Chef Scott Simpson and The Depot's pink peppercorn scallops.The scallops are served over Yukon mashed butter.

Bow & Arrow Brings Texas-Style Barbeque to Auburn

Acre Chefs David Bancroft and Caleb Fischer collaborate on a casual dining spot

WORDS **REBECCA TREON** PHOTOS **COURTESY BOW & ARROW**

It's easy to imagine Caleb Fischer as a pitmaster. At 6 feet 5 inches tall, the lean and bearded chef would look right at home towering over and stoking a wood-fired pit full of barbecue. And now, after three years as chef de cuisine at Auburn's acclaimed restaurant Acre, he's stepping into the role of pit boss at a smoked meat joint set to open this fall.

Construction is currently underway at Bow & Arrow, which will be located across the street from Church of the Highlands on East Samford Avenue in Auburn. Fischer is collaborating with Acre's executive chef David Bancroft, a James Beard Foundation Award-nominee, on the project. (The restaurant takes its name from Bancroft's favorite hobby, bow hunting.)

They aim to bring the flavors of Texas-style barbecue to Alabama.

"Both David and I have roots in Texas," Fischer says. "David was born in Alabama but grew up in San Antonio. I spent summers and school breaks either in Houston or on my family's farm in Texas. Texas barbecue is something we've just been passionate about for a while."

The menu will be a mix of the type of meats found at a Texas-style spot—smoked brisket, house-made sausage, pulled pork, smoked turkey and, of course, ribs—with plenty of home-style, straightforward Alabama sides. Guests will pick up their meats directly off the pit, ordering from the pitmasters. And there will be a bar of typical Texas condiments like pico de gallo (chopped tomatos, onions, cilantro and hot peppers) and chowchow (pickled cabbage).

"The idea is sort of a South Texas smokehouse meets Alabama potluck," Fischer says. "We'll use a mix of pecan wood, which is typical in Southern barbecue, and post oak, which is typical in Texas. We don't want to overwhelm people with Texas-style food; we want to fit into the great community that's already here and bring them something new."

Both Bancroft and Fischer have always worked in full-service restaurants (Fischer is also an accomplished pastry chef, recently competing on the Food Network series Spring Baking Championship), but Bow & Arrow will be a departure from that, offering casual counter service and less expensive plates. For a dash of whimsy, they'll also have a margarita machine reminiscent of the drive-through frozen-drink shacks that dot South Texas.

They envision the dining experience at Bow & Arrow to be more like a simple, laid-back Sunday potluck. "It's a place for people to get together, for families to let their kids run around, enjoy community and hang out," Fischer says.

One thing's for sure: Folks in Auburn have a lot more than football season to look forward to this September.

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Now Open: Playa Transports Orange Beach Diners to the Tropics

Fisher's new restaurant brings a taste of the Caribbean to Sportsman Marina

WORDS **REBECCA TREON** PHOTO **MELANIE SPOHN**

Forget the fried shrimp. Orange Beach's newest eatery is redefining coastal cuisine one pork tamale at a time.

Playa (the Spanish word for beach) is the new sister restaurant to Fisher's at Orange Beach Marina, the popular dual-concept restaurant from owner Johnny Fisher and James Beard Award-nominated Chef Bill Briand. Playa, which opened in May, sits one mile from Fisher's, across Terry Cove at Sportsman Marina.

"We didn't want to do something that was already being done in Orange Beach," Fisher says. "We looked south for ideas—way south, like Latin America. We were inspired by the food from Cuba, Mexico, the Caribbean."

While certain mainstays like cheeseburgers, whole grilled fish and ribeyes are on the menu, there are tropical favorites too, like Baja-style fish tacos, conch fritters and cobia ceviche. They're also offering DIY guacamole that you mix for yourself at the table and Mexican street tacos filled with roasted pork (aka carnitas), notably served on house-made tortillas.

Playa has partnered with local artisan Gabby Griffin for the tortillas, who sells her wares at weekend farmers markets. She is also making tamales for Playa.

"It's a great opportunity for both of us," Fisher says. "Gabby will make tortillas in our kitchen that she can sell to grocery stores to expand her business, and then she will also make her handmade tortillas for us. We're really the only place around that will be making their own tortillas."

