

DINNER HOUR

Quit Your Day Job

How three food lovers found freedom from the daily grind. By Jason Horn Photos by Cary Norton

Everybody's had the fantasy of telling the boss to shove it and striking out on their own. But few of us have the guts to actually do it.

Mike Wilson certainly had no intention of quitting his job when he opened Saw's BBQ in Edgewood. The Charlotte native had been cooking professionally since the age of 15, and he moved to Birmingham for a job testing recipes for *Cooking Light* magazine. Wilson's a Southern boy through and through: He used to make barbecue on his days off, and after a coworker asked him to cook her a few slabs of ribs, he began selling them to his office mates on a regular basis.

Wilson's original plan was to open Saw's and have employees run the restaurant during the day and man it himself after work. "But after the first week," he says, "I couldn't even imagine having to go back to work and have this place running." That's when he called his supervisor and gave notice.

For Lisa Anderson, the career shift was much more jarring. She ran Jane Simon, a high-end clothing boutique in Mountain Brook Village, for 12 years before the recession forced it to close in 2009. On a trip to New York soon after, Anderson discovered Burger Joint, a restaurant in the Le Parker Meridien hotel that serves plain ol' burgers and milkshakes but always has a line out the door. "I couldn't get it out of my head," she says. "I went twice."

Despite the fact that her only culinary experience was cooking for her kids, Anderson opened Boho Burgers last August in Cahaba Heights, serving patties made from grass-fed Alabama beef in a tiny storefront. The place only has three chairs at a counter inside and two tables on a miniscule deck outside, but on a good day, Anderson says, she can sell 130 burgers.

Trying to leave the restaurant world is actually what spurred Angela Schmidt to start her own business. She moved to Birmingham in 2001 to pursue a civil engineering degree at UAB, but a stint waiting tables at Ocean convinced her to trade bridges and canals for aprons and clogs. She worked in the kitchens at Chez Fonfon, Highlands Bar & Grill, Ocean and 26, eventually becoming executive chef at John's City Diner in 2008.

At that point, Schmidt says, "I didn't want a restaurant of my own anymore. I wanted my life back." She started looking for a non-restaurant job, but instead came up with Chef U. The business, which is



now just over a year old, is a combination catering company, cooking school and party entertainment service. "You kind of get three in one," Schmidt says. She creates a custom menu and cooks it in customers' home kitchens, offering tips and advice while guests look on.

One thing Wilson, Anderson and Schmidt all lacked in starting their projects was a fear of failure. "Just do it," Wilson advises anyone thinking about following in his footsteps. "You just gotta get out there and stick your foot in it."

Doubts are part of the equation, Schmidt says. "Every day is filled with, 'Am I going to have to get a real job?' Even if you're full of self-doubt, that's just part of it."

But all three say they found success because they're doing something they love. "If you follow truly your passion," Anderson says, "and put your heart in it, it'll just happen." ●



Opposite page: Mike Wilson of Saw's BBQ. Above: Lisa Anderson of Boho Burgers. Below: Angela Schmidt of Chef U

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