

# POLISHED CASUAL

WITH FIVE  
BRANDS, BURKE  
HOSPITALITY  
GROUP PROVIDES  
AN ELEVATED  
CASUAL-DINING  
EXPERIENCE.

BY JODY SHEE



While the food-scene spotlight of the South is usually aimed at Nashville, Tennessee, Atlanta and Charleston, South Carolina, Charlotte, North Carolina, is becoming a food destination brick by brick—literally. For the past 30 years, Charlotte-based Burke Hospitality Group has been adding restaurants to the region that have a warm Southern aura partly achieved through timeless building materials, such as old bricks, stacked stone and hardwood floors.

Burke Hospitality Group is now five concepts—Harper’s Restaurant, Mimosa Grill, Upstream, One Catering and 1801 Grille—and if there’s one notion to describe the combined assortment, it’s polished casual, says founder Tom Sasser.

Theater was Sasser’s original passion, which he supported by working in Atlanta restaurants. When acting didn’t work out, a childhood friend beckoned him to Charlotte, and the two opened Harper’s Restaurant. The foodservice plan then—and now—was to open a place where they personally enjoyed the food and drinks served, “and have a place where guests and folks who come to work with us can have fun and feel cared for,” Sasser says.

Beyond that, they set themselves a high standard of providing restaurants that are easily accessible (not too expensive) with high-quality food made in-house with locally sourced ingredients as much as possible—back when “local” was a foreign word. After 30 years in business and with six restaurants, Sasser shares his thoughts and theories.

## WHAT DO YOU MEAN WHEN YOU DESCRIBE THE RESTAURANTS AS POLISHED CASUAL?

First, it is conveyed through the timeless construction material. We use warm, natural materials in our interior spaces to make people feel comfortable. Our restaurants are not highly designed or sterile. Additionally, we pay close attention to lighting to provide a warm, casual feel. We also carry it out through our menus and our open kitchens so guests can see what we are doing. We are proud of our people and the food they make. You will feel comfortable in jeans or a tie.

## WHAT MAKES YOUR RESTAURANTS UNIQUELY CHARLOTTE?

First, we are in different areas of the city—in main areas of town. It gives everyone a Burke Hospitality Group option in their area. Charlotte has become a global melting pot, and our city and our company have always embraced all of this diversity. Many of these international folks have come to work for us and have also opened restaurants in the city. We have all been influenced by them.

Thus, we do a lot of things with a Mexican flair. We have great salsa, chips and tacos. One of our appetizers is Dip Duo or Trio, with jalapeño pimento cheese, guacamole, creamy spinach or house salsa served with warm tortilla chips.

