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nashville

Restaurants

Meet the Chef: Austin Ray

Austin Ray

Owner and chef

The Melrose Neighborhood Pub

2535 Franklin Pike

712-8160

Though his name has often been associated with nightclubs (he and Benjamin Goldberg co-owned Bar Twenty3 and City Hall before they closed), Melrose owner and chef Austin Ray also can show off his mad skills elsewhere - the kitchen.

"For me, there is nothing better than groups digging into a big ol' basket of loaded waffle fries or sharing beer-braised jumbo wings," he said. "I enjoy the challenge of continually elevating the quality and value of simple foods and staying consistent through sharp increases in food sales. Our kitchen is bursting at the seams!"



How did you learn to cook?

Although I received some formal training while earning my degree in hospitality administration from Boston University, I'd say 70 percent of what I have learned came from experiences in real-world kitchens.

I was born and raised here in Nashville, and learned first about Southern cooking from my mom and granny. I worked my first catering gig at 15 and learned about professionalism, fresh ingredients and hard-to-get items in the deli and kitchen at the Corner Market in Belle Meade. I began to hone my creative spirit as a line cook at the Mad Platter and while creating menus for several restaurants in Boston and Nashville.

Where do you find inspiration?

I love to see chefs making strides, especially in Nashville. I used to pride myself on visiting every new restaurant in Nashville as it opened. I know the Nashville dining world is moving in the right direction because it's so hard to keep up these days!

Tell us about a couple menu items at The Melrose that you're happy about serving.

I'm proudest of our six specialty burgers, all made with natural beef raised right down the road at Hillview Farms in Franklin. No hormones or antibiotics, and amazing flavor. I love to see my guests having a burger made with beef from a few miles away with a cold Yazoo beer brewed right up the street.

If you could cook for anyone - living or otherwise - who would it be? What would you prepare?

I would cook a Melrose burger for the next car coming out of the drive-thru at the very popular fast food restaurant down the street so they would remember what real beef tastes like.

If you were stranded on a desert island, what three food items would you want with you?

I'll split that into meals:

Breakfast: lots of fruit and a solar-powered blender. Or Cocoa Crispies.

Lunch: Muffaletta sandwiches and Zapp's chips from Central Grocery in New Orleans.

Dinner: Everything that makes up the pizza department at City House.

If you could get a free ticket to anywhere in the world, where would you go? What would you eat?

Barcelona for a tapas rampage.

What could we always find in your home fridge?

Good beer, Louisiana hot sauce, natural eggs and some good cheese, if I'm lucky.

If you could choose your final meal, what would it be?

A big Southern spread including fried chicken, creamy mashed potatoes and gravy, beans and greens, in-season sliced tomatoes, real mac-and-cheese and a big slice of my mom's chocolate meringue pie. The works.

-- Jennifer Justus