Few Southern staples are as simple—or as satisfying—as the tomato sandwich. At its most basic, it’s two pieces of white bread, mayonnaise and a few slices of fresh tomatoes sprinkled with salt and pepper. For many, it’s the taste of summer. It evokes memories of times gone by and gatherings with family and friends. It reminds us of the goodness that comes from the earth and unsnarls the increasingly tangled ties between the farm and our table.

That may seem like a lot to ask of such a simple sandwich, but it barely scratches the surface of what a tomato sandwich can do in the hands of the right person. Someone like Vivian Howard ’00, the chef and co-owner of Chef & the Farmer, a restaurant in Kinston, N.C. In Howard’s hands, the white bread becomes a homemade rustic onion bread that is slightly toasted, and the mayonnaise becomes a roasted corn aioli. The tomatoes are Cherokee purple heirlooms just plucked from the vines of a local farmer, and they are added to the sandwich in layers with salt and pepper and a bit of pickled onion on top. Just like that, a simple sandwich becomes spectacular.

Vivian Howard ’00 is reinventing Southern food and breathing new life into a Southern town.
And that spectacular sandwich becomes the latest step in Howard's rapid rise in the culinary world, where she is widely recognized for her mouth-watering reinventions of familiar and forgotten Southern standards such as candied yams, grits and something known as a Tom Thumb. (More on that later.) She has been a semifinalist for the prestigious James Beard Award for outstanding chefs, and a new PBS series featuring Howard and her exploration of Southern food traditions is airing nationally this fall.

“She’s cooking the food of her people and she’s cooking the food of her place,” says John T. Edge, director of the Southern Foodways Alliance, a nonprofit based at the University of Mississippi that studies and promotes the food culture of the South. “It just happens to be a life-changing tomato sandwich.”

Edge was talking about the effect the sandwich had on him and other members of the Southern Foodways Alliance—writers, chefs and lovers of good food—when they visited Howard’s restaurant last year. Writing in Garden & Gun magazine, Edge named the sandwich one of the top 10 dishes he ate as he traveled the country in 2012. Other Alliance members similarly gushed over the food Howard prepared that day, from Johnny cakes with pickled cucumbers and beets to fried okra with ranch ice cream. Not that there was anything unusual about such rave reviews—fans routinely drive from other towns and cities to eat at Chef & the Farmer.

“I’ve been here many times,” says Jeffrey Johnson, chairman of the English department at East Carolina University, about a 45-minute drive from the restaurant. “It’s well worth the trip. I love their tomato pie. I don’t get excited about vegetables, but the tomato pie is worth the price of admission. Almost anything they do is smart, intelligent, well-made and unique.”

Which brings us back to the power of that reimagined tomato sandwich. Take a stroll around downtown Kinston and talk with some of the locals, and it becomes apparent that Howard’s approach to cooking has sparked an economic revival in a pocket of eastern North Carolina badly in need of some of the inspiration that went into that sandwich. Until Howard and her husband, Ben Knight, opened the restaurant in 2006, there wasn’t much going on in downtown Kinston. Many of the buildings along Queen Street, the main drive through downtown, are vacant. The poverty rate in Kinston is more than twice the state average. Textile plants have shut down, and tobacco is not the reliable cash crop it once was. Even the Kinston Indians, the town’s beloved minor league baseball team, left town in 2011. In short, Kinston had become a place to get away from.

That has started to change as a result of Chef & the Farmer—with new shops and other businesses opening nearby along Heritage Street, one block off of downtown’s main strip—but only because Howard and Knight were willing to take a huge gamble. “They came downtown to a building that was empty and there was nothing but empty buildings around it,” says Stephen Hill, co-founder and CEO of Mother Earth Brewing, a successful craft beer company that opened in downtown Kinston only after Hill saw the initial success of Chef & the Farmer. “I can tell you that we would have never, ever thought of coming down here if they weren’t already here. I don’t know that I would have taken that much of a risk. What Ben and Vivian did, they spurred a small economic boom.”

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Argentina exploring the country’s cuisine and had written reviews of a couple of Raleigh restaurants for a communications class. During a summer internship for CBS News in New York, Howard spent much of her free time visiting various restaurants near her office and writing reviews that she kept in a notebook. So Howard quit her advertising job after a year and a half and took a job waiting tables in a new restaurant. It was there that she met Knight, an artist from Chicago who was also waiting tables.

“It was a very magical time,” she says. “I was really, really digging being part of the restaurant world.”

