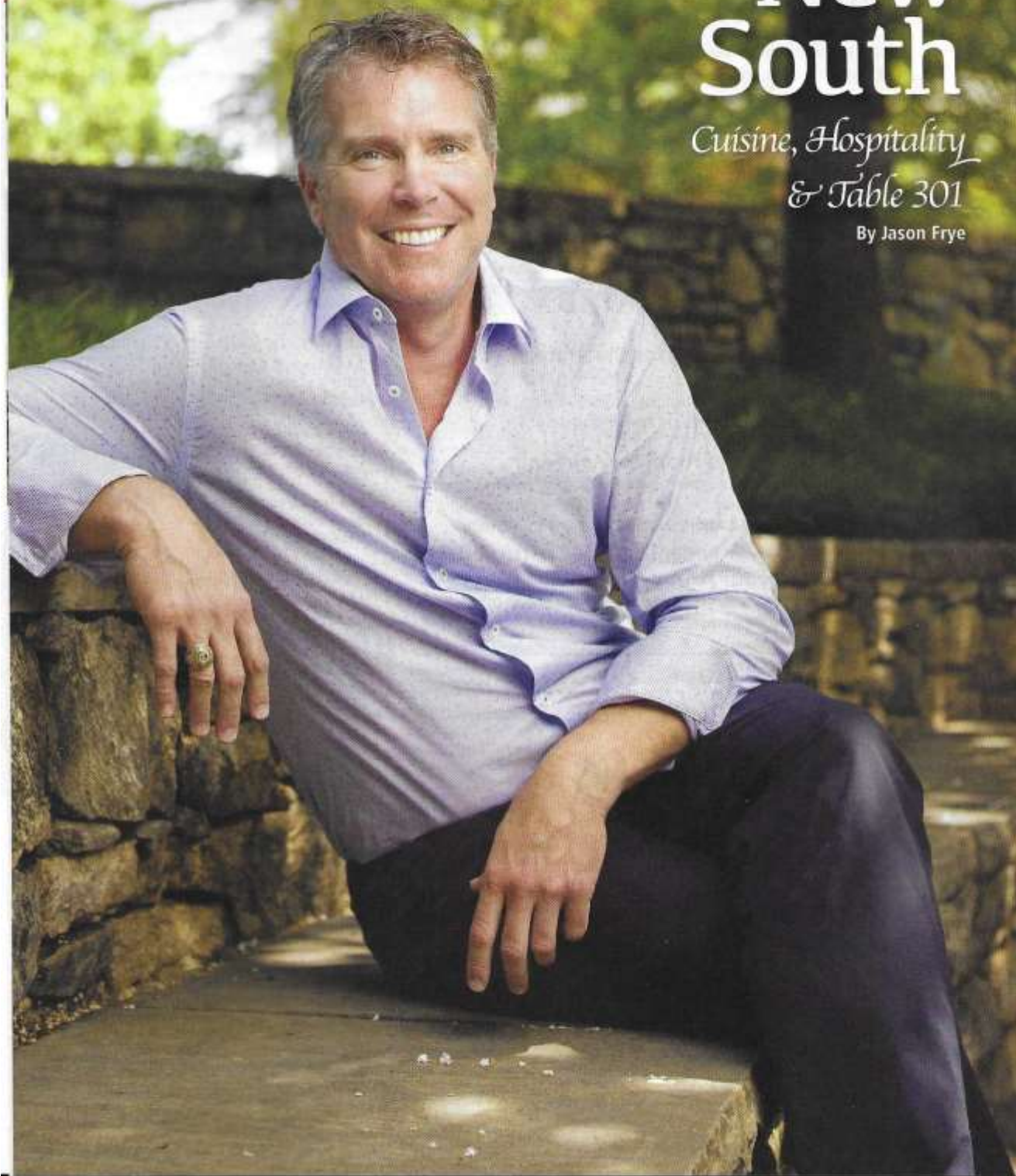


GO CLOSER TO HOME

The New South

*Cuisine, Hospitality
& Table 301*

By Jason Frye





When AAA Premier Member, Carl Sobocinski, speaks, everyone listens. As founder and owner of Table 301, the 10-restaurant group that's a juggernaut in the Greenville, S.C., culinary scene, he's earned this respect. But while others in his position may allow ego to reign, Sobocinski does not; with him it's easy conversation, quick smiles and warm, genuine, greetings for old friends and new acquaintances.

As he flits from group to group at a Southern Foodways Alliance dinner at Jianna, his contemporary Italian restaurant overlooking Falls Park in

with an employee; a food truck called Highway 301; and Southern Pressed Juicery, a cold-pressed juice bar. Oh, and Soby's New South Cuisine.