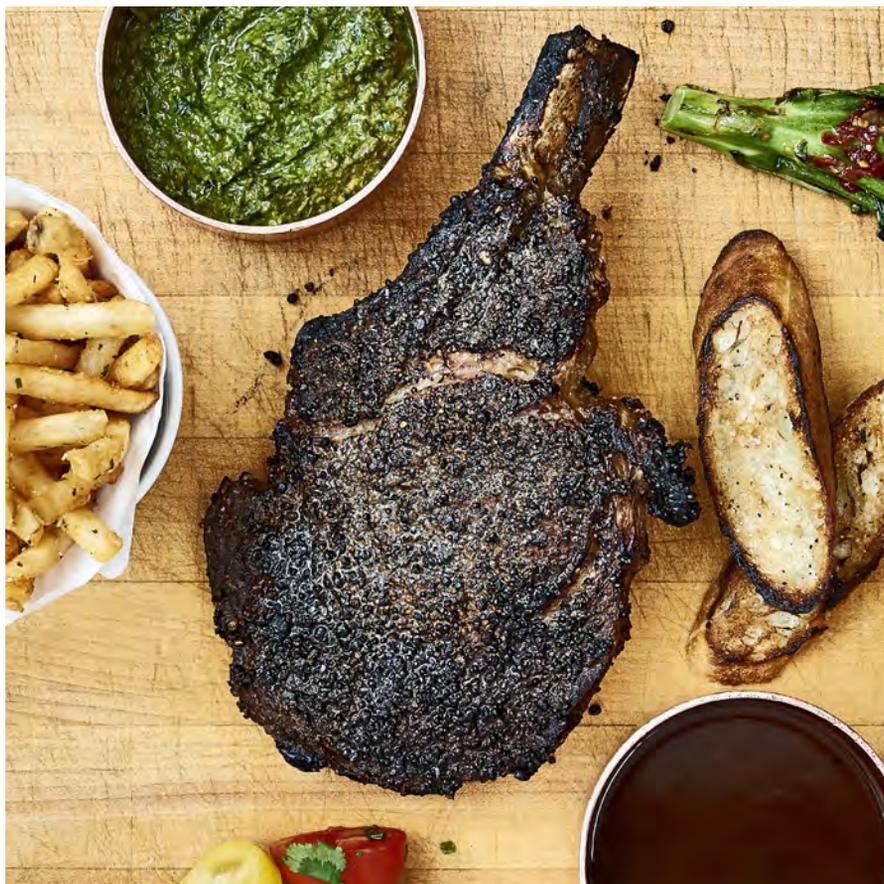


With three locations, Harper’s Restaurant focuses on American-style cuisine, including hickory-grilled steaks, fresh seafood, proprietary pit-cooked Carolina barbecue, fresh-ground burgers, specialty salads and sandwiches, and thin-crust pizza baked in a wood-fired oven.

**Dinner Menu Samples:** Pecan Crusted Trout with peach chutney, green beans and mashed potatoes; Hickory Grilled Tuscan Ribeye with basil pesto and baked sweet potato; Wild Boar & Bison Meatloaf with green beans and Yukon gold mashed potatoes; Crispy Shrimp Po’boy; and Slow Smoked Pulled Pork

**OPPOSITE:** Upstream offers a trio of appetizers: Big Eye Tuna Tacos, Charred Shishito Peppers and Spicy Shrimp Lettuce Wraps.

**ABOVE:** Harper’s Restaurant serves wood-fired pizza.



  
MIMOSA GRILL

Located a block from the Charlotte Convention Center, Mimosa Grill features global cuisine with a unique Southern twist and a farm-to-fork ethos. It was the 2015 winner of the Partners in Tourism Award for restaurants, recognized by The Charlotte Regional Visitors Authority/Visit Charlotte.

**Dinner Menu Samples:** Wood Oven Roasted Oysters with cultured butter and foraged sumac chili lemon vinaigrette; Fennel Sausage Flatbread with caramelized onions, uav (Uno Alla Volta) ricotta and sweet peppers; Springer Mountain Fried Chicken with Tennessee hot sauce, brown sugar mayo, pimento mac 'n' cheese and pickle slaw; Hickory Grilled Heritage Pork Chop with sweet potato and sorghum puree, braised greens and pumpkin seed gremolata.

**ABOVE:** Mimosa Grill regularly runs a rotating steak feature, including this bone-in Snake River Farms rib-eye with gremolata and house french fries.

At Upstream, our seafood restaurant, we have embraced a Pacific Rim-type profile. It's actually kind of a mashup combining Southern and Asian influences. For example, we have a Carolina Salt & Szechuan Pepper Catfish with blue crab and corn hushpuppies, kohlrabi slaw and tamarind tartar sauce. We also have a Sake Marinated Wild Sea Bass with lobster dumplings, bok choy, shiitake and shiso mirin broth.

But to the point of being Southern, one thing we brought to Charlotte was our family pimento cheese recipe. We've had a pimento cheeseburger and a pimento-crust fillet since 1987.

### YOU'VE SAID YOU WANT GUESTS TO FEEL LOVED AND CARED FOR. HOW IS THAT ACHIEVED?

It's through hiring and training a great staff. We try to hire for hospitality. We certainly believe in New York restaurateur Danny Meyer's definition of hospitality. Ninety percent of any business should be hiring and finding people with a hospitality gene. We try to get to that in the interview process. We want

those who understand they need to give more, and that they get more by giving more.

