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## First Year Phenom

Chef **Mashama  
Bailey** and The  
Grey have set  
Savannah's dining  
scene on fire.



# Into The Grey

With a historic backdrop, a rookie restaurateur, and a chef stepping into the spotlight for the first time, Savannah's hottest new restaurant conquered impossible odds in its first year. **By Danny Klein**

CHEF MASHAMA BAILEY SAYS SHE IS EXCITED, HUMBLD, AND YES, EVEN A LITTLE SURPRISED, BY ALL THAT HAS BEEN ACCOMPLISHED IN THE GREY'S FIRST YEAR.

EMILY ANDREWS JOHN CARRINGTON



## LEADERSHIP PROFILE





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**F**iguratively speaking, The Grey has set the Savannah restaurant scene on fire. But in its early days, the fire was nearly a literal calamity.

Ask Mashama Bailey, the restaurant's ebullient, Bronx-born chef about those formative months, and the memory quickly clambers to the surface. "That," she says, pausing and still managing to laugh a little, "was not a good day. That was not a good day at all."

About three months after The Grey opened in December 2014, some late-night stock preparation went awry, and the porter arrived the next morning to find "green stuff" coating the kitchen—from the floors, to the walls, to every piece of equipment in the pot's radius. Bailey and her staff cleaned tirelessly before the fire and health departments finally gave The Grey the OK to reopen for dinner.

When you consider the typical pitfalls of opening and operating a new restaurant, especially during its first year, Chef Bailey admits the story is a reluctant, yet acceptable blip in The Grey's remarkable run thus far, one that includes a James Beard nomination for Best New Restaurant and for Best Design/Renovation (76 seats and over). The Grey has already been called one of the Five Best Restaurants in America by *Food & Wine* magazine, and listed as a Best New Restaurant by *Esquire*.

If anything, Bailey, who began her career as a social worker at a homeless shelter and is labeled as the lone protégé of James Beard Award-winning chef Gabrielle Hamilton, admits she hasn't had sufficient time to relax, let alone reflect.

"Definitely, humbling. Exciting, yeah," Chef Bailey says. "We need to take a little bit more time and enjoy it. I think, however, that when I start to do that, I get nervous. I get anxious, and I'm like, 'I have to do something.'"

It's that kind of spirit that has made an unlikely, almost improbable pairing

with John O. Morisano, a native New Yorker and newcomer to the restaurant industry, work to near perfection.

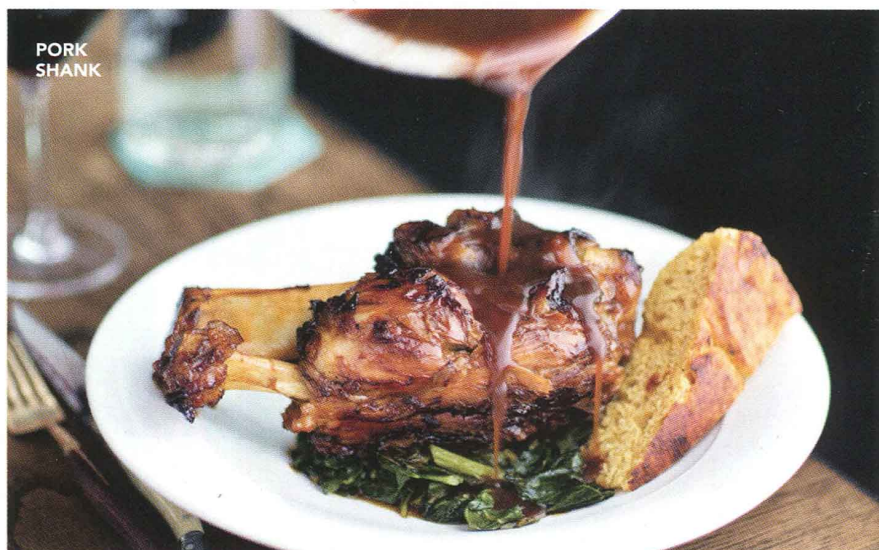
### Where to Begin

"Yes, I think so," Chef Bailey responds, thinking about whether or not she's surprised herself at The Grey. It's as close to contemplation as she will allow before leaping ahead to the future. Bailey wouldn't mind discovering a new way to unwind. She's considering vocal lessons, which could provide a welcomed break from her blurring schedule: six days in the kitchen (on the seventh she does office work) and incalculable hours—truly, just try and ask her. "I don't think that would be a good idea for me to think about," Bailey answers, punctuating the point.

live oaks and wrought iron of Savannah, without any real idea of what to expect.

And, naturally, it was a daunting challenge. Aside from the fact that Bailey had never helmed a kitchen, she was staring down a restaurant with more than three times the capacity of Prune, the famed East Village eatery owned by Chef Hamilton where Bailey had spent the previous four years as sous chef. And now, Chef Bailey was doing so with a charismatic owner who shared one very crucial trait: He had never done this either.

