

John “JD” Duncan, owner and proprietor of Bonterra Dining and Wine Room in Charlotte’s historic South End, has been in the restaurant business since he was 16.

It was Jerry Richardson – yes, that Jerry Richardson – who hired the young Duncan to work in a Hardee’s in Clemson, South Carolina. That was when the hospitality bug bit.

Duncan quickly moved through the fast food lane into the world of fine dining working in upscale chains of restaurants primarily based in the south.

He worked for Houston’s in Nashville for six years honing his restaurant management abilities; and then moved on to work for the Buckhead Life Group in Atlanta, where he stayed for 14 years.

In the mid 1990s JD and his dad, Jack Duncan, decided they were ready to join forces and open up a little place all their own. The father son team decided that JD had the experience to move forward, and dad promised to provide the financial backing.

# Bonterra Dining & Wine Room

The family business plan was to find a little historical home or old post office or hardware store – a place like the original Passion 8 Bistro or Bruce Moffett’s Barrington’s located on Fairview Road in Charlotte. They looked for locations in Atlanta, Charleston, and in and around Charlotte.

And then, Jack happened upon an old church that was for sale.

Jack Duncan was called to buy, you might say, and as JD tells it, “The size of the church alone, changed everything. Our little dream got big really fast.”

Dating back to the late 1800s and originally built and named the Atherton Methodist Church, the historic building now known as Bonterra was reincarnated in 1914 with a brick facelift and re-christened the Dilworth Methodist Episcopal Church South.

Over the years, two other congregations also occupied the space up until the late 1980s when the empty building became home to a holiday store and flower shop called The Red Sled.

While the history is fun to look back upon, JD’s favorite story about the impact of this historical Charlotte landmark is as of yet an unconfirmed one. It’s said that back in the day, the church also provided the food and shelter to field laborers arriving by railroad from Columbia and the South Carolina Lowcountry to pick tobacco in the Charlotte area.

Customer service is very important to JD, and it

shows. The staff at Bonterra is among the most seasoned, most professional team in town, and service at Bonterra is always seamless. JD takes great care in hiring, looking for mature professionals who know their craft and share the Duncans’ original vision.

Same goes for the culinary back of the house team at Bonterra. JD wanted a culinary team who got it, and to that end, Chef Blake Hartwick joined the culinary team in 1999.

“At the time,” he said, “we were the hot new place, and so we kept trying to bring Charlotte the next new thing – we were all young, and it was a more avant garde style of cooking.”

“Local produce and product was available, but it wasn’t so easy to get it, and honestly it really didn’t matter as much to people,” Hartwick continued. “Back then Charlie Trotter was a big influence on us all, and tasting plate dinners were all the rage.”

JD concurs, “We realized early on that we were probably trying to be more than we needed to be.”

But within a very short time, the pendulum swung back to a comfortable compromise, things fell into place, and the menu and 200 by-the-glass wine list at Bonterra combined with a professional team of spot on wait staff made the local dining-out favorite – a reputation it continues to enjoy to this day.

Blake’s culinary heart has always had its roots in the south. He has honed his style and his technique over the years, and now after a 10 year or so absence is back at the helm of the kitchen at Bonterra with a talented team that includes pastry chef Jason Lemon and sous chef Mike Long.

Now, Blake’s style is much more about his roots than ever before. Locally grown and produced products take center stage, and the emphasis is on the plate, making each plate look as beautiful as it tastes.

“When I was young it was about keeping up with what was in vogue. Now I cook to warm people’s souls. It’s from my heart – not just because a tech-

nique or an ingredient is the trendy things to do.”

And Blake continued, “No matter what any chef says – in the end for us all, it’s about the look on a customer’s face when they take that first bite – it’s priceless when you see that smile that tells you that you hit a home run.”

With easy availability of local product, Blake now shops regularly at the Atherton Market and supports several area farms including Bells Best, Sammy Koenigsburg’s New Town Farms, Brasstown Beef and Poultry Junction in Stanley County.

