

IT TAKES A VILLAGE

IT TOOK MORE THAN AN ACT OF GOD, A MARKET CRASH, AND A SET OF BLUEPRINTS TO BRING ABOUT **THE ANCHORAGE**, CHEF GREG MCPHEE'S FIRST RESTAURANT. WITH A MODERN TAKE ON CHRISTMAS EVE'S TRADITIONAL FEAST OF THE SEVEN FISHES, CHEF MCPHEE CELEBRATES WITH HIS FRIENDS AND COLLEAGUES WHO HAVE HELPED SHAPE THIS SPECIAL DREAM.

By KATHRYN DAVÉ Photography by JIVAN DAVÉ





CHEF GREG MCPHEE IS DEFENDING HIS PINK DRINK.

It's somewhere between the second and third—or is it the fourth?—course, and he's taking a well-earned cocktail break. The drink is a foamy riff on a classic Negroni, an of-the-moment concoction bartender Stephen Phillips shook up. The joke is a teasing reference to McPhee's habit of accidentally ordering rosy-colored cocktails during his travels with his wife Beth. And the dinner is many things: a modern re-interpretation of a classic Italian holiday meal. A seven-course celebration of The Anchorage, McPhee's first restaurant, slated to open in the next few weeks. Most important, it's a reason to come together around the table.

No one can say exactly what the typical Feast of the Seven Fishes table should look like. The tradition has its roots in Southern Italy's La Vigilia, a Christmas Eve fast. (Yes, a seven-course dinner counts as fasting, God bless the Italians.) When the feast migrated to America, Italian Catholics made it famous, serving platter after platter of seafood while they waited for midnight Mass. The number of courses, like the menu, varies from family to family. Maybe you'd find seven courses, for the seven sacraments, or thirteen, for the apostles and Jesus, or ten, for the Stations of the Cross. Or maybe it was seven for the seven days of creation, or for the seven virtues. Who knows, really. As long as you could anchor your courses in some sort of symbolism, you'd have seven-plus excuses to eat and drink with the people you love.

The candles flicker, a few tea lights already swimming in a pool of wax. The friends gathered around these shared plates and wine are the people most crucial in making The Anchorage a reality. Not just McPhee's team—although some of them do hold titles at the restaurant—but true friends who followed him

to the Village and believed in his vision. Tonight's Feast of the Seven Fishes dinner is a toast to the connection and comfort that bind family holiday tables—and, he hopes, the tables at The Anchorage. He's reimagined the traditional Christmas Eve menu here (there's no red sauce in sight), but the sense of gladness in each other's company is the same across generations.

McPhee's path to this city, this restaurant, and even this very table came thanks to near-constant rerouting. At every pivotal moment in his career, fate intervened, charting a course that brought him from Canada to Connecticut to the Carolinas. McPhee set out to study art after high school but soon realized he didn't know how to translate his passion into a livelihood. A gap year spent working in restaurants delivered the epiphany he needed. He decided to go to culinary school.

Enter an act of God. "I was a month away from moving to attend The Culinary Institute of New Orleans when Hurricane Katrina hit," McPhee explains. The school was flooded and never re-opened. Forced to find a new path, he went to Johnson & Wales instead. "It worked out for the best because unlike a traditional culinary school, they also have a nice focus on the business side—which allowed me to understand the big picture so I'd be ready to open my own place now," he says.

Fast forward a few years after graduation. With his first kitchen job at The Cloister under his belt, McPhee was packing up for Denver to take the next step in his career when the market crashed. The phone rang with news of a hiring freeze. Suddenly directionless, he spent a few days visiting a friend in Columbia, South Carolina. By chance, he met the chef at Motor Supply Company and decided to come on as sous chef. "Those three years were a time to build confidence," he says, looking back. And the confidence gained was what he needed to earn a spot at Sean Brock's groundbreaking Husk when it opened in 2011, where he quickly worked his way up to executive sous chef.

