

RUSH JAGOE'S SOUTHERN STORIES

BY JESSICA GORDON

Rush Jagoe is almost as good a pool player as he is a photographer—I found that out last year, when Jagoe and I cued up after the *PDN* Photo Annual party in New York City, where he was in town meeting with photo reps after being named one of 30 up-and-coming photographers by our sister publication *Photo District News*. A turn through his portfolio at rushjagoe.com and it's clear why Jagoe was chosen as one of *PDN*'s 30. Though only 26, the Kentucky native has cultivated an oeuvre that belies the work of a much older photographer, with richly-colored images brimming with context and personality. With a strong emphasis on storytelling, Jagoe's subjects are often artisans themselves—whether it be cross-stitching embroiderer Elsa Hansen, or a group of Mississippi moonshiners. Now based in New Orleans, Jagoe is the southern go-to for editorial clients in New York City (the week we spoke, he was shooting a portrait story for Dr. Oz's *The Good Life* magazine, and another for *Modern Farmer*). He has not only gained artist representation by Anderson Hopkins, but his portraits and editorial features continue to be published in *Food + Wine*, *Saveur*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *Rolling Stone* and *Reader's Digest*, to name a few.

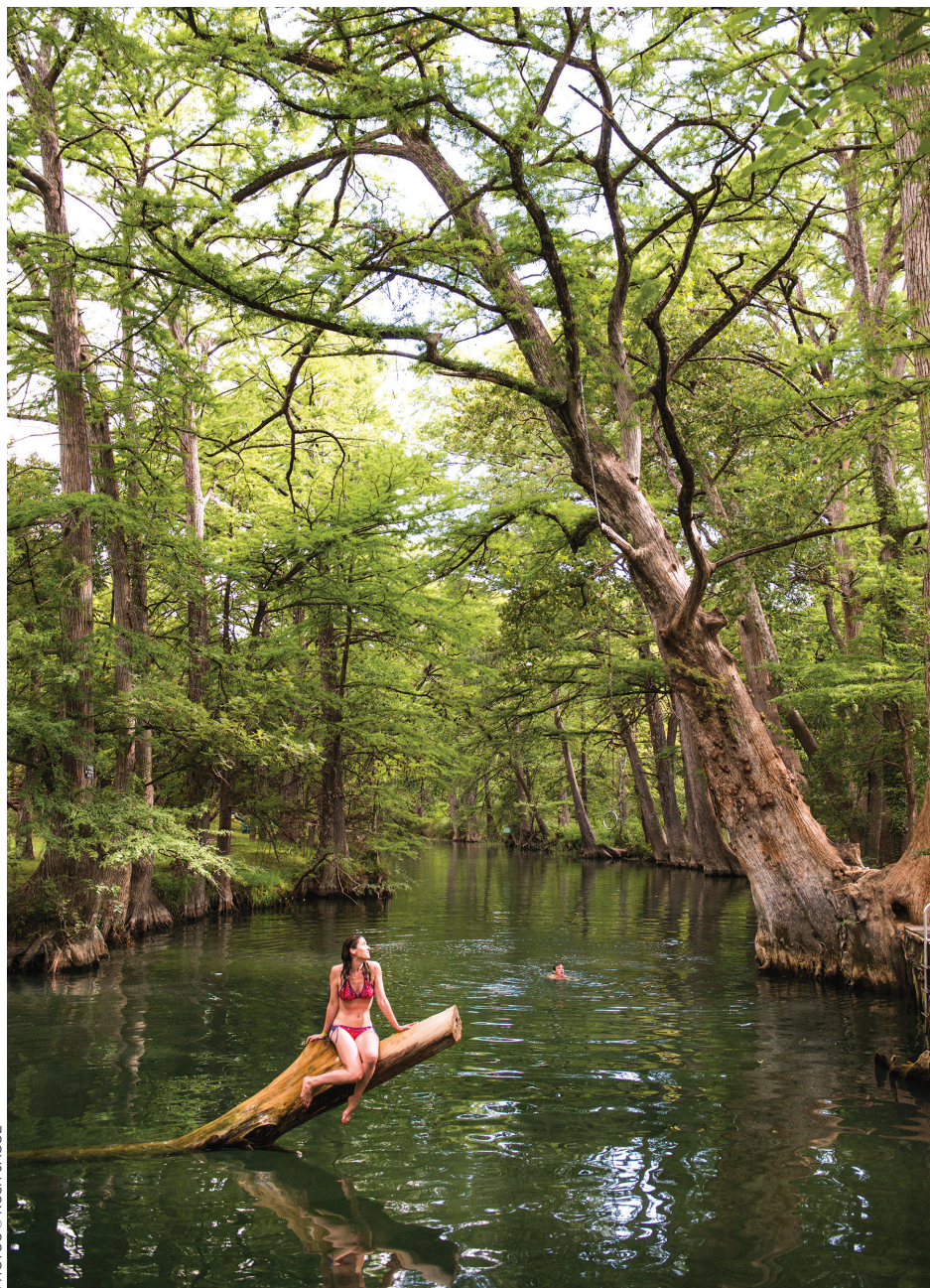
Balanced Diets

Part of what draws clients to Jagoe's work and makes it interesting is not only his depth in storytelling, but the very reason he won so many design awards in high school: an adept eye for color, composition and moments, proof of which lies in his food photography. ▶

Right: Remnants of a roasted fish with salsa verde, from Pêche Seafood Grill in New Orleans, shot in direct sunlight for *Garden & Gun*.

