

JOSH BUTLER

EXECUTIVE CHEF, LA MESA DEL SUR AT ZAC BROWN'S SOUTHERN GROUND SOCIAL CLUB

WRITTEN BY KELLY SKINNER

EMERGING FROM a Florida childhood brimming with taco nights, family barbecues and Justin Wilson episodes, it wasn't until Chef Josh Butler was a teen, working as a delivery driver at a Chinese restaurant, that dreams of cheldom started taking form. "I used to hang out in the kitchen and watch the chef cook," says the self-taught culinarian. "It amazed me how many dishes one person could cook so quickly." The infectious energy of the kitchen pulled him in, and before long, Butler was cooking at Tallahassee, Florida's exclusive dining establishment, The

Governors Club, which eventually led to an unrelated, and highly coveted, gig as executive chef at the Florida Governor's Mansion. Taking the helm as the youngest chef ever (he was only 21 when he got the position, making him the youngest governor's executive chef in the country), he went on to wow presidents, senators, and even Willy Mays, as he earned his chops on the job over the next 13 years. Later, trading oranges for peaches, Butler served as personal chef to Tyler Perry in Atlanta before becoming Southern Ground Executive Chef Rusty Hamlin's sous-chef. As of February,

Butler has emerged as top toque at Brown's recently opened La Mesa del Sur restaurant in downtown Senoia, Georgia—a Latin-meets-Southern food spot whose proceeds benefit Zac Brown's Camp Southern Ground.



PHOTOS: HARRWOOD STUDIOS

Flavors: Tell us a little bit about cooking at the Florida Governor's Mansion.

Butler: I ended up cooking for four governors and one lieutenant governor while I was there. I was responsible for breakfast, lunch and dinner, and did everything from personal meals and luncheons to fancy dinners and receptions. The biggest event I did was for 800 people.

Flavors: Wow! Is there any one event that really stands out in your mind?

Butler: All the generals from the bases around Florida came for a luncheon. After I cooked a Cajun/Creole-inspired meal, they stood up and gave me this thunderous applause. It felt really good to be appreciated by such powerful people.

Flavors: You must have felt like a rock star. Speaking of which, tell us about working as Hamlin's sous-chef on the road.

Butler: We cooked a buffet-style feast for members of Zac Brown Band's fan club, the Zamily, for his Eat & Greet events. Zac has specific recipes that we would do every single show: his pocketknife coleslaw, his Georgia Clay Rub beef tenderloin and the pork tenderloin smothered with Zac's

Southern Ground Grub Brown Sauce. On top of those items, we would do fresh vegetables, different grains, homemade pastas ... the menu was wide open to creativity.

Flavors: Speaking of creative, we love the blend of Latin-meets-Southern fare at La Mesa del Sur. What are a few of your favorite things on the menu?

Butler: I would have to say the mac'n' queso (which comes with smoked chicken, *barbacoa* brisket or pork *carnitas*) is over-the-top delicious. I also really enjoy our *barbacoa* taco with beef brisket and pickled onions.

Flavors: When not preparing slow-cooked recipes at the restaurant, what's your favorite time-intensive dish to make during the fall?

Butler: I've got to go with *coq au vin*. That's a classic dish that was taught to me by one of my mentors, Chef Albert Ughetto (Jacques Cousteau's chef). There's something really profound about cooking a classic dish. I love innovation, but sometimes it's good to go back to your roots.



La Mesa del Sur

18 Main Street, Senoia
770/727-9072

southerngroundsocialclub.com



For Chef Butler's recipe for *Brisket Barbacoa Tacos*, visit flavorsmagazine.com.