The smell of grilled bread fills the air, and McPhee takes a final sip of his cocktail before heading back to the stove. In one deft move, he reaches in the skillet and turns the toasted sourdough with his fingers. He'll spread each toast with vivid salsa verde, almost neon in its intensity, and top it with salted cod, arugula, preserved lemon, pickled onion, and black radish. He slices each toast into sharable bites, just as he imagines people will do at The Anchorage, and piles them on a platter for passing. Its trek around the table is halted, though, when someone wants to snap an Instagram. And no wonder. This vibrant dish, like all of McPhee's cuisine, is too lovely to eat without first pausing to really take a look.

Drink to That:
(This page) Chef McPhee works on dish number five of the seven-course meal; a riff on the Negroni cocktail that bartender Stephen Phillips made on the spot; (opposite, clockwise from left) Stephen Phillips, the bartender at The Anchorage; charred mackerel awaits plating; Irma Johnson, the pastry chef at The Anchorage; course three: grilled sourdough, salted cod, salsa verde, arugula, preserved lemon, pickled onion, and black radish

FEAST OF THE SEVEN FISHES MENU:

1. Cold-water oysters, giardiniera, herbs
2. Smoked trout spread, pickles, rye crackers with herb salt
3. Grilled sourdough, salted cod, salsa verde, arugula, preserved lemon, pickled onion, black radish
4. Pasta alla chitarra, carrot broth, white shrimp, mussels, broccoli rabe
5. Charred mackerel, local apple, scallion, shoyu, ginger, chili
6. Whole roasted High Valley Farms trout, Brussels sprouts, sweet potato, kimchi, Thai basil
7. Mint panna cotta, pomegranate, dark chocolate, shiso, pistachio, bourbon chantilly

WINES
J. Lassalle, Champagne Brut Ter Cru Preference (NV); Thomas Batardière, Anjou Chenin Blanc L'Esprit Libre (2014)

GUEST LIST
Beth McPhee / Greg's wife
Stephen Phillips / Bartender at The Anchorage
Irma Johnson / Pastry Chef at The Anchorage
Nicholas McSherry / General Manager at The Anchorage
Ed Buffington / Co-owner of The Community Tap and partner in The Anchorage
Kim Buffington / Ed's wife



Eat, Drink & Be Merry:

Guests enjoy course four of handmade pasta alla chitarra, with carrot-broth, white shrimp, mussels, and broccoll rabe. Chef McPhee's cuisine is vegetable-forward, with a focus on local produce from land and sea.





Sea Change:

(Above, left to right) Ed Buffington, co-owner of The Community Tap and partner in The Anchorage, selected J. Lassalle Champagne to pair with starting dishes; the pasta alla chitarra with white shrimp and mussels; cold-water oysters with giardiniera and herbs

"Complementary color is really important to us," he explains. He lists a few of the elements to consider when building a plate—salt, sugar, acid, texture, height, composition—but comes back to color, his studies in art evident as he speaks: "If I'm going to put a green on a plate, it will always be a bright green. There's nothing worse than a brown pesto." He stops, then adds, "You eat with your eyes." He is very earnest about this.

The radish toasts have disappeared, and it's time for oysters. Ed Buffington, co-owner of The Community Tap and a partner in The Anchorage, pours more wine—a crisp chenin blanc from Thomas Batardière. McPhee has made quick work of shucking the cold-water oysters and is nestling them in a tray of crushed ice. "Around the holidays in Connecticut, my family always had hot Italian sandwiches," he says, as he spoons a bit of bright giardiniera onto each raw oyster. "This giardiniera is a nod to that, and it brings a kick of acid that hits the spot with wine." The tray of oysters sails around the table, stopping when Irma Johnson, pastry chef at The Anchorage, announces that she's never tried oysters before. After some instruction, and then some coaching, Irma slurps one down. Her reaction is perhaps more anti-climactic than hoped for. "I taste the sea," she shrugs, smiling. The tray starts up again, amid laughter, and someone wonders what McPhee is bringing out next.

You could say that this tableau—close friends laughing over beautiful shared plates—is what McPhee had in mind when he decided to open The Anchorage. You could say this vision drove every element of the restaurant, from the menu (eclectic small plates) to the prices (modest enough for a lovely meal to become a weekly staple rather than a special occasion) to the atmosphere (casual and comfortable). But you could also credit it to divine intervention: a set of blueprints dropped in his lap.

