

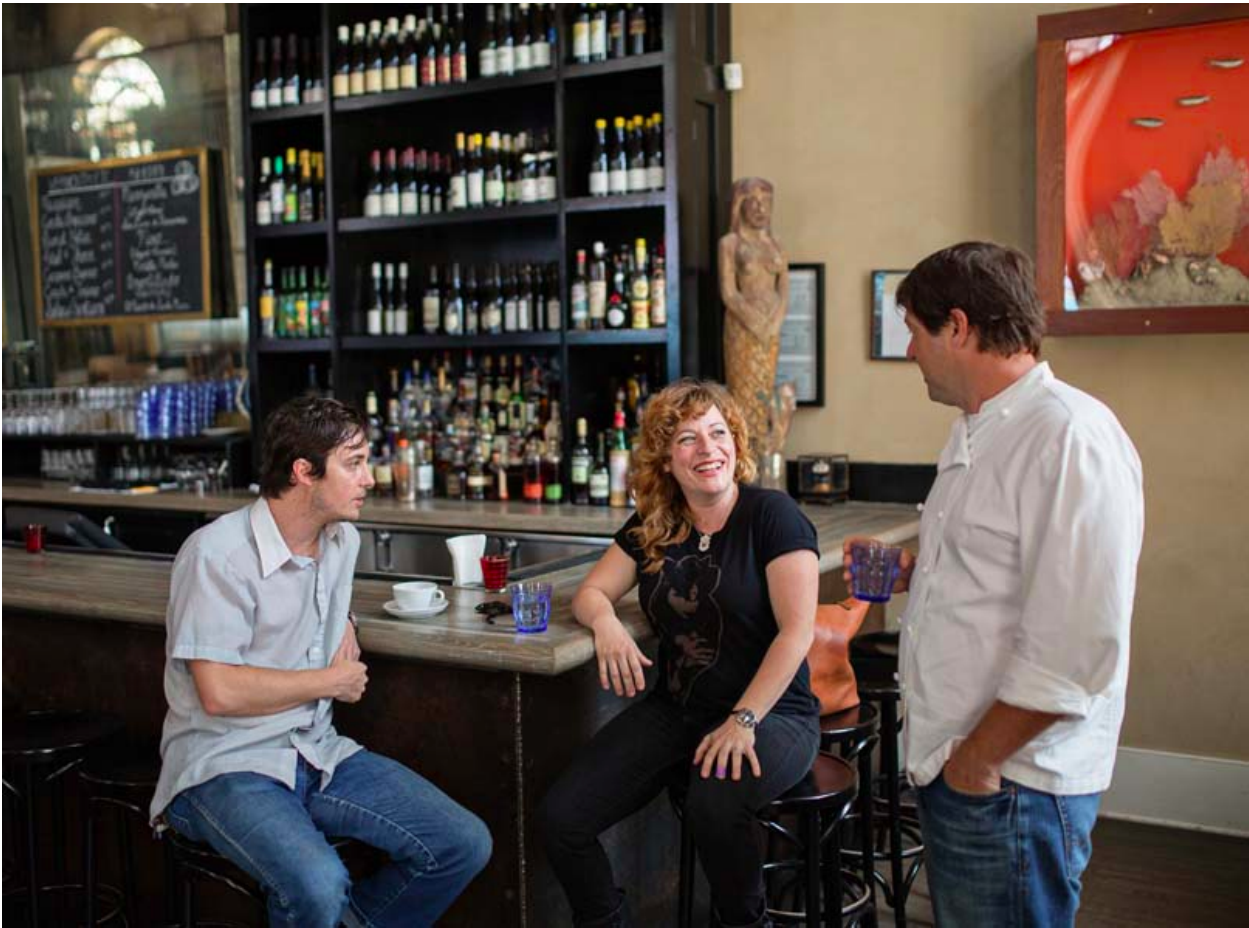
SHOVELS & ROPE + MIKE LATA

FAN CLUB



*Chef Mike Lata in his Charleston restaurant The Ordinary with Cary Ann Hearst and Michael Trent of the musical duo Shovels & Rope. Photos by Andrew Cebulka*

Food and music go hand-in-hand at Billy Reid, and with that in mind, we began a series of “Fan Club” posts in the early days of the Journal. Here, we invite some of our chef and musician friends who share a mutual admiration for one another to ask a handful of “burning questions” about their respective crafts, inspirations and whatever else comes to mind. We’ve long been wanting to hear from Chef Mike Lata of **Fig** and **The Ordinary** in Charleston, South Carolina, and fortunately, so have husband and wife musical duo Cary Ann Hearst and Michael Trent of **Shovels & Rope**. They met up at The Ordinary with photographer **Andrew Cebulka**, who captured the exchange.



