

RYAN SANTOS

drops anchor at please

words
DOUG GEYER

photography
GINA WEATHERSBY

Explorers are known for moving. Like rolling stones, they gather no moss nor put down roots. Chef Ryan Santos traced a route across Europe and around America but has put his journey on pause to settle in Cincinnati's Over-the-Rhine. On his expedition to learn about the culinary arts from top chefs, Santos was after far more than just adding stamps to his passport. With every experience in every kitchen, he was resolutely focused on gleaning as much knowledge as he could about food and flavor while building enduring friendships along the way. Diners at his conceptualized restaurant, Please, are enabled to experience his adventures in ways both unexpected and transportive.

Santos embarked on his odyssey guided not by pleasure but by pain. After he was diagnosed with Crohn's disease, his doctor put him on an extremely restrictive diet. With few ready-made choices, Santos began cooking for himself. From his discomfort was born a delight so deep it progressed beyond the infatuation phase into a lasting relationship, a love that led to a career as a chef despite previously earning a degree in graphic design from the University of Cincinnati.

Lacking any formal training or exposure to kitchens beyond his own, Santos took a bold step when he walked into Tartine Bistro in Cleveland and asked for the chance to help out. A two-day trial was their initial offer. Santos stayed for almost two years. He credits the valuable mixture of humility, hard work, and willingness to be taught. This recipe continued to serve him well when he headed to Pittsburgh to work with Chef Kevin Sousa at Salt of the Earth. Santos's reward was his first glimpse at cooking with creativity as well as the accumulation of funds to help finance multiple trips to Europe.

"Every great chef, no matter where they're from, went to Europe at some point. So I felt like it was necessary. I'd never been, so it was both a personal desire to travel, and I knew it would be a crash course. I knew it was going to be insanely hard. I knew it was going to be like nothing I'd seen."

The crash course morphed into an extended education with trips to France, Belgium, and Denmark. He'd return stateside to earn and learn before crossing the Atlantic yet again. Of all his memories, his time on the small Danish island of Bornholm off Sweden's coast is his favorite. In his four months at Kadeau with Chef Nicolai Nørregaard and his team, Santos worked exceptionally hard while soaking up inventive ways to serve familiar foods.

"One of the things that drew me to Denmark in general was how we share a lot of the same produce. Very different part of the world but generally the same palate. Long, hard winters as well. There's this concentration of chefs doing really interesting and creative food while working with what I have to work with at home."

But it's the connection he made with Nørregaard that continued to draw him back.

"I've been back to Denmark and Copenhagen since. As soon as I get there, the invitation is in, and we meet up. They cook dinner, [and] send a bottle of wine down to the beach because Kadeau is right on the Baltic Sea," Santos remembers fondly. Their bond strengthens him still. "It's sometimes hard to fathom. Kadeau is now one of the world's top one hundred restaurants, and the fact that they stay connected to what's happening here . . . it's mesmerizing."

Santos eventually met John and Karen Shields. John cut his teeth at Charlie Trotter's and was with the original crew at Alinea in Chicago while Karen was a pastry chef. They were figuring out their own next steps while transforming a small restaurant in Virginia. They welcomed Santos to join them the two weekends per month it was open. Over time, John became a mentor and invited Santos to join them once they'd decided to return to Chicago. John also pointed out the fact that Santos was ready to venture out on his own. With roots beginning to thicken in Cincinnati, Santos decided to do just that. Immensely popular pop-ups kept things moving as Santos continued searching for his own style and philosophy.

"I went to Europe to see what the best restaurants in the world were like. I went to LA to work on my friend's food truck to see what that experience was like. It was very important for me on this path to not just go to places that were making the food I wanted to make. It was very important to me to have a well-versed vision."

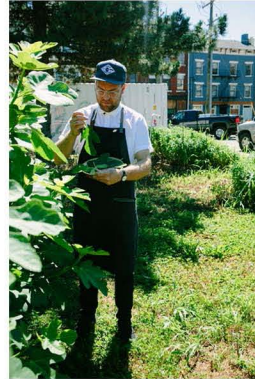
In November 2016, Santos opened Please with an intentionally intimate design that fosters the feeling of pop-ups. The fourth wall is broken to allow guests front-row seats as the drama unfolds. Also broken is the tradition of tasting menus that take all evening from start to finish. Santos designed his dishes and service to allow



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guests to have more time before and after though most are likely to amble around talking about what they just experienced—simple, smart, and creative dishes. But even with these considerations, the focus of the experience still remains the taste.

“We can be as creative as we want to be, but it has to be delicious. That’s the test we have for all of our dishes. Would I come here on my night off and eat this dish? Is it delicious?”

Santos dreams of how to incorporate fresh ingredients from local farmers as well as from their own garden on Walnut Street. Throughout the summer, pineapple sage and lemon verbena flourished both in the soil and his imagination. Visions of figs danced in his head and found their way to table the same day they were picked.

Santos is also grateful to have an amazing team. The consistency of what they’re building night after night, dish after dish, is rewarding after the many years of shifting and drifting.

Even after all he’s experienced, one thing has surprised Santos—the way his guests share at Please.

“I’ve been shocked by how many people will order four things from the tasting menu and then share—they’ll switch. I’ve never seen a restaurant where people share like this. It’s a huge compliment. Everyone wants to taste every dish. It’s amazing.”

Given the spirit of the chef at the helm of Please, this adventurous atmosphere seems like a logical and organic progression. An appropriate expression of like-minded travelers and learners, both curious and courageous. Diners eager to be moved without ever taking a step.