Howard could see herself becoming a food writer, but one with the cachet of having worked in a professional kitchen. So she worked for free in the kitchen on her days off and enrolled in a culinary program to give her a shot at an internship in one of New York’s hottest restaurants. She succeeded, landing a spot at wd-50 on Manhattan’s Lower East Side.

“Working there was so frightening,” Howard says. “Everyone there was so serious about their job. I was in way over my head. They were into all these avant-garde cooking techniques, and I didn’t even know the basics of cooking.”

Howard eventually landed a job at Spice Market, a new restaurant in New York’s meatpacking district that featured the cuisine of Southeast Asia. As a line cook, Howard’s job was to make the same five dishes all night, every night, in a restaurant that served up to 400 guests every day. “If you can juggle all that and do it in the right amount of time and make your chef happy, it’s a good feeling,” she says.

Meanwhile, Howard and Knight also were running an increasingly popular soup-catering business out of their apartment in Harlem, using the bathtub to chill the soups. But it was a hectic life, and the allure of the big city was starting to fade. And, so, the newly married Howard and Knight talked about moving back to North Carolina to be closer to Howard’s family and start their own restaurant. Howard still thought about writing, but she enjoyed the creativity and craftsmanship of the kitchen. Howard’s father, John C. Howard Jr. ’62, a successful farmer with family roots in Lenoir County dating back to the early 1900s, offered to provide the financial backing necessary to open a restaurant.

It was not an easy decision. “To a certain extent, coming home meant that she was giving up,” says Knight. Besides, there was nothing to indicate that Kinston could or would support the sort of upscale restaurant that Howard and Knight envisioned. “I saw this whole area,” Howard says, “as a culinary wasteland.”

Hard Work and Hard Lessons

And yet they decided to give it a go, in a building a block off of the main street that had once been used as a mule stable. By their own admission, Howard and Knight had no idea how difficult opening and running an upscale restaurant in downtown Kinston would be. “Everyone thought we were crazy,” Howard says. “When we first opened, there were all kinds of people who said we won’t be here in a year. Everyone was certain we were going to fail. In retrospect, I totally understand why they believed that.”

The difficulties ranged from figuring out what equipment was needed in the kitchen to hiring a qualified staff. “When we got ready to open, we put a banner up that said ‘Now Hiring,’” Howard says. “The first six or seven people who came through the door were from the homeless shelter, and it didn’t really get any better after that.”

Further complicating matters was Howard’s own inexperience as a chef. “I was a line cook who suddenly opened Howard’s parents, John and Scarlett Howard (below), eat in the restaurant several nights a week. Opposite page: Howard has high expectations for her kitchen staff to prepare food that servers such as Johanna Kramer can be proud to serve.

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“She mixes together ingredients you never think would work. She’s done fried okra and ranch ice cream. Who in the world would do that? Who would do that? But it’s wonderful.”
—Pat Jenkins, manager, Lenoir County Farmer’s Market

“Over the years, I’ve become fascinated with this region’s culinary traditions,” Howard says in explaining how she finally found the focus she needed for her restaurant. A devastating kitchen fire shut the restaurant down for four months in early 2012, but Howard retained a kitchen staff that she now trusts to leave the restaurant alone occasionally and a waitstaff that she now trusts to leave the restaurant in good hands.

“I see a humility in her cooking. I see the daughter of farmers on the plate. I see a woman who knows her soil and knows her city. That’s where I want to eat.”
—John T. Edge, director of the Southern Foodways Alliance
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A Frenzied Life

Earlier this year, Howard unveiled a dish that she hopes will become a signature item for her restaurant. It is the aforementioned Tom Thumb, and it speaks to Howard’s passion for preserving and reinventing often forgotten traditions of Southern food. When Howard introduced the dish to her wait staff, her initial instinct was to keep the description simple: “It is a semi-cured hot sausage, and that’s really all you need to say,” she told them as they huddled around the restaurant’s bar for a taste. “If people want to know more, it’s a semi-cured hot sausage that’s stuffed into a pig’s appendix and hung for about a month to cure. What happens when it’s hanging is it’s losing water, it’s developing a complexity of flavor, it’s becoming more and more rich. When you taste this, you can taste the organ element of it. It doesn’t just taste like straight-up sausage. There’s something funky. It’s very rich. It’s complex tasting. It’s something people used to do 50 years ago in eastern North Carolina.”

To make the dish her own, Howard slices the stuffed appendix into large patties that are then pan fried. She adds field peas and a pickled relish made of rutabaga and watermelon rind to balance the flavors, and lists it on the menu as a “small plate” for $11. “There’s not another restaurant in the world that is serving this, I can assure you,” Howard tells her wait staff. “Anybody who travels to eat here should be getting this dish.”