"At first, I was just sort of like, 'I don't know if I can do this ... I don't know if I can expedite this. I didn't know what to do to get the food to the table. But when I walked into the space, it felt good. It felt right. I just went with it,'" Bailey says. "So, that's exactly what I did."



She hopes to become more "executive," understand and trust her instincts, and continue to work out operational kinks, like hiring and training.

But this progressive pace, and the frequent drawing—and redrawing—of plans for 2016, doesn't cloud the past to the point where she can't appreciate it from a safe distance. Bailey left the bright lights of New York City and, in a certain, distant way, headed home to the





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One last, minuscule detail: The restaurant was going to take place in a neglected, barely standing 1938 Greyhound bus station that had been abandoned for the past dozen years.

### A Past with Potential

Despite only recently purchasing a home in Savannah's historic district, Morisano, who goes by John, already had a good feel for its charms. Mainly, don't try to impose on the social and superficial workings of America's first planned city, where relationships and appearances are as callous as the famous railings that adorn many of its older homes.

The owner of SLAAM Ventures, an investment group specializing in tech and media startups, Morisano knew a project with potential when he saw one, despite having never opened a restaurant in his career. When he began delving into commercial real estate, Morisano came across the bus station with a broken roof, located on a gritty block of Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard. Without a clear picture for the future, he began a one-year negotiation and

Walking through the open spaces, some in outward disrepair, Morisano saw the space for what it was in its most recent past—a restaurant called Café Metropole that closed in 2002—but with a reimagined perspective. That's stating it lightly, truthfully. He had a vision to take the fabric of the establishment, so Savannah-bred in its history that it was almost haunting, and bring it back to life.

"Savannah is very much a preservation town," Morisano says. "As I was looking around the building, I realized if I was going to stay true to the architectural integrity of the space, not put up walls, and not take away from what was here, then this place really sets up well to be a restaurant. It was in that heartbeat that I realized what we were going to do here."

### Into The Grey

Morisano believes the startup industry can be set against a single backdrop: expectations. In most cases, it's best not to have any, he explains, seeing as failures arrive far more frequently than successes. A year after opening The Grey, what most surprises Morisano are the decisions. "I think," he says, "that we're surprised how many we got right."

Morisano says linking up with designers Andrew Cohen and Jeremy Levitt from the New York City-based Parts and Labor Design was one of the best decisions in his 48 years. After more than two years and a "few million" dollars spent on the renovation, the result is a striking balance between the timeless and the uncommon. On the outside, the facade stayed honest to the original blue and white Vitrolite structural glass featured in many buildings at the time. Despite the materials being long forgotten with the Art Deco and Art Moderne designs of the era,

Morisano was able to track down a St. Louis man named Tim Dunn who found similar supplies and oversaw the project. Inside, the open kitchen is located where the ticket counter once was. There's even a worn-down spot of the original pink terrazzo floor where passengers used to wait. "Waiting Room" is printed in the back section, above where African-American passengers stood, and framed photographs from Savannah's First African Baptist Church, along with other historic pictures, line the walls.

As hoped, Bailey says the design struck a chord with native Savannahians. "A couple came in a while ago, and as they sat in our dining room he remembered being the baggage guy for the bus company. And the kitchen is where the baggage room used to be," Chef Bailey says. "So that was pretty cool."

"I think what Savannah likes is people who are honest about contributing to the betterment of Savannah, and not coming in and trying to change Savannah," Morisano adds. "To respect the fabric that's here and try to weave into that fabric, instead of trying to create something that's outside of it. And that's what I've tried to do since I've been here. I think that's what we really set out to do at The Grey."

### The Meeting

Lack of experience aside, Morisano was confident he could lean on business savvy to succeed in his first restaurant venture. But he was also pragmatic enough to understand the need for a partner with serious food chops. The problem was, even though Morisano was raised in an Italian family that adored eating and he had, for most of his life, continued that love affair, he wasn't sure where to look.

The inspiration came from the mind of Hamilton, the 2011 winner of the James Beard Award: Best Chef New York City, while driving one of his many 800-mile rides between Savannah and the Big Apple. He was listening to an audio-tape version of Hamilton's book, *Blood, Bones & Butter*, and decided they needed to meet.



OWNER JOHN O. MORISANO CALLS CHEF BAILEY'S COOKING A 'PERFECT STORM OF EATING.'

closed on the property for \$945,000 in March 2013. The decision-making process wasn't really a complicated one. "I bought it because it was really kind of falling apart," he recalls.

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"I told her my tale of woe, how I was preserving this bus terminal and I was going to make it this great restaurant, and I was looking for a partner," he recalls. "And she was like, 'Why the hell are you talking to me?' And I said, 'I don't know, just from reading your book I felt connected to you and I just thought you could help.' I would say she looked at me quizzically at best, maybe like I was a completely crazy person at worst."

