

**S T . E D W A R D**  
**PRIDE**  
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ISSUE 4

**Stir  
it Up**

## ***Great Lakes Escape***

A look at the wet and wonderful on Ohio's #1 Tourist attraction, Lake Erie.

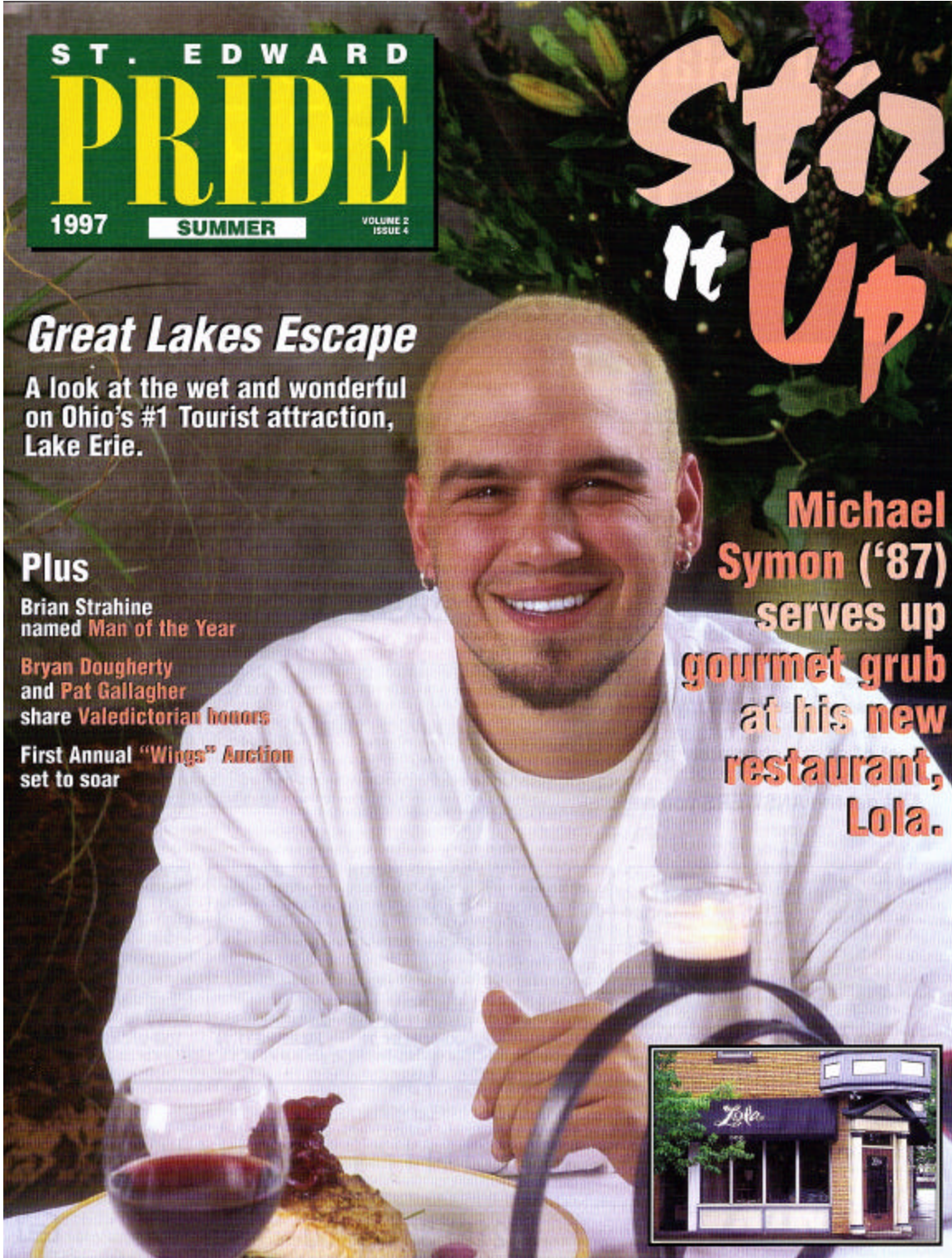
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Brian Strahine named **Man of the Year**

