




SEA ISLAND  
CHEF DE CUISINE  
GEORGIAN ROOM  
SCOTT CRAWFORD

# GREAT SCOTT

BY HOLLY HERRICK

The Georgian Room's regional flair, compliments of the chef, Scott Crawford



COTT CRAWFORD, the chef de cuisine of the Georgian Room at The Cloister, admits that he can sometimes get a little carried away about quality. But to spend a bit of time talking with this 33-year-old newcomer to Sea Island's culinary scene is to be more than a bit charmed by his dedication to doing things right. Crawford's particular brand of dedication is mixed with dashes of youthful enthusiasm, humility and wisdom that make him eminently likable, an unassuming player in the world of high-profile chefs.

The starting point for Crawford's journey to The Cloister was the town of Meadville, Pennsylvania, some two hours north of Pittsburgh. His mother was a homemaker with a talent for music and art; his father an engineer who brought "precision and analysis to the table." Their combined influence would serve Crawford well in a career for which artistry and meticulousness are essential ingredients. As for the sheer joy of cooking, it was another family member who had the greatest influence on the chef-to-be.

Crawford would regularly spend Saturday mornings in his grandmother's kitchen. At the tender age of 6, he was deemed too young and too "mischievous" to hang out at his grandfather's sawmill with his older brother. The youngster was mesmerized by his grandmother Crawford. "She would just touch food and make it do whatever she wanted," he says. "I didn't know it then, but I was learning an appreciation for it. I wanted to make the food work for me like it did for my grandmother. It was a bonding experience, but I later learned that she had taught me how to make food do things the way I wanted. The ingredients came together naturally for me. I just said, 'Wow.' It just happened."

Crawford nurtured his childhood attraction to cooking by enrolling at The American

Culinary Academy in Tampa, Florida. As part of a self-styled primer, these studies were preceded by a year of traveling the country on what he calls a "culinary tour." In California alone, he worked in restaurants all over the state. "I just knocked on people's doors and asked if I could cook for them." It was a journey to his destiny: "All of a sudden this light bulb went on, and I realized this is what I should be doing. I should pursue cooking. This is my passion. I love it."

That moment of clarity was helped along by a bit of good luck in finding the right mentors. One of them was Scott Howard, a chef at Tampa's *Mise en Place*, where Crawford worked after finishing culinary school. The young upstart was promoted to sous-chef after only a few days as a line cook. "I just wanted to *cook*," he says. "I stayed up all night looking at cookbooks and talking about the menu. It was unbelievable."

Crawford was particularly impressed by Howard's "joyful" outlook. "He had the capacity to really hide all the stress, and I took on that ability later," Crawford reflects thoughtfully. "He just got you excited every day." His stint at *Mise en Place* would land Crawford positions at a string of prestigious restaurants, where he continued to hone his skills. While working at the San Francisco restaurant *Black Cat*, he connected with the region's emphasis on fresh produce, then so prevalent in northern California. "You had so many farmers with their mushrooms, nettles, ferns and all these wild things that they would show up with in the city," he recalls.

Eventually, Crawford had an opportunity good enough to lure him back east, where he could also be closer to his family. Shortly after signing on with the Ritz-Carlton on Florida's Amelia Island, its sous-chef at the time, Richard Arnoldi, encouraged Crawford

Two tempting dishes from the Georgian Room's menu: bison rib eye with garlic risotto, porcini mushrooms, a selection of organic vegetables and crispy sage; roasted quail (below) with seared foie gras, succotash and huckleberries, garnished with fresh thyme leaves.

to further develop his own personal style. While grooming Crawford for the fine dining found in restaurants like the Georgian Room, Arnoldi would say, "If you're demanding of your people, you need to be ten times more disciplined, organized and creative than they are. You need to show up at work two hours before them and leave two hours after they do." Up until then, Crawford says looking back, everything was just about the cooking. But Arnoldi taught him leadership.

Crawford's work at Amelia Island put him on a trajectory that would lead to The Cloister. His professional introduction to the resort came when a Sea Island representative showed up at Amelia with a "beautiful bottle of cabernet," asking him to be a guest chef at a wine dinner. "I thought it was very nice that they came personally," says Crawford. "I did a wine event and had an amazing time."

He kept his finger on the pulse of developments at The Cloister as it underwent its subsequent rebuilding. All the while, he oversaw the acclaimed Dining Room at Woodlands Resort & Inn in Charleston, South Carolina. "Totally out of the blue, one day I called [Sea Island Executive Chef] Todd Rogers," Crawford recounts, "and he told me that someone had just asked him who he was going to choose as the Georgian Room's chef." The timing wasn't lost on Crawford, and apparently not on Rogers, either. But then, Crawford believes that everything in his past—his family influences, tutelage of chef mentors and familiarity with the South—has landed him precisely where he's meant to be.

In the Georgian Room, Crawford prepares what he defines as "refined Southern cuisine" in a menu that reflects Bill Jones III's passion for the best. That menu is also inspired by relationships Crawford has forged with artisans and farmers in the region and his dining



experiences in "little places" that serve the finest in Southern food. In his kitchen-in-the-round, a Montague Excalibur suite, he is surrounded by a young and driven staff. This design means "we're looking right at each other while we're cooking," says Crawford.

Like the chefs who helped cultivate his talents, Crawford attempts to mentor his young staff. He keeps a bulletin board in the kitchen and asks his team to post articles or other clippings their colleagues might find inspirational. Something Crawford himself has posted that captures his personal outlook is a quote from the motivational speaker and author Kenneth Blanchard: "There is a difference between interest and commitment. When you're interested in something, you do it only when it's convenient. When you're committed, you accept no excuses, only results." Fittingly, one of Crawford's contemporaries, Robert Carter, executive chef at Charleston's Peninsula Grill, describes the chef's approach to cooking as "methodical."

The result Crawford most strives for at the Georgian Room is to provide diners with an experience, rather than simply a meal. The experience is fostered through such things as tableside service (when classics such as Dover sole and sliced giant hearts of palm are served), a jacket-and-tie requirement and a service staff clad in black tie. "It's really grand, just really, 'Wow,'" says a beaming Crawford. "Every three minutes we're going to wow them, without being intrusive."

The chef's distinctive Southern-influenced menu includes roasted quail glazed with sweet Vidalia onion, seared foie gras, succotash and wild huckleberries; grits soufflé with sautéed Georgian white shrimp and smoked tomato; and a chilled spring-pea soup with a touch of mint and tarragon with lobster knuckles. Of course, all dishes will continue to be tweaked as the seasons change to ensure the freshest use of the region's rich ingredients. In addition, Crawford envisions a garden of herbs and some vegetables on the restaurant's terrace, where guests can step outside to "smell the aromas."

Whether in his kitchen or the breathtaking Georgian Room, Crawford seems to draw inspiration simply from being at Sea Island. Its storied past reminds the chef of just how high history has set the bar for him. The perennially upbeat Crawford couldn't welcome that challenge more if he tried. "I want our guests to be blown away every time they come into the restaurant," he says emphatically, "so I can live up to this kitchen and this room. It's not pressure—it's an honor." ■

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