Decor is also a big part of bringing a Latin-Caribbean vibe to Playa. The space had previously been home to Shipp's Harbour Grill, which closed last year after a kitchen fire. Fisher and his business partner, Bennett Long, bought it, gutted it and renovated it to give it a complete surf bar makeover.

The new space includes eight distinctive areas—including a rooftop bar and private dining room—each with its own chic, beachy feel. There is hand-painted Cuban tile work, tufted-back bar stools, beaded curtains and, of course, panoramic views of Terry Cove.

"Playa is definitely Instagramable!" Fisher says, laughing.

Really, though, after five years in the business at Fisher's, Johnny Fisher just wanted to open a spot where he would want to hang out and sip on a cold bottle of Red Stripe.

"Authenticity means a lot to us," he says. "We wanted to create a place that's true to who we are. We just had the confidence to trust that if we do the things we love, good things will happen."

That's a philosophy to live—and dine—by.

Playa: 27842 Canal Rd. at Sportsmans Marina, playaoba.com, 251-981-9891.

O TOWN ICE CREAM

Opelika's O-Town is about more than gourmet ice cream—it's about community, too.

WORDS **REBECCA TREON** PHOTOS **COURTESY O TOWN**

Chris and Angela George's small town ice cream shop was born, in part, by adversity. The couple, along with their three children, had moved from Angela's hometown, Opelika (population: 29,000), to Atlanta, where Chris hails from. "That lasted all of nine months," Chris says. "It was such a shock, with all the people and the traffic—we ran back here as fast as we could."

During their stint in Atlanta, though, the family spent a lot of time visiting ice cream shops around the city and sampling their frozen desserts, honing an expertise on things like mix-in ratios and butterfat percentages. When they returned to Opelika, they wanted to do something that reintegrated them within the community, and they found that their family hobby was right in line with the one thing the town was missing: an old-fashioned, hand-dipped ice cream shop.

The couple started O Town (that's Opelika's nickname) with a pushcart in the summer of 2005. They wanted to gauge how the neighborhood would respond, and, using social media, they built momentum for their business, closing a gap in Opelika's food scene. "We saw a niche and wanted to fill it," Chris says. "If someone else had already been doing it, we probably wouldn't have done it."

The Georges opened a brick-and-mortar shop two years ago on Opelika's historic block of stores adjacent to the railroad. The space has an inviting vintage feel like you'd expect at a 1950s soda fountain. A row of booths line the center of the shop, flanked on one side by the ice cream freezers and by stacks of board games on the other. A hand-painted mural covers one wall, depicting landmarks of Opelika: Sally Field in her Academy Award-winning role as a unionizer in Norma Rae (the movie was filmed at a local mill) and the Lee County Court House, among other attractions.

O Town sources its ice creams from a family-owned creamery in Atlanta that's been in business for more than 60 years. The creamery creates unique flavors just for the shop and O Town names them to refer to things or people in town. There's the best-selling Big Swamp Turtle, a butter-caramel ice cream with a caramel swirl and mini caramel turtles; the name Opelika means "Great Swamp" in the Creek language. And there's the Norma Rae, which is made with raspberry ice cream studded with chocolate chips. A banana pudding flavor speckled with mini Nilla wafers is called Chunky Monkey Park, named for a local playground that used to house live monkeys, which were given to zoos in the 1980s because pranksters kept setting them loose.

"Whenever something significant happens or someone is honored we name an ice cream after them," Chris says. In all, the Georges have introduced about 40 flavors in the shop, and Chris is convinced that it's the high quality (and high butterfat content) that makes O Town's ice creams a success. "Our flavors are constantly rotating," he says. "But I think it's because the taste is on par with the big guys like Häagen Dazs and Ben & Jerry's."

O Town also offers lunch items such as pimento cheese sandwiches, and has a "scoop it forward" board, where locals can buy a scoop for someone like a local law enforcement officer or kindergarten teacher. (The Georges let recipients know they've been treated by posting a photo of the board on the shop's Facebook page.)

Regardless of how well known the shop gets—the Alabama Media Group just named it one of the top ice creams in the state—O Town continues to embrace its roots. On summer nights when local parks host live music or other special events, the Georges bring their ice cream pushcart back out, delivering frozen treats directly to the community that welcomed the family back from Atlanta with open arms and full bellies.

O Town Ice Cream: 815 S Railroad Ave., Opelika; 334-737-5700; facebook.com/otownicecream