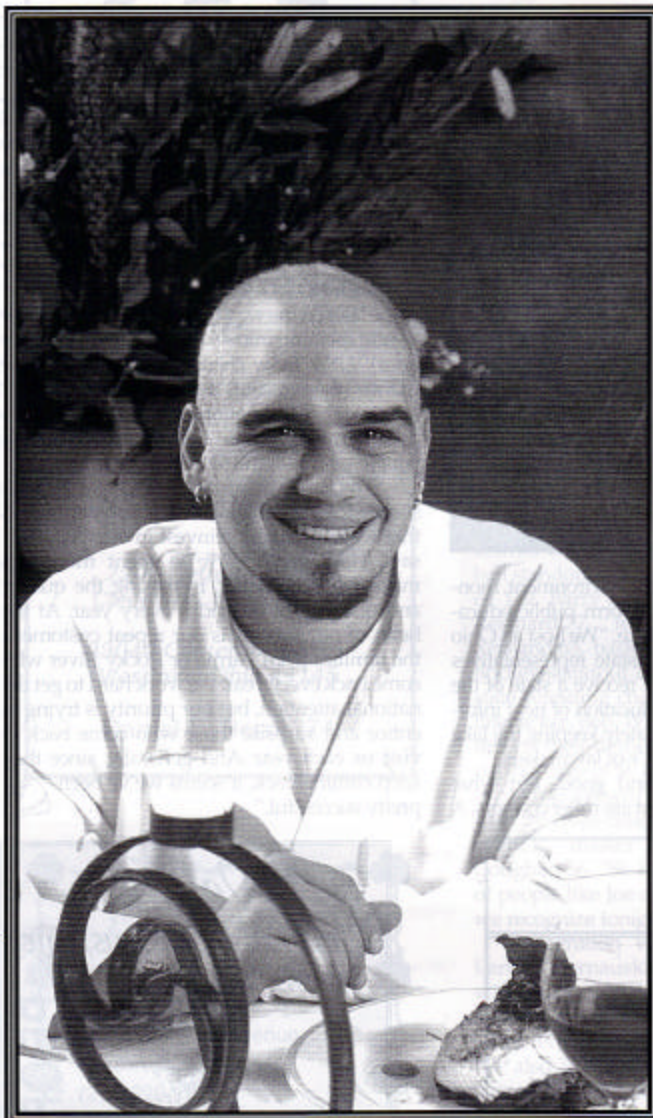
Bryan Dougherty and Pat Gallagher share **Valedictorian honors**

First Annual **"Wings" Auction** set to soar

**Michael Symon ('87) serves up gourmet grub at his new restaurant, Lola.**







Photos by Bill Rieter

# Stir It Up

by *Matt Weiland*

**Chef Michael Symon ('87) has Cleveland licking its chops with his new venture, Lola, while the rest of the country takes notice of the young man whose creations and concoctions dare to flair.**

**C**hef Michael Symon does not fit the conventional pre-conception of the culinary artist as a young man. Whereas you might expect airs and flourish, fine dining pomp blended with flaunted circumstance, Symon instead exudes an aura of quiet reserve, albeit it garnished with the assurance that often accompanies talent and accomplishment regardless of the field of endeavor. At times, to be sure, his brow creases into an earnest furrow and his

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**"The notice I've received has been due to hard work. But because of their coaching I know to keep my head down, and to stay true to the course I've set."**

demeanor intensifies as he addresses an issue or a situation surrounding his new restaurant, Lola. When behind the grille in his kitchen in the throes of a creative dash — the place that is his true quintessence and the center of his creativity — he is as focused as a chess champ.

Nonetheless, he is always ready with a smile, indulgent with the many who need a moment of his time, genuinely warm as he introduces his two Akitas, Max and Sasha. "They're Japanese," he explains as he lets them rip at his hand, taking turns jousting with each. "In ancient times, they were traditionally the watchdogs for the Japanese emperor."

It is perhaps fitting, then, that Max and Sasha find themselves now in a court of culinary royalty. Because for Michael Symon, the star of chef celebrity has been steadily rising since word-of-mouth of the up-and-comer at the former Caxton Cafe spread through the various dining quarters of Cleveland. He quickly began to gain renown for the distinct flair and unique style that fine diners so seek to savor and ultimately come back for.

**S**ymon is at once ambitious and irreverent, his current musical choices of ska and swing reflecting the range of his own appetites and tastes. He is serious about his work and the new business, yet is often able to squeeze in a daily round of golf in the morning prior to coming in. And who

can argue with the results? He and wife Liz Shanahan have embarked on opening their first restaurant as the theater where Symon is the featured player and the house band. The two have known each other since the days when he was the sous chef at Players and she the manager before both moved on to the Caxton Cafe. Married two years ago, they opened Lola in March (named in part after Symon's aunt) and it has already created a stir in the Cleveland fine dining community while also garnering kudos from national connoisseurs.

Most recently, *Restaurant Hospitality* magazine recognized Symon as one of its "Rising Stars of 1997." The magazine noted that "Symon's cutting-edge American cuisine has set a new standard for other cooks to shoot for...after working for years to make others successful, he recently opened his first restaurant, which has been playing to a full house amid glowing reviews; his decision to locate Lola in an urban frontier has helped bring new energy and revitalization to the neighborhood."

