



There are certain people in life that as soon as you meet them your brain places a bookmark. Perhaps it's their smile, or handshake, or their larger than life personality. Some people just have "it" and Kenny Bowers has "it." So often chefs today have attained diva-like statuses that would make Aretha Franklin blush, but Kenny with his disarming smile greets you as a friend who is delighted that you've come to join him for dinner. For this special issue we thought it would be important to speak with someone of stature on DFW cuisine. Kenny smilingly agreed. And with the Wood Fired Grill, Kenny's Italian Kitchen, the Burger Joint all under his belt I think he fits the bill. Pull up a chair and elbows off the table... Kenny is served.

What's the first thing you ever cooked? Veal Parmesan, my stepmom taught me how to make my first dish. I was like nine years old and it was my favorite dish before we made it. She told me that we have to double bread the veal and we gotta pound it, all this good stuff you know. People talk about their "last supper" without a doubt that would be mine.

Where would you place the current state of the restaurant industry here in Dallas? I think in general we are pretty fortunate to be in Texas and specifically Dallas in terms of the economy. Things are a lot better here than they are in other parts of the country. So, I think that there has been some insulation, although, it definitely has hurt some people, but because Dallas is such a business friendly and easy operate place it attracts a lot of people. But it used to be years ago Dallas had a lot of chains or a lot more chains I should say, but now I think you are

seeing a changing of the guards. A lot of people are tired of chains and they are putting more emphasis on independents and chef driven concepts that aren't necessarily "cookie-cutter."

So, what about the food truck craze? It's funny we talked about actually doing a food truck. I think it's awesome and really cool because from a business perspective if you open a restaurant and you open your doors you have to attract the fish to come to you, but if you have a food truck you can just drive to where the fish are. Dallas is such a strong city the way it's set up with little pockets and shopping centers. It's not like New York or Boston or LA where you have such a density of people in one particular area so I like it, but I just don't know if it's ever going to take off here like the way that it did in those places.

It seems that new trends are constantly popping up. What do you think is next on the horizon? People are now talking about South Asian cuisine. And if you think about what P.F. Chang's did for Chinese food, you know. They kind of took it and packaged it up and made it very mainstream. That's such a tough question [pauses to gather his thoughts] again because of the economy I think value and how people are treated is heightened because people are more discerning with their dollars now. I think one area that has always been there, but I always thought was really cool is sandwiches. When I say sandwiches I don't mean one that you would get at a chain place, but an upscale sandwich. If you think about it you can take anything and put it between two pieces of bread. You can put all kinds of cool ingredients and it's affordable. There is a place like that in LA that I just read

about and you see individual places like that in New York.

So, being from Boston what is something uniquely New England that you were able to bring to Dallas and put your own spin on it? It originally started with Daddy Jack's when Jack Chaplin and I were partners we opened up Daddy Jack's in the early '90s we said that we were going to do boiled and broiled seafood and give them [Dallas] a taste of New England. Fast forward to now and this place here [Kenny's Italian Kitchen] is a lot like you would get on the north end [of Boston] and that's something that my business partners and I wanted to do here. Lobster Fra Diavolo is something that I grew up with; it's Italian, but it's also New Englandy, you know? At the Woodfire Grill we do a New England Baked Stuffed Fish and it's a Ritz Cracker crabmeat stuffing and that's just as New England as you can get. We also have Popovers. There's a pretty famous place called Anthony's Pier 4 that's in Boston that has been there forever and they serve Popovers. The Popover is sort of like a version of Yorkshire pudding, but it's individual. That's something that I had at home that I wanted to bring here. At the Burger Joint we have a dish called the Steak Bomb. In Philly it's called the Philly Cheesesteak, but in Boston they call them steak bombs. It's big and it's got shaved ribeye with provolone and white American, peppers, onions, and mushrooms. Good stuff.

Wow, so how did you end up in Dallas? I didn't want to go to school anymore and I came down here when I was 20 to work with my cousins and my uncle in the insurance business in the summer of '88. We started Affordable Insurance the next year and then Jack Chaplin a

friend of mine had just sold his restaurant and we opened up Daddy Jack's together for three years. After that I did Lefty's on Belt Line, and then Big Fish Little Fish down on Henderson [It's now Vickery Park] and I was with Rockfish for seven years after that, which is where I met my current business partner Bob [Stegall]. Then we started the Wood Fired Grill and three years after that our other business partner Mike [Hutchinson], who was still at Rockfish but it had converted to Twin Peaks, wanted a change so he came onboard.

What's the hardest part about managing three restaurants that cater to three different clienteles? One element that is difficult is that the Burger Joint is much more casual than the Wood Grill. We would have people go up to the Burger Joint and they were expecting the Wood Grill, but they are two completely different concepts. So that was a hurdle to get people to understand that it will be a different experience, but still a great experience. The other thing is that we genuinely try really hard to make everyone happy. Even though the Burger Joint is really casual, the Woodfire Grill is upscale, and the Italian Kitchen is right in the middle we try to give people the same level of satisfaction, service, and value and that is hard because it's three different price points. We are fortunate to have great team members and everyone does a great job, but sometimes it's hard to deliver a consistent experience for all three.

So moving into more of the personal instead of the business, what's a must have in your kitchen at home? Ketchup. I love ketchup, I do. It's funny because I always have a hidden bottle in case of an emergency situa-

tion. Houston's is one of my favorite places even though it's a chain and Sundays nights are Prime Rib night and I put ketchup on my steak, I'll admit it. So, there is nothing worse than being at home drinking wine and about to eat my steak and the ketchup is not there. So ketchup is a must have.

Who are some chefs that you admire? Gosh, there are a few. I would have to say Kent Rathbun because I think when he's cooking he's one of the few guys that can really do upscale food and it taste really good, have substance, and a good portion. There are not a lot of people that can do that so I definitely look up to him. My good friend Bud Boswell, who's sort of in sales now, but he has been cooking for a long time and he is somebody I definitely get ideas from. My brother-in-law owns a restaurant in Philadelphia and he's someone I really look up to; he's the kind of guy that up to a couple years ago was making his own mayonnaise. Tre Wilcox is someone I have a ton of respect for and my old partner Jack Chaplin, who was my mentor. He taught me how to cook and was in the fourth graduating class of Johnson & Wales [College of Culinary].

What chef TV show do you most disagree with? *Worst Cook In America*. I think it looks really staged.

Last question. What keeps you cooking? It is really gratifying when someone says, "oh my God this was so good." I enjoy that aspect of it. And this is the kind of philosophical part of it because to me the food and the alcohol are really just a medium to bring people together in a place to show them a good time. I really enjoy cooking.