

# Her Old Kentucky Home

Twenty-five years after returning home, Ouita Michel has created a mini-restaurant empire built on Bluegrass bounty

By Jennifer Stewart Kornegay

“I

CAN'T COUNT THE NUMBER OF times, after eating my food, people have said, 'You could have done anything if you'd stayed in New York,' or, 'This is good enough to be anywhere.' I'm thinking, 'Damn straight it is! Who do you think you're dealing with?'" The frustration weighting chef Ouita Michel's voice disappears as she answers her own question with a throaty laugh, part chuckle and part giggle. She quickly reaffirms that leaving the heat of Manhattan's kitchens and coming home to Kentucky twenty-five years ago was not settling, it was choosing. Choosing to rediscover roots; choosing to focus on food, not fanfare (although she's earned numerous accolades, including multiple James Beard award nominations).

She was ahead of her time in this and other aspects of her Ouita Michel Family of Restaurants—six establishments in and around Lexington (and another one on the way): her white-tablecloth Holly Hill Inn, deli Wallace Station, Smithtown Seafood, Windy Corner Market, Honeywood, and Glenn's Creek Café, plus a bakery. "I'm loving that now, especially in the South, there's a renewed recognition of rural areas and smaller cities," she says. She nods to the scene outside her car window, split-rail fences framing a county road cutting through fields of low, undulating hills. "This is real horse country out here," she says. It's the outskirts of Midway, Kentucky, about twelve miles northeast of Lexington (where Michel grew up), home to what she and her staff call the "mothership," her first restaurant, the Holly Hill Inn, and next door, her home with husband Chris and daughter Willa.

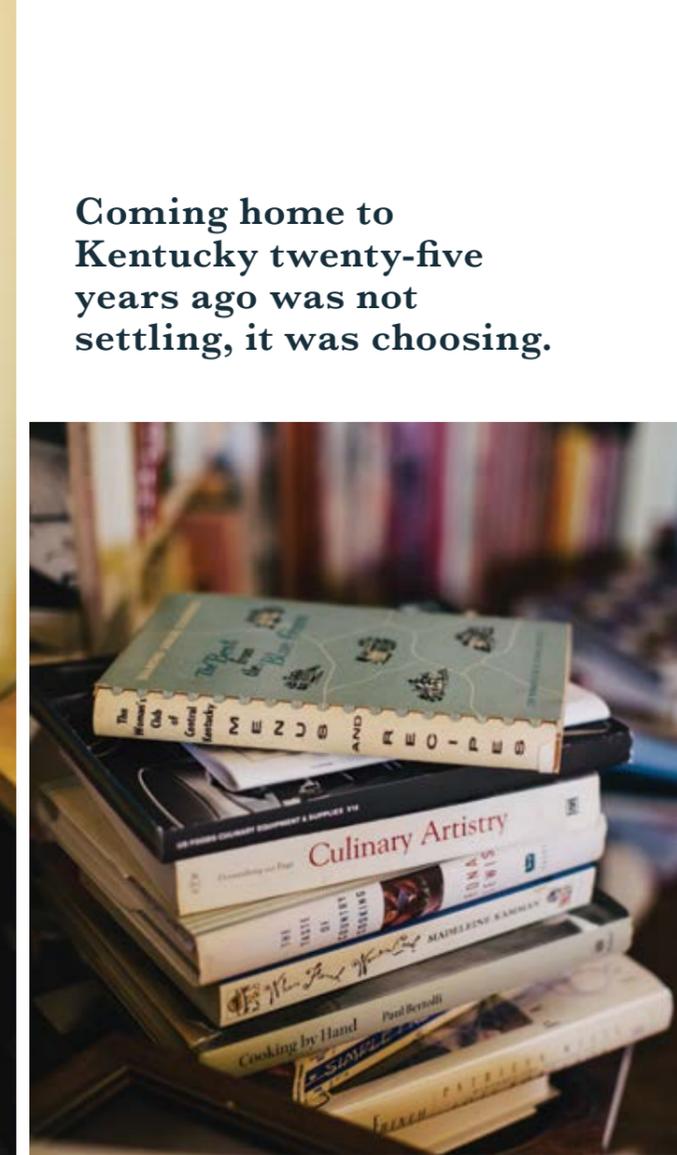
Initially, coming home was temporary. She'd moved to New York to attend the Culinary Institute of America when she was 21, and eight

years later, in 1993, was engaged and convinced by her mother that she had to get married here. Between dress fittings and invitation picking, she and Chris (who she met at CIA) were going to decide what was next. "We thought we'd end up opening a restaurant in New York; I had no thoughts of staying in Kentucky." That is, until she was back on its bluegrass-blanketed soil under wide open skies; the combination was a powerful balm. "As soon as I got here, I realized how much I had missed it and how much I missed my mom," she says. "It was this instant 'aah.'" Throw in the realities of New York, and Lexington looked better than ever. "New York is a tough place to open a business," she says, "and the accessibility of everything here—advice, help, a loan—was appealing."