Located on the corner of Professor and Literary Avenues in Cleveland's Tremont Neighborhood, Lola provides an elegant mix of fine dining in an amicable, walk-in atmosphere — the neighborhood sophisticate. And it is perhaps symbolic — if not emblematic — that Symon would choose Tremont as the locale for his first enterprise. It is, after all, one of the magnetic cores of activity in the city — at once young, cool and confident.

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"I lived in Tremont for quite a while," he says, "and I have for a long time liked the direction the neighborhood's going. I like that it's near downtown, that it's urban, a little bit Soho, a little Wicker Park. And in such a neighborhood you're a part of the community. You interact with people. It's more affordable. Besides, there's always a place to park."

Like any art form, the culinary arts requires not only the combination of talent and ability, but also the fine blend of creativity and discipline, resilience and endurance. Combine that with the necessary fiscal and marketing dexterity of entrepreneurship and you've got quite a few burners to attend to, often when the pans upon each are simmering to a boil.

"I do deal with the business aspects a little more," he says of his new role as restaurant owner. "Essentially, much of it is just about keeping up. In a lot of ways, it's been much busier than we initially expected so the readjustment to rise to the volume that we've been doing has been quite a challenge. But I think we've succeeded pretty well so far."

And as you browse the menu, you begin to see the other assorted mixes, the combinations for the palate that at once seem to defy sensual or sensory reason, yet which

allure the taste buds as if on a dare. *Go ahead, try it. You might like it.* And sure enough, after the scrutiny, the inspection of texture, the sniff for aroma, you taste and you begin to nod. *Yeah. Pickled ginger, who'd a thought? And whoever considered watercress? And finally, a use for wild leeks!* That is in many ways the nature of Symon's ability and his approach, almost the college kid using whatever ingredients he finds in the cupboards and fridge, all the while seeming to say 'Watch this' as he stokes up the stove and like Merlin commences his conjuring. And it is delicious.

A look at the Lola line-up illustrates the range of entrees: the horseradish crusted salmon over a roasted apple and beet salad; the slash and burn grouper with corn fritters and whipped avocados; the pan-roasted walleye over a shrimp and barley risotto with collard greens and mustard oil; the swordfish club with avocados, smoked bacon, red peppers, chile mayo and sweet potato chips.

Symon considers his own cooking style to be pure, simple and seasonal, contemporary American cuisine that he calls 'urban comfort food,' particularly seafood specialties. "We change the menu a little bit every month," he says. And one glance at the menu will quickly show how this seasoned, seasonal artist plies his creativity right down to

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the monikers of such favorites as the "knuckle sandwich" (a lobster claw and knuckle sandwiched between smoked bacon, mozzarella cheese, and watercress) and oysters on the half shell with "Asian love sauce."

"Whatever's in season, we work into our menu so that the menu's always changing," he says. "Seasonal means higher quality and affordability. It also keeps us from getting bored."

This recipe has earned him the title of Cleveland's "hottest chef" by *The Plain Dealer* while the *Cleveland Free Times* says that he and Shanahan are "setting an entirely new standard for casually elegant dining in the city."

The son of Angel and Dennis Symon, Michael grew up in North Olmsted and upon graduating from St. Edward attended the Culinary Institute of America in New York from 1988 through 1990. He then worked at various Manhattan locales before coming home to Cleveland for an apprenticeship at Sammy's.

He became the sous chef at Players under Mark Shary, who Symon says taught him how to "develop and extract flavors," and then became corporate chef at Piccolo Mondo and Giovanni's, learning to orchestrate a kitchen under the tutelage of Carl Quagliata. He cites both men as his mentors while also noting the influence of

Charles Palmer, a Manhattan restaurateur whose Aureole restaurant, says Symon, has stayed on the cutting edge over the past decade or so without ever succumbing to the terminal temptations of being trendy. "His food doesn't stand still," Symon observes, then adds with a wry twist. "He isn't still doing hollandaise."

During his time at St. Edward, Symon was a wrestler until he blew out his arm during a match, shattering both of the bones in his forearm and dislocating his elbow. It was then that he got a job at Geppettos, a move which ultimately changed his life. Still, the influences of his wrestling days remain strong within him today.

"Howard Ferguson and Greg Urbas taught me how to be dedicated to something and follow through with things," says Symon. "Coach Ferguson taught me how to interact with people. And he and Coach Urbas both taught me how to work hard, to always keep your chin up and to have a good attitude. The notice I've received has been due to hard work. But because of their coaching I know to keep my head down and try not to let it change my day-to-day regimen and routines. To stay true to the course I've set. I wouldn't be content just being an owner. I'm a chef. That's what has brought me some success. It is what gives me a sense of fulfillment."



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