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PHOTOS © RUSH JAGOE



Above: Blue Hole, a public swimming hole in Wimberley, Texas. **Far left:** An apple pie from Big Bob Gibson Bar-B-Q in Decatur, Alabama. **Left:** A cocktail in a pineapple at Cane and Table in New Orleans' French Quarter. All images shot for *Southern Living's* "Road Trip" feature.

"When I photograph food, I look at it as a living thing and all the work that went into it," Jagoe says. That may have to do with the fact that his wife, Melissa Martin, is a notable New Orleans chef. "I remember having a meeting with a creative director who said, 'Your food [images] are good because you photograph food as a person.' There are people who do more extensive food styling than I do, but mostly it's just finding or creating the good light, using the environment and props to the best of your ability, and letting the people preparing the food—and consuming the food—inspire you to shoot it the way you do."

Being able to capture the essence of a location is another specialty for the photographer, and Jagoe says it comes from a genuine curiosity with the jobs he takes. "You have to be interested in what you're shooting," he says. "That's easy for me, because I'm generally a curious and interested person, and I think that's what comes across in the pictures. I try not to overthink; I let it happen naturally. There are times when places aren't visual enough and I have to be more creative and figure out ways around the light or the situation to get the best picture, but that's all part of your tool kit that you build as a photographer."

Budding Up

Jagoe's interest in photography sprouted as a 12-year-old, when he began toting his mom's Minolta along with him on hunting trips. While trekking through the woods for his target, Jagoe would come across old coal mining operations turned public land near his Kentucky home. "It was kind of fun to explore and photograph decaying infrastructure," he says. He continued shooting photos through middle and high school for the school newspaper and yearbook, excelling in design, but deciding to pursue photography because he enjoyed it more. After studying photojournalism at Western Kentucky University, he took two workshops at Penland School of Crafts in



Above: A pitmaster of Kreuz Market in Lockhart, Texas. Also shot for *Southern Living*.

North Carolina—one of which focused on visual storytelling.

“I didn’t really know what was out there; the photographers I knew in Kentucky were newspaper photographers,” Jagoe says. “I was going to school for photojournalism, but I was exposed to a lot of different kinds of photography that were not necessarily fitting inside the standards imposed by photojournalism. I was interested in being more creative, but still doing storytelling and narrative photography. I decided photojournalism school wasn’t for me... I wanted to meet people, travel and tell stories—editorial and commercial were the best places to pursue that kind of work.”

After his photo education, Jagoe was persuaded by a friend to move to New Orleans in 2008. He built his portfolio by photographing stories about the Gulf Coast leading up to the oil spill, assisting photographer Cedric Angeles and attending portfolio reviews like Photo-

NOLA, where he met *Garden & Gun*’s photography director, Maggie Kennedy, whom he described to *PDN* in 2013 as a mentor and “a big guide in my work.” It was both *Garden & Gun* and *Southern Living* that gave Jagoe his first significant assignments.

Chasing Lifestyle

A recent *Southern Living* road trip feature sent Jagoe from Charleston, South Carolina, to Austin, Texas, over nine days—shot list in hand—for images that ran the gamut from the Hunter Museum of American Art in Chattanooga, Tennessee, to a Lockhart, Texas, smokehouse specializing in brisket. “The first three days of the trip, it was pouring rain, so it made it pretty challenging to make the kind of summer travel photographs [editors] wanted,” says Jagoe, who shoots with natural light whenever possible, or cinema lights if budget allows. “After that, everything got bright and sunny,

and it was a race against the clock to make as many beautiful pictures in these places we were going. Some days we’d be shooting seven or eight locations while also driving six to eight hours between them. It was pretty grueling, but a lot of fun.” Originally set to run as a feature in one issue of the magazine, the breadth of quality content convinced editors to spread the road trip over five months.

Next up for Jagoe—aside from a bow hunting expedition in the Alaskan tundra he’s planning to take with his father—is a continued foray into commercial photography. “Since I’ve signed with Anderson Hopkins last year, I’ve been learning to apply my style and sensibility to commercial work and pursue it as well,” he says.

There’s no doubt he’ll do in every genre what makes his editorial so special: conveying a sense of location—wherever that may be—and a connection with the people in it. ☺