The final incentive to stay was the chance at culinary communion. "I realized that I wanted to be part of a community," she says. But she brought a little New York with her, an attitude she had to shed to find her Kentucky-centric food philosophy. "I'd been trained in New York, and all my cooking experience was in Manhattan," she says. "That can make you arrogant. You think you know what constitutes good food and what doesn't, and you start discounting a lot of the food you grew up with."

She didn't have much respect for Kentucky's unofficial state libation either. When she first got home and was cooking at a downtown Lexington restaurant, bourbon wasn't big in culinary circles. "There would invariably be someone sitting at the bar, fork in one hand, eating my dish, glass of bourbon in the other. It drove me insane. I thought, 'They can't possibly taste the food.'" Today, as the chef in residence at Woodford Reserve, one of Kentucky's most revered distilleries, she's done a 180 and often incorporates the spirit in her recipes.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JESSIE KRIECH-HIGDON



Coming home to Kentucky twenty-five years ago was not settling, it was choosing.

She stresses the way most people think about bourbon has changed dramatically in the last two decades. “And it’s interesting, because I think there’s still a sense in my industry that if you’re not in a big urban environment, you’re not making it, and yet these famed distilleries, out in little places like Versailles, they’re part of a rural economy,” she says. Midway’s got 1,700 residents, and even Lexington (population 318,000) isn’t a huge market. Surrounded by farmland, both places haven’t strayed far from their agrarian background. “I realized that I could have an impact here, that I could change the food culture for the better,” she says.

She’s an outspoken champion of Kentucky-grown and Kentucky-raised foods (and the folks that produce them)—proof is the more than \$2 million in products her restaurants have purchased from area farmers. It started in 2001 with her quest for quality when she opened

Holly Hill Inn. “It’s about the primacy of ingredients,” she says. She wanted fresh—and that meant local. But being in Kentucky didn’t immediately translate to being *of* Kentucky. “A few years in, I saw that what I’m doing is about Kentucky, and the only way you can express Kentucky cuisine really, is to use Kentucky agriculture,” she says, “so my commitment to sourcing locally got stronger.”

At that time, the “eat local” movement was in its infancy, but it was growing in the Lexington area, with Michel helping drive it. “I wanted a supply of good, fresh product, but there weren’t young people going into farming, so I also wanted to be part of an economic solution for farmers, so young people would see, “There is this market for my products locally.’ That’s how we really get Kentucky cuisine.”

And she doesn’t limit “Kentucky cuisine” to beaten biscuits and burgoo. “If your parents came here from Thailand, and you’ve lived in

Quita Michel and her husband, Chris, cook at home. **Opposite, clockwise from left:** Michel at home; a stack from the chef’s cookbook collection; grits and greens are almost ready; the family dog, Tia. **Opening spread:** The Michels and Tia on their front porch.

Kentucky most of your life, your cultural heritage is Thai, but you can still use Kentucky ingredients in your pad thai,” she says. “Then it’s Kentucky cuisine; it’s both.”

### Stepping Out

“I don’t want to be a trend chaser, but I want to talk out maybe changing a few things,” she says. Her face, with red-framed readers perched on her nose, is lit by the bright morning sun and curiosity as she goes around the large dining room table asking opinions on Honeywood’s menu style. She’s chatting with graphic designers in her Midway office about replacing verb-driven descriptions of dishes with just an ingredient list.





the strategic side of what her restaurants serve. “I get to do more recipe research, and I love that,” she says.

In 2017, she took another leap, opening Honeywood in an environment about as different from her other spots as she could get: an upscale mall, but a mall nonetheless. The developers spent months convincing her. “Going into the heart of chain restaurant territory and doing local food is a challenge,” she says. “But we’re doing it.” Servers ferry plates of Kentucky beef burgers smothered with a silky mayocheddar spread and resting between two crisp-tender hoecakes, earthy carrot croquettes, and snack portions of country ham, biscuits, and pickles to diners in an airy room with natural light bouncing off whitewashed brick, dark wood, and brass accents. It’s warm and comfy, yet elegant. “I’m really proud of this place; the vibe turned out just right,” she says.