Shovels & Rope answer Mike Lata

*Mike Lata: I would bet some people categorize y’all as an overnight success with the release of O’ be Joyful. I know better and have*

*witnessed your perseverance. What was the tipping point?*

Shovels & Rope: That's a great question because it's hard to put a finger on it. It could have been the point at which we enlisted "professional help" to expand on the dirty rock club success we had built on our own after many years of postponing such business alignments. For example, after we were already touring all the time and selling lots of our self-titled and respective solo records on our own out of the back of the van, we cautiously partnered with Dualtone Records to release *O' Be Joyful* and that relationship proved to be very cooperative and fruitful. While it has been one small step after the next up the mountain, those partnerships "grew our business" in a way that made us look like the hotshots we're perceived to be today.

*ML: Chefs, like most musicians, have to strike a balance between art and commerce. How does this influence your creative process?*

S&R: We were gonna ask you a similar question and we couldn't quite articulate it! We have been so lucky to have been able to strike that balance and we think it comes from all of us - management, label and us as artists - having manageable expectations all around. At some point one has to ask "how much of this music business pie do I want and what am I willing to do to get it?" We were perfectly happy to go for the small slice that requires little to no creative compromise. We can be "boutique" and still have enough appeal to generate economy for ourselves and all the people who depend on us. We write the songs and record the music the way we want to and then put it out into the world with minimal consideration for the tailoring of it for the audience. What we have found is that the audience we have likes our cavalier nature and are down to party with us as long as we stay true to ourselves. And as a result we get to eat the manageable piece of pie that we seek.

*ML: I've always likened a chef's menu to a musician's album. We want a few hit singles and we also want the opportunity to express our evolution in both craftsmanship and in terms of repertoire. Do you have a formula or an approach to building an album? Do you have your audience in mind?*

Michael Trent: A well-balanced record, in my opinion, has a couple of hits, a few deep cuts, and at least one song that's so ridiculous and out there you think "there is no way people are gonna go for this," but usually ends up being half your audience's favorite song on the record. It always happens! After being in this biz for as long as we have, and touring for as long as we have, you develop a sense of who it is that's coming to your shows and buying your records and you have a pretty good idea of what songs are going to be your "hits." They usually appeal to the biggest portion of your collective audience; they are the easiest to connect to without too much effort on the part of the listener. It's great to have hits. They pay the bills, make people happy and you can always pull one out in a time of need, like when the girl in the front row center starts yawning. *But*, we also really love to challenge ourselves and our audience. We are unbelievably grateful to have an open-minded fan base who seem to get a kick out of our desire to approach things a little differently.

I feel like part of the thing that goes along with being an artist is your willingness to try something new at the risk of people not liking it. It's how you grow. And it might even open doors for other artists in some way.

*ML: What is your biggest performance disaster?*

Cary Ann Hearst: Every show for us is an effort in averting disaster, though my favorite disaster was at Voodoo Fest in New Orleans, where we were covering Bruce Springsteen's "Johnny 99." We were two acts before Pearl Jam, so there must have been about 20 thousand people standing in front of us, waiting for a band that was not us.

I'm at the little piano, which I can barely play anyway, and I'm suddenly dumb-struck to remember the lyrics *or* the chords, and it just fell apart in a totally unrecoverable way... and in New Orleans to boot. I was certain half the audience were actual piano players and they were shaking their heads in shame.

*ML: I remember seeing y'all perform "Birmingham" on David Letterman and you absolutely killed it. That had to be incredibly nerve-racking. How do you prepare for a performance like that?*

CAH: Funny thing about that! The final edit of the show runs hours after the actual taping. The last time we were on, we played "Coping Mechanism," and I just blanked a third of the way through the song and had to stop cold, say "I got to start over," and take two breaths, count us back in, and crank it back up. It happened really fast and was over before it started. It's a crazy feeling. It's got some of the elements of a regular show - P.A., an audience - but you have one song and you have to kill it or go home. You have Paul Shaffer within spitting distance to your left and Dave over on the right and it's cold as all get out in there. To prepare for any performance, we usually sit in quiet for about 15 minutes and just think or not think about what we're about to do. We listen to music, we vent our insecurities and reassure each other that we are not awful and that we can actually play the song we wrote.

*ML: I'm often asked what my guilty pleasure food is, which is an Egg McMuffin. What are yours?*

CAH: Sweet things: "Hot Now" Krispy Kreme donuts and ice cream sandwiches.

MT: I go for the Sausage McMuffin with egg, which we affectionately call "breakfast of shame." They call it the number two... We'll leave that one right there.