Hamilton could think of a few names to pass forward, but one gave her pause. Hamilton's sous chef, Bailey, was really the first cook she mentored, and it would take some serious time to weigh the loss. But considering Bailey's readiness to expand to a space of her own, she set up a meeting between the pair.

The one-hour block ballooned into four hours of conversation. Did Morisano and Bailey dig into any deep-seated issues and plans for the future? "We sat down, and I was just like, 'What do you think about food?' She was like, 'I like food.' I'm like, 'I like food, too.' That was really it," Morisano says. "I may have offered her a water first. I don't remember."

### Bailey Heads 'Home'

Bailey hesitated briefly at the thought of Savannah. She's 41, and the vast majority of those years were spent in New York City. She lived in Savannah from age 5 to 11, true, but most of those memories felt like a child peering through the window of a traveling car. Bailey attended Charles Ellis Elementary School and, strangely enough, her parents were married pretty much directly across the street from where The Grey was resurrected. But aside from a day trip when she was 24, which included a stop at her old house, she hadn't been back.

Even more significant, she had never run a kitchen on her own.

Her time as a social worker led to cooking potlucks, and then dinners on holidays. Bailey attended the Institute of Culinary Education in New York City, held jobs as a personal chef, then worked at the Oak Room in The Plaza Hotel, David Burke & Donatella, and the Aquagrill. When Chef Hamilton

and others convinced her it was time to spread out, Bailey felt it was important to first take a step back. Instead of flying to Savannah, she hopped in a car and set on a reconnection tour with her Southern side, traversing the country from North Carolina to Tennessee to New Orleans, stopping at culinary staples along the route. Bailey ate at Tupelo Honey Café in Asheville, sampled Cajun boudin in The Big Easy, tasted butter-milk in Knoxville, barbecue in Memphis, and finally arrived at a eureka point during a meal at the Mayflower Café in Jackson, Mississippi. She ordered deviled crabs, which came with a salad and a "Comeback Sauce." It spoke to her past.

"I called my mom and was like, 'Mom, this is the dressing you used to make for us when we were little,'" Bailey says. "I just kind of bounced around a little bit and it felt good, and I felt this reconnection to the food here."

### Raising the Staff

There are unquestionably some challenges with cooking in Savannah, as Bailey was quick to discover. Firstly, the supply-order chain simply works at a different speed than in New York City. When Bailey wanted to place an order at Prune, it could be done in a Manhattan minute. In Savannah? Not so much. "I'm not used to ordering in stuff by 8 P.M.," she says. "That's when you get your run and it's when you figure out if you need something for the next day. So, that took a lot of adapting."

The same was true of finding the local suppliers, a task made easier when she connected with Cynthia Hayes, the executive director of the Southeastern African-American Farmers Organic Network, who won the James Beard: Leadership Award in 2015. Logistics taken care of, Bailey also had the added pressure of sudden kitchen spotlight. She says she's not as strict as Hamilton was ("Although my staff might not agree,") and is still figuring out how to identify the right kind of talent. Bailey's standards, though, are measured in miles per hour.

"All you have to do is keep up; that's it. I will teach you everything else. You

have to walk as fast as me, or even walk a little bit faster. Because I'm tall, I have long legs and I can really move," says the 6-foot Bailey.

Lately, she's noticed an uptick in the quality of staff at The Grey, which she believes bodes well for her budding legacy. "That's how I'm going to start building my reputation. When people leave, and go and work in other places, they're like, 'Oh, you worked for Mashama Bailey; OK, you know what's up then.' I want that."

### Port City Southern

There has never been any doubt about the food. Bailey's menu, which she says isn't exactly Southern food, but rather "Port City Southern," draws a check average of \$65 to \$70. Some dishes include Whole Fire—roasted fish, charred orange, bay leaf, olive oil; Catfish Tagine—chickpeas, bell pepper, preserved lemon; along with sides like Smoked Collards—leek, onion, shallot; starters such as Pan Roasted Squid—shelling beans, celery, parsley; and "middles" like Country Pasta—pork belly, Parmesan, and cracked bell pepper. There are also oysters and a raw bar with stone crab claws. "I didn't really want it to be a Southern restaurant. For some reason, I just wanted it to make sense here and in this particular town," she says.

Morisano couldn't be happier. He believes the combination of his Italian background, with Bailey's Southern and New York influences, with French and Italian training, has resulted in some relatable dining, and just really, really good fare. "It's the perfect storm of eating," he says.

Moving forward, Bailey and Morisano have big plans for 2016. Mostly, they want to continue learning and growing, while maintaining the quality that has turned The Grey into one of the nation's buzziest spots. The idea of opening another restaurant, while initially forcing Bailey to collect her thoughts, results in a generous laugh that breaks through the quiet. "I have a lot on my plate," she says. "This is going to be a crazy year." ■



# GATE 2 LEADERSHIP PROFILE

THE GREY'S  
REINVENTION OF  
A FORMER BUS  
STATION EARNED  
ITS DESIGN TEAM  
A 2015 JAMES  
BEARD AWARD  
NOMINATION.