Edge, who writes about Southern food for publications such as The New York Times, says there is nothing flashy about Howard’s cooking. “I see the daughter of farmers on the plate. I see a woman who knows her soil and knows her city. That’s where I want to eat.”

Howard, 35, explores that connection to her region in the series, A Chef’s Life, that debuted on PBS this fall. Each episode focuses on a particular food—such as grapes, biscuits or tomatoes—and allows Howard to visit with a Southern expert on making homemade wine, baking biscuits or canning tomatoes. It also gives viewers a chance to watch Howard at work in the kitchen, creating new ways to prepare familiar foods.

But the PBS series is just one sign of Howard’s success—and of an increasingly frenzied life. Howard and Knight (who manages the front of the restaurant) operate a beer and wine store adjacent to their restaurant, which serves dinner five nights a week. This summer, they opened an oyster bar called The Boiler Room across the street and down an alley from Chef & the Farmer. As if that wasn’t enough, Howard and Knight are raising 2-year-old twins, Florence and Theodore, in a modest, contemporary home that they built on the back edge of a 40-acre cotton field in Deep Run owned by Howard’s father.

On top of that are the expectations—overwhelming at times—that come with the sort of success Howard has enjoyed. Her restaurant cannot survive if its customers come only from Kinston. It has to be a destination for diners from Greenville, New Bern, Wilson and Raleigh, and Howard feels the pressure to make sure the trip is worthwhile. “The fact that people drive two hours to eat here from the Triangle and then drive straight back, it makes me very uncomfortable,” she says. “When people from a city choose to leave the city and come and eat here, you feel like you need to give them something they can’t have back where they’re from. Hence, something like the Tom Thumb.”

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Howard and Knight, along with their 2-year-old twins, Theodore and Florence, had a contemporary home built on the back edge of a field in Deep Run, N.C., owned by Howard’s father. A Methodist church sits at the front of the property (lower left), where Howard plans to have a garden where her children can get an appreciation for the goodness that comes from the ground.
Bida Manda has been a welcome addition to the Raleigh restaurant scene from the day it opened last year. It offered something unheard of in the Triangle or, for that matter, in much of the country—the food of Laos, with simple dishes from the period before it became a French colony and more complex dishes from the country’s postcolonial days. Diners have filled the restaurant in Raleigh’s Moore Square to enjoy crispy pork belly soup, caramelized ginger pork ribs or a green papaya salad. Vansana Nolintha ’09, the restaurant’s owner, hopes they have also learned something about his native Laos.

“We knew from the beginning that Laotian food was not the only thing we were serving,” says Nolintha, who is known as Van to his friends. “We are also storytellers, ambassadors for a culture that is very foreign to this community.”

Nolintha, 27, is familiar with the notion of bridging different cultures. His parents sent him to the United States when he was 12 years old in search of a better education. He lived with a host family and attended school in Greensboro, N.C., before going to NC State, where he double-majored in chemistry and art and design, a reflection of a shift in his initial plans to become a doctor. He thrived as a Caldwell Fellow, soaking up the program’s emphasis on leadership and community service. He then earned a master’s degree in international peace and conflict studies at Trinity College Dublin in Ireland, one of 35 countries he has lived in or visited.

But when it came time to start a career, Nolintha found himself drawn back to Raleigh and the friends who had become like family during his years at NC State. “The one place where I felt grounded, challenged, inspired and loved, I think, was NC State,” he says. “It was the first time I felt like I was coming home.”

Like Vivian Howard ’00, the chef and co-owner of Chef & the Farmer in Kinston, N.C., Nolintha has managed to bring together the two places he considers home—Laos and Raleigh—into a restaurant that he hopes will serve as a favorite gathering place for people interested in a taste of a different culture.

“The best compliment that anyone has ever given us,” he says, “is when somebody left and said, ‘We had a really good time tonight.’ We want Bida Manda to be a place where people slow down and just make memories together.”

“Opening night for Bida Manda did not go well. Vansana Nolintha ’09 recalls how he fled the restaurant during the middle of dinner service, and then collected himself and got to work addressing the problems. It helped, Nolintha says, that the community was ready to embrace him and his restaurant.”

by Bill Krueger
photography by Ted Richardson

Vansana Nolintha ’09 and his sister Vanvisa Nolintha (opposite page) are honoring their parents, who are pictured in tapestries. The bar (above left) and restaurant (above right) serve the food and spirit of Laos.

Food and hospitality were at the heart of family life before Vansana and Vanvisa were sent to the United States as children to be educated.