

Get It While It's *HOT*

Pop-up restaurants
offer Savannah foodies
new cultures, cuisines
and creativity

Written by **ALLISON STICE**
Photography by **NIKKI KRECICKI**

IT'S A RUNNING JOKE at Late Air that first-time customers often stop in on a pop-up night none the wiser, says co-owner Madeline Ott. The Starland wine bar and small-plate restaurant regularly hosts some of the Southeast's most renowned chefs on select Monday nights as they create limited menus that allow them to explore their passions with a new audience — without the pressure of fully operating their own restaurant with a nightly service.

As one-night-only or short-term offerings, pop-ups offer established and aspiring chefs alike the opportunity to unleash incredible creativity. The result? Culinary delights featuring flavors and cultural traditions you can't sample anywhere else in the city.

The Late Air lineup has included cuisines like Japanese-inspired street food and showcased talents like Victoria Shore, the executive chef at Thompson Savannah, who riffed on cuisine from the country of Georgia.

"Pop-ups are like looking through a peephole at a new concept that is blossoming, or a concept that has existed under wraps for chefs who haven't had their own place yet," said Late Air co-owner Colin Breland.

Starland District wine bar Late Air often hosts pop-ups from local chefs, including Chef John Benhase's Little Light dinner series.



And it's only fitting for the wine bar to regularly host pop-ups. After all, Ott and Breland built buzz for Late Air by hosting pop-ups at venues like The Wyld, Common Thread and The Drayton Hotel before opening its brick-and-mortar on Bull Street in late 2022.

Indeed, Late Air is far from the only one to participate in this growing trend. The culinary team at Saint Bibiana premiered its coastal Italian cuisine with preview pop-ups around town before opening at the revamped Hotel Bardo fronting Forsyth Park in September. Likewise, other ephemeral restaurants are taking Savannah food culture by storm at local hotspots like Big Bon Ghost Kitchen, Colleagues + Lovers, The Garage at Victory North, Troupial, Two Tides Brewing, Sea Wolf and more. Here are a few to catch — if you can.

ROAD SHOW

Chef John Benhase, formerly of Common Thread and a co-founder of Starland Yard, had been kicking around the concept for a long time before making it a reality this year. With stints at Sea Wolf, Late Air and Alley Cat Lounge, Little Light's seasonally

focused one-off small menu dives deep into the Middle Eastern influences that fascinate Benhase.

To take the show on the road — which can include small-space kitchens and unpredictable rushes when crowds show up at once — Benhase says he focuses on concocting sauces and building wood-fired flavors ahead of time. A recent fall menu included pork that had spent the night in the smoker then chilled before getting a sear in a cast iron with shawarma spices and served with accouterments like Turkish ezme.

"To me, pop-ups are the first big sign of a lot of cool things happening in a city," Benhase says. "It's also in a time where the restaurant industry is going through a lot of change and growth, and pop-ups are a natural progression of that."

It's no secret that restaurant work is fast-paced, stressful and physically taxing — conditions are exacerbated by increased food costs, supply chain challenges and labor shortages.

For resilient chefs like Benhase, pop-ups also allow them to cook exactly what they want to — and rediscover what got them into hospitality in the first place.

HOMEGROWN FLAVORS

Taylor Neff of The Garage at Victory North, Brandon Preston of Crispi at Two Tides and Carlos Ardila Jr. of Dottie's Market had the natural affinity of growing up in Florida and realized they all wanted to cook together.

The flamboyant "Flawda Men" first debuted with their take on Publix-inspired "Pub subs" — a Swamp Chicken po'boy featuring fried gator tail — at The Garage at Victory North before taking a more refined approach with a forthcoming six-course prix fixe menu this December — while keeping the fun and flavors reminiscent of their home state.

Pop-ups allow chefs to share their culinary traditions as a matter of course. After departing Husk earlier this year, Chef Chris Hathcock has partnered with the FARM Bluffton group for a fall residency at Strange Bird inspired by his travels through Thailand and beyond. Southeast Asian cuisine meets southeast U.S. produce and seafood at Odd Gai, open Tuesdays and Wednesdays at Strange Bird for a limited time only.

"I'm making stuff that I want to eat that I can't get when I go out," Hathcock says. "It's aligned with what I wanted to do

— something that fulfills me and gives me quality of life and balance.”

Hathcock’s focused menu features largely vegetarian and pescetarian dishes flavored with lots of herbs and lemongrass, and standout mains like Thai fermented sausage and larb, paired with dessert offerings by The Grey former pastry chef Tanya Matta. The experience also allows Hathcock to explore his Laotian heritage. “I didn’t grow up with any of that food, so it made me curious as to what the cuisine was on that side of my family,” Hathcock says.

CROSS COUNTRY

Chef Modou Jaiteh of Common Thread, whose culinary résumé includes stints from Café Boulud in New York City to his own restaurant Jacaranda in Boulder, Colorado, has also introduced dishes from his native Gambia via the pop-up vehicle. Now, he hopes to one day open his pandemic-shuttered restaurant in the Lowcountry, where he moved at the invitation of Gullah cultural bearer and personal chef BJ Dennis to collaborate on various ventures.

Until then, he shares his culture and explores the intimate connection between West African cuisine and Southeastern dishes, creating offerings like peanut butter stew and Carolina gold rice spiced with Ghanaian suya and Sea Island peas at pop-ups around the region. Jaiteh topped off a recent Late Air edition with sweet corn ice cream sprinkled with popcorn by Natasha Gaiskill of Sixby — reminiscent of West African wedding goodie bags, which frequently feature popcorn and sweets.

“A lot of establishments are open to people like me who don’t have their own restaurants yet, and that’s a good culture to build,” Jaiteh says.

With the rapid pace of creativity and collaboration, Jaiteh predicts that the Savannah restaurant scene may look completely different in five years.

Considering pop-ups are inherently fluid and unpredictable, only time will tell for sure. But, in the meantime, the robust variety of rotating pop-ups promises one thing: today’s local dining options are anything but dull. **S**



Chef John Benhase's
Little Light dinner series
at Late Air

Know before you go

Advice for those curious to pop in on a pop-up, according to local insiders:

- **It’s okay to arrive late.** Diners often rush in right when doors open for fear of dishes running out, but pop-up organizers plan carefully for the food to flourish until last call.
- **To find out about upcoming events,** follow your favorite chefs and venues on social media and subscribe to their newsletters because most menu drops only occur digitally or through word of mouth.
- **Be ready to try something new.** Whether sampling far-flung cuisine or dining family-style, pop-up dinners are all about enjoying comfort food outside of your comfort zone.