Opening a restaurant was always the end goal. "I always knew I wanted to open my own place. I'm just a little surprised by how quickly it came," he says. After leaving Husk, McPhee came north to the Upstate in 2013. He served as the executive chef at High Cotton and, eventually, Restaurant 17, where he crystallized the bright, vegetable-forward approach that typifies his cuisine. Just as he was beginning to dream about his own restaurant, fate interrupted a third time. Over lunch, the man who would become his landlord unexpectedly invited McPhee to come see a space. It was so perfect—and McPhee fell for it so fast—that he went home and told his wife, "I think someone wants to give us a restaurant."

Here was a place McPhee had written off. He had once considered the Village of West Greenville as a possible location for a future restaurant, but ultimately decided: "The neighborhood isn't ready yet. I thought, someone's going to do it, but it's not going to be us." Seeing the building—now painted a deep blue for The Anchorage—changed all that. "I realized: maybe the somebody that has to go in there and open something first will be us."

The blueprints fast-tracked his dreams of a restaurant from "someday" to right now. The Anchorage came together quickly because the building blocks were already there, in McPhee's mind. He knew the kind of food he wanted to cook and the

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kind of environment he wanted to create, but bigger than that, he knew how to make it happen. His unique experiences—hotel kitchens, the business-focused culinary school, executive chef positions at a young age—turned out to be the ideal prep school for his own venture. "Maybe it's hurricanes and market trends that steered me in the right direction," he laughs.

Steam rises as McPhee carries a big bowl—made for The Anchorage by local potter Darin Gehrke—to the table. It's filled with his playful take on the traditional clams and linguine: *pasta alla chitarra* (a signature ingredient for McPhee) with shrimp, mussels, and broccoli rabe in a carrot broth. The saucy, red-orange strands are reminiscent of the classic red-sauce pastas McPhee remembers from his childhood in Connecticut, but the earthy sweetness of carrot takes your taste buds on a delightful U-turn. Second helpings are served, but he's already back at the stove, finishing the grandest dish of the feast: whole-roasted trout with Brussels sprouts, sweet potatoes, kimchi, and Thai basil. Trout, for McPhee, is a love story—the kind where chef meets local producer and bliss follows. It's become an important part of his cuisine over the two years, thanks to High Valley Farms, where the silvery fish is hand-caught in mountain waters and delivered to him.

You'd think the prospect of dessert after six courses would be a daunting one, but McPhee's modern fare has paced everyone through the feast. "By the end of

Anchors Away:

Chef McPhee's restaurant The Anchorage is scheduled to open this winter. McPhee hopes the space will reflect its name: "something that provides a strong hold or connection"; (bottom, left to right) Chef McPhee works on plating; course 6, the *pièce de résistance*: whole-roasted hand-caught trout with Brussels sprouts, sweet potatoes, kimchi, and Thai basil; The Community Tap's Ed Buffington pours a glass of chenin blanc for his wife Kim.

a long meal, I like to serve lighter desserts that don't leave you looking for the nearest couch," he says. Irma helps him serve the mint panna cotta, garnished with pomegranate, dark chocolate, pistachio, shiso, and bourbon chantilly. "Plus," he adds, grinning, "I'm a sucker for panna cotta."

Spoons clink, the universal sound of happiness. By this point, all the evidence of a good meal is here. Puddles of wax on the table? Check. Empty wine bottles crowding the corner? Check. Laughter, and more laughter? Check. This sense of community and deep connection is what McPhee remembers about the boyhood Feasts of Seven Fishes he experienced with his Italian friends growing up in Connecticut. And it's what he hopes to achieve in the Village with The Anchorage.

After work on the restaurant was underway, there was a moment when McPhee stood in the echo-y, unfinished space with a long list. He and his partners Mike Okupinski and Ed Buffington had been brainstorming names. He looked down, landed on 'The Anchorage.' He said it out loud. It just felt right. Later, a quick check of Webster's proved his intuition correct: the third definition of *anchorage* was "something that provides a strong hold or connection."

McPhee looks now at this glowy table, stacked with dishes and half-empty glasses, just a few blocks down from his other tables at The Anchorage. The name is manifesting its own destiny. Connections between people, in the neighborhood, are already taking root.

Time for another round of cocktails. 🍷