When Blake is not cooking, he likes trying new independently run places around Charlotte. “I like all the older places, too,” he said. Noting that he loves dropping by Pinky’s occasionally; and just stopped in for dinner at Beef and Bottle – it was Sunday at 7:30, and the place was packed. “Testimony to the fact,” Blake noted, “that Charlotte does really offer something for everyone, and all of us are here for the right reasons.”

Recent dinners at Lumiere and Passion 8 confirm the fact for him that Charlotte is moving in the right direction; and he’s thrilled that the much anticipated Rock Salt opened its doors.

Meanwhile JD, Blake and the Bonterra team have a lot planned for its collective plate in 2015. On May 27, the restaurant will host a James Beard Celebrity dinner, and in addition, has a series of wine classes and a monthly series of wine dinners all in planning stages for late spring/early summer.

Currently, Bonterra is happy to play host to the third annual Charlotte Got To Be NC Competition Dining series with dinners most Sundays and every Monday and Tuesday evening from March 22 to May 19. Tickets for these events are available at [competitiondining.com](http://competitiondining.com).

Bonterra is located at 1829 Cleveland Ave. at East Worthington Ave. The bar opens at 4:30 pm; and the restaurant opens for dinner at 5:30 pm Mon. – Sat. For dinner reservations or to book a private event at the restaurant call 704.333.9463. For more information visit [bonterradining.com](http://bonterradining.com). \*



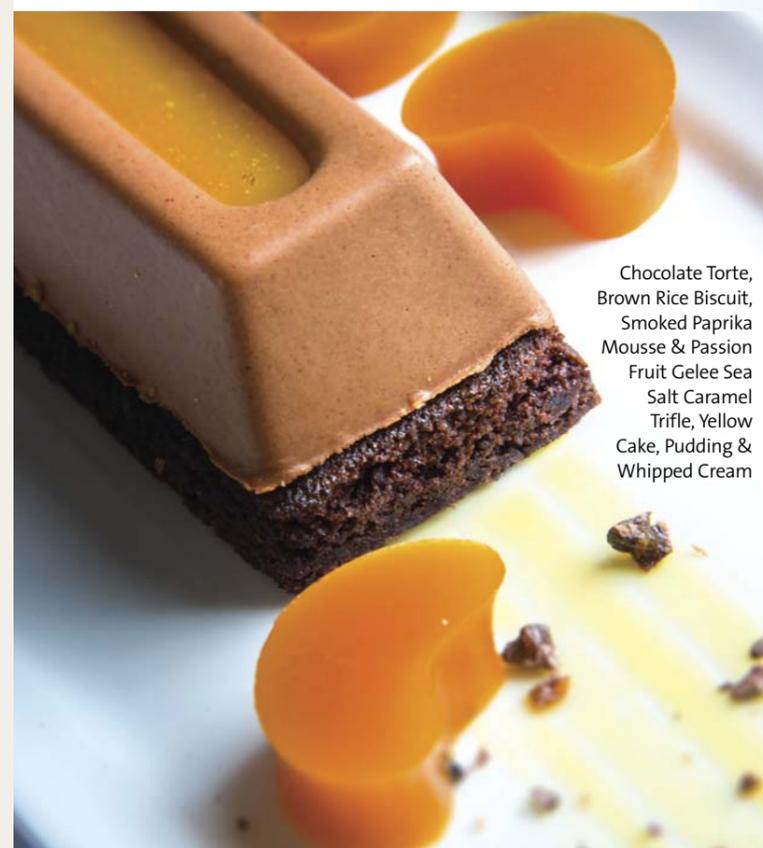
Chef Blake Hartwick



Olive Oil Cake, White Pear Caramel, Cinnamon Streusel & Black Sesame Praline



Brasstown Smoked Brisket, Johnny Cake, Carolina Chow Chow, Cheerwine BBQ Sauce



Chocolate Torte, Brown Rice Biscuit, Smoked Paprika Mousse & Passion Fruit Gelee Sea Salt Caramel Trifle, Yellow Cake, Pudding & Whipped Cream



Roasted Scallop, Candied Orange, Leek Butter Foam, Osetra Caviar