### Cooking’s Call

“I want more chives and dill, but we were swimming in basil last year,” says Honeywood’s executive chef, Josh Smouse, as he and Michel go over a list of upcoming produce with one of Honeywood’s primary farmer-suppliers. Getting the right mix of ingredients in a way that works for the restaurant and the farmer takes constant communication. The result is a steady stream of fresh food that Michel believes differentiates Smouse’s dishes from nearby offerings. “Our culture wants more spice, more

**“There’s still a sense in my industry that if you’re not in a big urban environment, you’re not making it.”**

sugar, more salt,” she says. “We forget what real food tastes like. It’s about balance; we want to make our food taste good without overpowering or outshining the ingredients.”

Striking balance is part of what drew her into the kitchen. “Cooking involves art, craft, history, politics, collaboration,” she says. She’s loved it since she was a child, helping her mom feed her two siblings, but then, in the days before cable food channels, she never imagined it was a career. “That was the 1970s; there weren’t many female chefs. There weren’t really chefs at all, not [ones] that everyday people knew about.”

She kept cooking for fun and went to the University of Kentucky, excelling on the debate team. She gave a few moments’ thought to law school, and then decided chef’s whites and sharp knives fit her better than dark suits and legal texts, and enrolled in the Culinary Institute of America. She relishes competition, a holdover from her debate days. “You don’t open this many restaurants without being competitive.” Michel has always been in it to win, but she’s fair-minded in her approach.

### Changing the Game

“I need your input on pies we want to add to our existing selection for the new restaurant,” she says. Sitting again around a table, picking the brains of the employees at her Midway Bakery—which, housed in an old elementary school cafeteria, supplies breads and desserts to all her restaurants—Michel asks questions and listens to answers. She gives the bakers’ ideas and her own thoughts equal measure, but there’s no doubt she’s in charge. “It’s demanding to command a kitchen; it’s definitely a confidence game,” she says later at Honeywood. “You have to be confident in



**Clockwise from left:** Michel and cook Talitha Schroeder stem kale; the Michels opened Holly Hill Inn in 2001; the dining room at Holly Hill. **Opposite:** Holly Hill’s interior.

It’s a small detail, but one of many she’s constantly evaluating to ensure every element benefits the overall experience. Her company has more than 200 employees and will be adding another 50 soon, as her new (yet unnamed) downtown Lexington restaurant opens this summer. She’s overseeing a culinary empire, something that wasn’t part of the original plan. “It just grew, and for a while I was still running the Holly Hill kitchen with all of this other stuff going on.” Three years ago, when she turned 50, her mom passed away.

That strife and the compounding stress of her multiple restaurants pushed a breakthrough. “My identity was wrapped up in being a chef, but I realized, you can either work in your kitchen or run your business, and I had been doing a kinda crappy job at both.”

She turned Holly Hill’s kitchen over to chef Tyler McNabb, and stepped up to truly



helm her company. But she still cooks: every day at home for her family (including a picky 13-year-old), at events, and any time she gets out of sorts. “When I get owly, I go into the kitchen and get centered,” she says. “That’s my treat now.” Another pleasure is delving into

everything you are presenting to your staff so they understand where you’re coming from. As a woman, that’s even more important.”

The industry has a different playing field for women, she says. “There’s been a lack access, but it’s changing, and that’s exciting. I have a lot of women in my company, young women, and mentoring them is one of the things I like the most.” She touted the first all-female advisory council (that she’s on) for the 2018 Atlanta Food & Wine Festival as evidence of a shift. “That’s so great. A wonderful young woman, Elizabeth McCall, the master taster at Woodford, is serving with me.”

Hearing the multiple sexual harassment stories that have been spilling out of the food world, she feels lucky. “I didn’t have any of those experiences,” she says. “But it’s a tough environment; you have to have a thick skin.” Creating a better working environment in her own kitchens is a priority. “When you’re young, you’re aggressive in the way you approach everything, at least I was,” she says. “Now, I have less stress with seven restaurants than I did with just one. I’ve matured.” And while she’s always set high standards for her employees, she values their work, and has shown it for years by providing full-time staff with health insurance, a rarity in the restaurant industry.

