

# MITCH ARENS

southern hospitality

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Chef Mitch Arens fondly remembers hunting for poke with his grandfather in Hazard, Kentucky. Poke, *Phytolacca americana*, is not some shy nocturnal creature that skulks around by the glow of a full moon but is a perennial weed that sprouts along sleepy highways and backyard fences. Generations have harvested the tender leaves and stems of young plants to create poke salad. It also happens to be poisonous. But in the right hands with the right recipe, it tastes like spinach and asparagus. At his grandfather's side, Arens tasted love.

Arens grew up in a home where special occasions were celebrated with home-cooked meals, so the magic of bonding through food was woven into his DNA. Though he had no exposure to fine dining, he came to embrace what makes truly wonderful meals fine.

"We can get caught up in all the anxiety and pressure of this job. Having these great memories growing up, they really help center you and bring you back to why we do this. It's the whole process that I loved. Sitting in the kitchen and catching up on our day, talking about what we were going to do for the weekend, what was going on in sports, with life. We sat at the table as a family almost every night."

Arens turned his passion into a profession after earning his culinary degree from Sullivan University's College of Hospitality Studies while he worked full-time at a popular restaurant. Through pluck and perseverance, he landed a coveted spot with Chef David Falk at Cincinnati's Boca and Nada before developing further under Chef Donald Link in Louisiana. Arens moved back to his home state in 2018 to oversee Hotel Covington's many food and beverage offerings, including Coppin's, their fine dining experience. Arens built on the foundation of fresh, from-scratch cooking, folding in local ingredients from regional purveyors.

Conversations with Corporex chairman Bill Butler morphed into a formal partnership and a new restaurant group, Y'all Hospitality. Each entity of the group would reflect a bridge between Kentucky's Southern flavors and bourbon history and Cincinnati's Midwestern charm and brewing heritage.

Y'all kicked off in September 2019. The first month proved to be one long team-building exercise as the crew prepared for BLINK, the four-night light and art festival that brought ten thousand people through the Y'all parking lot. The team bonded quickly through their common love for fresh food and personal service.

Each entity of Y'all Hospitality adds its own unique personality to the mix. Butlers Pantry and Butlers Pantry Cafe are current members, with Whiskey Thief hovering on the horizon. Each has been conceived to meet specific needs that fill in local gaps. Butlers Pantry is like a curated casserole—part wine bar and liquor store, part boutique market with counter service and comfortable seating. Guests can buy a bottle of wine from the retail area to pair with a charcuterie board or hot sandwich and settle in for an indoor picnic.

Whiskey Thief will boast an extensive bourbon list, local beers, craft cocktails, and an array of small bites and shareable plates to encourage a communal experience. Y'all's outdoor patio seating, The Porch, pulls it all together with live music, firepits, adult-sized Jenga, and cornhole to provide local families and visiting guests with a fun and festive space for all occasions.

Arens continues to honor his conviction for supporting and promoting the local and regional culinary community on both sides of the river. Carriage House, Dark Wood, and 80 Acres are a few of the farms that provide a myriad of staples, while artisans at the Incubator Kitchen Collective supply a portion of the baked goods. Butlers Pantry also proudly offers MadHouse vinegar, Grateful Grahams, and products from more than fifty other local vendors.

Surrounded by the Northern Kentucky Convention Center, hotels, and corporate offices, Y'all is centered on infusing its personality and services into this dynamic while still developing space and growing along with the RiverCenter complex.

"[I had] the experience growing up with everyone in the kitchen together or standing around the pig waiting for it to





cook, picking off little crispy edges while it was finishing up. Having a beer around the big fryer or bonfire. That engagement of eating being more than food and nourishment but being an experience. That Southern hospitality that you get when you're invited into someone's home—you can get the same kind of experience in our restaurants. And we bring that family aspect to our employees. We're trying to create a place where people feel rewarded for their work, where they feel engaged and given opportunities to be a part of what they're doing, to grow and be a part of our growth."

As the global pandemic has spread, Y'all's plans have shifted to adapt, but their purpose has remained the same. With the isolation and separation that COVID-19 has pressed into our lives, the need for the simple pleasure of safely being out and together has been elevated and amplified. It is clear to Arens and his team, now more than ever, that they are offering so much more than food.

"It was our second Friday night after we started grilling out on The Porch, and we were recognizing some of the same faces from the week before. Just seeing people, even with their masks on, sitting around with their friends and family listening to live music, enjoying the beautiful weather. This group pulled me aside and said, 'Thank you. This is our first time eating out since March. We're sitting out on your patio, and we feel like we're dining at a resort. We're relaxing, the weather is perfect, and the music is great as we sit here and watch you cook our food on the grill. You really made our night. We really needed this sense of normalcy.'

"It got me. To hear people say we've had an impact on them, made a difference, it reminds us of why we do it. It's about entertaining people, and it goes back to why I cook. It's that sense of family, making guests happy and making them feel special."



Coffee & Desserts



Breakfast Banana Split



Shakshuka