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May 02, 2011

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\$20 Dinner with Ryan Smith

Empire State South's chef takes it slow with tripe and pig ears

by Wyatt Williams



JAMES CAMF

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Behind the pecky cypress-paneled dining room of Empire State South, executive chef Ryan Smith is standing in the kitchen. A hog's head brines in a pot to his side. A nearby white board is covered with notes like "SIX HAMS OFF CURE MAY 10." He's arranged a spread of groceries from the Sweet Auburn Curb Market on the counter in front of him, assessing how best to use the vegetables and legumes — okra, corn, butter beans, pink-eyed peas — that he casually purchased without much of a plan earlier this morning. At the center of the spread, though, are a few cuts that make Smith's meal a truly under-twenty-dollar affair: two pig ears, a couple of smoked ham hocks, and a big, flat piece of tripe. Hugh Acheson, the pretty "Top Chef Masters" star and part owner of Empire State South, saunters over in pristine chef whites behind Smith and cracks, "Pig ears? Tripe? Yeah, like anyone is going to make that."



JAMES CAMF

Ryan Smith

Acheson has a point. Tripe, the stomach lining of a cow, and pig ears, basically just stiff cartilage sandwiched in two layers of skin, aren't the most welcoming ingredients. For Smith, though, whole animals are integral to his culinary style. "To utilize the whole thing is the challenge," he says. "I'll buy a whole pig just to preserve it or to teach people how to break it down. We sit down as a kitchen and say, 'OK, we're going to take the two hams to make prosciutto and the two shoulders to make sausage and the loin for lomo and the belly for bacon.' We divvy up the jobs and it gets everybody involved that way." The butchering leftovers, like the two ears sitting in front of Smith, are typically without an obvious place on any menu. It takes a little creativity and a lot of patience to use them right.

In fact, Smith's dedication to patient, slow cooking is the reason we're in Empire State South's kitchen today. When *Creative Loafing* asked Smith to cook at his home in Decatur, he just laughed, saying, "I haven't cooked a meal for myself at home in over a year." Since taking over as executive chef of the restaurant in October, Smith has spent most of his waking hours transforming the kitchen to meet his vision: preserving and jarring an enormous quantity of fresh vegetables, curing an impressive store of charcuterie, and even putting away a couple barrels

Shopping List

Smoked ham hocks:

\$1.40

Pig ears: \$2.28

Tripe: \$3.78

Butter beans and field peas: \$1.82

Large shrimp: \$3.47

Corn: \$1.49

Okra: \$2.49

Spring onions: \$1

Garlic: 45 cents

Total: \$18.18

Cheats: Butter, bay leaves, lemon

worth of hot sauce. When Acheson recruited Smith from Restaurant Eugene and Holeman & Finch, Smith says he was invited "to make this place my baby." When he says, "I try to take a day off every week," it's obvious that doesn't always happen.

Smith never rushes around, even as the kitchen gets slammed with lunch orders. His casual, bearded appearance hides a careful, intent focus. His shift at the restaurant typically begins around 10 in morning, but, he says, "The best time to get work done is after midnight. I come into a busy kitchen, I can't just sit in a corner and create new things. So, I think about it all day and when everyone is gone, I pour my bourbon, sit in the corner and make it."

When he gets started on the tripe, it becomes clear where the time goes. The cut has to be carefully washed first — Smith is meticulous about cleaning meat — then thoroughly dried and then smoked before he starts braising the cut, a process that takes hours unto itself. Smith's rule of thumb for braising is simple: "The longer and slower you do it, the better."

He repeats a similar braising process for the pig ears. Slow cooking is crucial for breaking down the collagen from cartilage, which produces a gelatinous, rich stock and tempers the toughness of the ear. While the tripe and ears simmer slowly in the background, Smith is free to attend to the busy kitchen staff around him — conferring with a sous chef about cooking down a pot of ramps to be preserved, or tasting a fresh batch of oregano from the restaurant's herb garden.

Acheson is around, too, working on this or that in the office or strolling around the dining room, though it seems that his favorite occupation is screwing with Smith. At one point, Acheson sneaks up behind Smith with a shrimp, trying to surprise him by pushing the crustacean in his face. Smith just rolls his eyes. They have the comfortable relationship of brothers.

Ears and tripe might be intimidating in the kitchen, but they're an absolute pleasure once Smith has them on the plate. The pig ear stock, steeped with the smoky flavor of ham hocks, brings a rich, unexpected depth to an otherwise common pairing of shrimp and corn. The ears themselves, sliced thin and fried to a crisp, are a crunchy, salty compliment to the buttery, soft ragout of peas and beans. The tripe, also sliced into thin strips, builds heft not unlike a noodle. A big splash of barrel-aged hot sauce adds a perfect kick. A hot sauce like that, though, takes some time.

Next: Two delicious recipes from Ryan Smith

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1 [2](#) [next](#) »

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