### Cooking Up Connection

Michel’s quarter century in Kentucky has witnessed myriad changes, but one constant is her desire to create and nourish connections using food. “For me, cooking is a link—to a culture, to a past, to a person,” she says. “I recently got in the kitchen with a friend who taught me how to make her grandmother’s chicken and dumplings,” she says. “It was nothing complex, but it meant so much.” Back in February, Michel served the dish at the James Beard House in New York, making the dumplings, but with fried rabbit.

With the opening of her seventh restaurant in mere months, Michel says it will be her last, as she toys with writing cookbooks. “I’d like to do one that preserves heritage recipes but advances them too,” she says. “But that’s the tricky part, how to honor their past and also bring them forward to a new generation.” And she’ll never tire of connecting Kentuckians to their past and to a brighter food future, through things like her work with area foodways programs and the nonprofit Food Chain, where she’s a founding board member. “What I’m here to do is to express the culture of Kentucky through my food,” she says. “It’s not to be a New York chef in Kentucky, not to do the style of Le Bernardin in Kentucky. My career, my soul, my family, my value system: It’s all rooted in Kentucky; I am a Kentuckian.”

For extra-rich grits, swap heavy cream for milk. At the inn, Michel lets the grits sit over the pilot light for about an hour and a half “letting them swell,” as her sous chef, Lisa Laufer, says.



## Pecan-Crusted Trout with Holly Hill Inn Extra-Creamy Cheese Grits

Serves 4

### For the grits:

2 cups milk  
2 teaspoons salt  
1 cup stone-ground white grits  
(Michel uses grits from Weisenberger Mill)  
2 cups grated sharp white cheddar cheese  
½ teaspoon cayenne pepper

### For the trout:

1 cup pecan pieces  
½ cup stone-ground yellow cornmeal  
1½ teaspoons salt  
½ teaspoon white pepper  
½ teaspoon paprika  
½ teaspoon freshly ground black pepper  
1 cup buttermilk  
4 boneless trout fillets, skin on  
½ cup canola oil

**1. Make the grits:** In a heavy 2- to 4-quart pot with a lid, bring 2 cups of water, milk, and salt to a hard boil. Add grits, reduce heat, and stir until they come back to a simmer and starch begins to develop. Cover grits and reduce heat as low as possible. Cook for at least 30 to 40 minutes. Check them occasionally to make sure they don't scorch on the bottom, but don't stir too frequently. Add the cheese and cayenne and taste for salt.

**2. Make the trout:** Combine pecans, cornmeal, and spices in a food processor and pulse until the nuts are coarsely ground. Pour into a shallow baking pan. Pour buttermilk into another shallow baking pan. Clean trout fillets of any small pin bones, but leave skin on. Place them in buttermilk. In a large cast-iron skillet over medium-high heat, heat the oil, about ½-inch deep. Remove fish from the buttermilk and press into nuts and cornmeal. Then flip fillet, until nicely coated. Repeat with all four pieces.

**3. Preheat oven to 250 degrees.** Once oil shimmers, lay fillets flesh side down into the hot pan. Cook for 5 minutes, then flip and cook the skin side for about 5 minutes more. (Depending on the size of skillet, you might have to sauté the fish in batches). Transfer to a cookie sheet and place in oven to hold until ready to serve. Serve with Holly Hill's tartar sauce (recipe follows).

## Holly Hill Inn Tartar Sauce Makes 1½ cups

### For the mayonnaise:

1 egg yolk  
1 teaspoon salt  
Dash cayenne  
1 teaspoon dry mustard  
½ cup vegetable oil  
¼ cup olive oil  
1 tablespoon lemon juice

### For the sauce:

1 cup mayonnaise  
1 teaspoon dijon mustard  
1 tablespoon minced parsley  
1 tablespoon minced shallot  
1 tablespoon minced pickle  
(Michel uses cornichons)  
1 hardboiled egg, minced  
1 tablespoon minced capers  
1 teaspoon fresh lemon juice

In a blender, combine the egg yolk with salt, cayenne, and dry mustard. In a separate container, combine oils. Turn the blender on and drizzle in a little of the blended oil. With machine running, slowly drizzle in lemon juice and then the remaining oil. (You can also omit this step and use store-bought mayo—Michel likes Duke's or Hellmann's). Transfer 1 cup of mayo to a bowl and combine with the remaining ingredients. Let sit for 20 minutes. Check seasoning and adjust as needed.