There are a lot of restaurants making good food. But what matters is how guests feel after they leave. They may forget the food, but they will remember the way they were treated and the way the people made them feel. These are huge components to success.

### BECAUSE THAT'S SO IMPORTANT TO YOU, CAN YOU TALK A LITTLE FURTHER ABOUT THE HIRING INTERVIEW?

We update our questions all the time, giving the managers ways to ask the same question to get people to talk about themselves and what they care about. We ask what they like to do with their time away from work—what they like to participate in. Maybe it's a charity or a church group or neighborhood situation, or maybe they are into helping rescue animals.

We believe it's great if they come with job skills, but if not, we can train them if they want to do the job and are curious. But we can't train for caring. You either generally care or you don't. We had a hostess once who noticed a guest hadn't visited in a while. She knew how to get in touch and found out the woman wasn't feeling well. This hostess took a few of the staff and went over to her house, and with the husband's permission, planted flowers to brighten her day until she could come back to the restaurant. We can't train someone to do that.

### AFTER 30 YEARS, WHAT KEEPS YOUR RESTAURANTS RELEVANT?

Change. We have to stay fresh and keep updating. We can't ever think that because we've done something a certain way, it's exactly the right way. We have to stay open-minded enough to take new



Mostly a seafood restaurant, Upstream is focused on Pacific Rim flavors and also features a full sushi bar with a variety of rolls, as well as sashimi and nigari. For more than 10 years, it has partnered with a fisherman who works off the North Carolina and South Carolina coasts to provide a continuous supply of fresh fish. In 2000, the restaurant was named one of *Esquire's* Top 10 Restaurants in America.

**Dinner Menu Samples:** Roasted Scottish Salmon with parsnip/peanut puree, shaved radish, frisee, Asian pear, toasted peanuts and Thai peanut vinaigrette; Carolina Black Grouper with yu choy, roasted peppers, shishitos, carrots, lemon grass cream and sweet chili relish; Togarashi Dusted Ahi Tuna with palm sugar glaze, Szechuan green beans and Asian pear cauliflower fried rice.



1801 Grille is located on the edge of the University of South Carolina's campus in Columbia and features tavern-style farm-to-table cuisine. Some of the food choices are grilled burgers and sandwiches, housemade pizzas, fresh seafood and an array of such shareables as pub chips, sweet and smoky calamari and "sloppy" sliders.

**Menu Samples:** Creole Shrimp and Grits with Adluh stone-ground grits/blackened Gulf shrimp/creole chipotle tomato sauce and crispy fried okra; House Made Duck Sausage Pizza with Gorgonzola, arugula and pickled onion; and K.C. Style Spareribs with napa cabbage/peanut slaw and Sriracha glaze.

suggestions and ideas from the great associates who come to work for us. We've had to update our spaces, how we plate, how we hire and how we train, keeping our original ideas in mind as we go.

## WHAT ARE SOME IMPORTANT LESSONS YOU'VE LEARNED ABOUT OPENING RESTAURANTS?

Before opening a new restaurant, it's important to be 100% all in with no reservations about the location, the concept or the landlord, for example. I've had reservations about one of those things in the past where I felt unsure if this would be the best landlord partner or the right concept for the spot, or, the location was good but not perfect. With that little reservation, I went ahead, and I was sorry. So, be 100% all in or don't move forward.

## WHAT TECHNOLOGY LESSONS HAVE YOU LEARNED?

Having a reliable and user-friendly POS system is huge in our business. You want one that easily ties into the back office where you can track what's working and what isn't from a sales standpoint, including what sells and what servers sell and don't, and why. ■

JODY SHEE, AN OLATHE, KANSAS-BASED FREELANCE WRITER AND EDITOR, PREVIOUSLY WAS EDITOR OF A FOODSERVICE MAGAZINE. SHE HAS MORE THAN 20 YEARS OF FOOD-WRITING EXPERIENCE AND WRITES THE BLOG [WWW.SHEEFOOD.COM](http://WWW.SHEEFOOD.COM).

ABOVE: Upstream's wood-oven-roasted octopus.