to accomplish around the casual, communal tables of Gather GVL. "Handing someone a taco or something they've never tried before and watching their eyes light up as they bite into it, seeing them get excited about trying something delicious—that feeling is why I do it," Olbrantz tells me.

Love is the answer for almost any question you could ask about Olbrantz's cooking. Why be a chef? He loves good food. Why open four restaurants at once? Because it's four times the cooking and the fun. Why pizza and burgers? "Because we love to eat them," he laughs. Why Mercado's emphasis on Yucatecan food? Because he wants Greenville to experience the same infatuation with the region's flavors as he did. He quotes Anthony Bourdain, patron saint of all who love food, reminding me that Bourdain says chefs were in the "pleasure business."



Olbrantz agrees, adding: "At the end of the day, I want people to feel happy because of what they're eating."

Just before we part ways, Olbrantz confirms I have what I need because he's leaving the country for Rome. "Gotta go research that Roman-style pizza," he says, grinning, eyes truly twinkling.

Like he says—the man just loves things that are delicious. **T** Mercado is slated to open next spring 2019 inside Gather GVL, an outdoor food hall coming to Greenville's West End.



TACOS Y MAS:
The menu for Mercado was inspired by Mexican cantinas where patrons linger over rounds of drinks and snacks, like sikil pak, a Yucatecan pumpkin seed dip served with tortilla chips (opposite top) before moving on to hotter bites, like panuchos de pavo, small refried tostadas stuffed with beans (right).