With the exception of Soby's, none of these restaurants are definitively Southern, but they all show the influence of Southern cuisine in their inspiration, ingredients, preparations and fusions of flavor. Much like Sobocinski himself.

Sobocinski came to South Carolina in 1986 to study architecture and design at Clemson. He traded New England winters for Southern summers and learned his passions didn't lie solely in architecture, but spread over to the restaurant and hospitality industry. At



downtown Greenville, he leaves everyone in his wake buoyant. Even after 20 years of owning and operating restaurants, his energy and passion are infectious, making him a rare find in an industry with high burnout rates and higher stress levels.

A Bigger Table

Table 301's 10 restaurants push the boundaries of Southern food, updating regional classics and creating fresh takes on Southern dining. That said, not every restaurant Sobocinski touches is necessarily Southern. There's Jianna, the Italian restaurant; Passerelle, a French bistro; Mediterranean at The Lazy Goat; Nose Dive, a gastropub; Papi's Tacos, a taco and torta spot in collaboration

Clemson he worked in the kitchen of a country club. Not long after graduation he and a partner opened their first restaurant, The 858, in Greenville. In 1997 he opened his flagship, Soby's New South Cuisine in a historic building in downtown, a project that combined his architectural and restaurateur skillsets.

It paid off. They serve decidedly Southern dishes, but ones that are updated — more homages to the classics than carbon copies — and are made with fresh, local ingredients. Fried green tomatoes, shrimp and grits, mountain trout and a bevy of sides that reflect the local bounty





give it that traditional Southern feel, but dishes like hummus made from boiled peanuts, Nashville hot oysters (think Nashville's famous hot chicken, but in oyster form), and braised beef shortribs with polenta (think Italian grits) bring in a contemporary, playful touch and make Soby's a destination restaurant.

It makes each of Table 301's restaurants destination eateries, actually, and their success has helped create an environment where more restaurants can flourish and put Greenville on the map for the thousands of visitors who allow their taste buds to guide their travels.

Party of All

Culinary tourism has been a hot topic in both the travel and food worlds since the mid 2000s, but Sobocinski pushes past the simple idea behind culinary tourism — "I'll travel to this city or that just for the food" — and into the larger idea of visitation as an economic driver.

"Part of my mission — our mission — at Table 301 is to be ambassadors. All of us in the hospitality industry, we don't just sell food and beverage, we sell Greenville. We sell a place," he says.

They also sell an experience. Not just the experience of being in a particular restaurant or tasting a specific dish, but the experience of the town. That's why Sobocinski reaches beyond his own restaurant group, works with other owners and chefs, builds relationships within the hospitality and entertainment community to do things that benefit Greenville as a whole.

Along with friend and platinum-selling musician Edwin McCain, Sobocinski created Euphoria Food, Wine and Music, a four-day food and music extravaganza. Chefs come in from across the United States to cook, taste and experience Greenville. And so do visitors, who come for Euphoria but come back for a larger taste of Greenville.

"When we started Euphoria it was an offshoot of the dozen or

so charity concerts [Edwin McCain] was playing around town. At Table 301, we believe in giving back, so we wanted to help. Our idea was to put on one large charity event and distribute funding from one pool, but we had no idea what to expect," says Sobocinski.

In 2006, the first Euphoria, then a two-day event, ran over budget, but Table 301 and others kicked in to meet their charitable obligations. With a few lessons learned, they improved the event for the second year, learned a few more lessons, and made the third year even better. By 2010, Euphoria was a four-day festival featuring 40 chefs from 32 states cooking in demonstration kitchens, preparing special dinners, participating in the grand tasting, and enjoying Greenville while doing it.

"Again, we want to be ambassadors for Greenville, so when a chef like Curtis Duffy comes to Euphoria, we don't pack his schedule with festival obligations, we give him plenty of time to sit in on other chef demos, see the town, try some of our restaurants. We try to give him an honest visitor experience," says Sobocinski.

It works as Duffy and others spread the word among their peers, diners and fans.

"I start getting emails and texts in March asking me 'What's September look like?' and saying 'Looking forward to being at Euphoria again this fall.' When you have busy chefs saying they're excited to be back to work at your festival and spend their time in a town in the corner of South Carolina, you know you're doing something right."

Southern hospitality. That's what Sobocinski's doing right. At his restaurants he serves it up on plates and platters and in every interaction with service and bar staff, with hosts and hostesses. In doing so he's

introducing diners not only to the Southern and Southern-inspired dishes at his own restaurants, but to Greenville and all it offers. ♦



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