*ML: If you made me a mixed tape, what song would you always include?*

S&R: Lately, "Strangers" by The Kinks has been popping up on all the mixed tapes we have made. It's such a beautiful song about human kindness and compassion in a world where no one knows why we're here or where we're going.

*ML: What do you cook for someone when you want to impress them?*

CAH: Banana pudding from scratch. The custard cooking part makes you look like a fancy chef and then the meringue solidifies the illusion as you whip egg whites to perfect peaks and toast it just so.

MT: I do a beer-braised slow cooker black bean pork butt thing on the regular, but a prosciutto-wrapped chicken marsala when I need to get out of trouble with my wife.

## Mike Lata answers Shovels & Rope

*Shovels & Rope: What are your earliest culinary memories? Were you cooking with your granny or breaking down a deer with your dad?*

Mike Lata: My Polish paternal grandmother had a great influence on me in the kitchen. She was a master of her craft — her repertoire wasn't grand, but she was meticulous, thrifty and made delicious food out of seemingly nothing. My maternal grandmother also had skills and we spent time in the kitchen together cooking food from her French-Canadian background. Because of them, I considered myself a cook from a very young age.

*S&R: You seemed to set your roots down in Charleston just as it was ripe for a culinary coming of age. Did you sense that when you*

*came here? What was it like to be one of the chefs that perpetuated that blooming?*

ML: I was recruited from Atlanta to be Executive Chef and to bring a local food program to Anson Restaurant. I was 25, opinionated, idealistic and confident (read: cocky) and it took a while to become acclimated to 1998 Charleston; it lacked the electricity of Atlanta and I had a hard time reconciling my decision to move here. The turning point was a few years later when we opened FIG. So many people in the community came together to help me realize my dream of owning a restaurant that I was humbled and overwhelmed with a sense of belonging and purpose. I felt like I was home for the first time since leaving my mom’s house in Massachusetts a decade earlier.

*S&R: Tell us about your “lost years” in New Orleans and Europe!*

ML: I was in New Orleans just after I turned 21. Let’s just say, I learned to cook with consistency under the most difficult of outside influences.

As for France, that was a life-long dream. I left Anson Restaurant in 2001 with the intention of opening what would become FIG. It was the best window of opportunity to realize that dream, so I disappeared for eight months to cook in Nice and Burgundy. I went in without a solid plan, but knocked on some doors and got into some kitchens. I landed a great job, and I was there long enough to become accepted as a fellow cook. I experienced cooking from a much different vantage point in a culture where food is viewed so differently from ours. One noteworthy mention: I was finishing up my lunch shift when 9/11 began.

*S&R: At any point in your professional career did you feel like giving up? What motivated you to keep going?*

ML: Just after New Orleans, still 21 and now in Atlanta, I got fired for “doctoring” my chef’s recipes. He couldn’t cook for shit. He knew it and I knew it. Nonetheless, I was discouraged from not yet having an inspiring mentor or kitchen experience. All that changed while I was sulking around in a shopping plaza looking to buy a CD. I stumbled upon a restaurant called Ciboulette; the exterior was nondescript, but I liked the menu on the door, walked in, and asked for the chef. I told him I was starving for a job in a great kitchen and promised that I would work harder than the rest of his cooks if he would give me the opportunity. It was the most professional and inspiring kitchen I had ever worked in. Eager to make the most of it, I spent a year coming to work at 9 AM for a 4 PM shift. I studied with the butcher, pastry chef and eventually became the chef de cuisine after a big turnover. I would go home at 1 AM and fall asleep reading cookbooks only to start all over the next day. This was the most formative part of my professional life.

*S&R: Do you listen to music in the kitchen? If so, what gets your skillet good and greasy?*

ML: I love music. But cooking demands all of our faculties and intense focus in order to be consistent. I can have my back turned to a cook and tell by the sound of a sizzle in a pan if they are exercising good technique. Not to mention, when two cooks don’t like the same song, we all shift our focus to that instead of the food. If I did listen to music while cooking, it would be Ryan Adams. For some reason, when one of his songs comes on it’s always just right.

*S&R: If you are a culinary Captain Ahab, is there a challenging dish that is your “Moby Dick,” a dish that conquers you every time?*

ML: Instead of a dish, it’s more of a setting. It is so challenging to adequately represent your food when you are on the road... which we do all the time. All of the variables make it difficult to execute. I may liken it to being a musician; he can fine-tune a recording in the studio but can never predict the mercurial conditions of a live performance

*S&R: What do you feel like eating today?*

ML: Eggs....always eggs.

*S&R: Do you have a sentimental knife?*

ML: I bought seven or eight big, old school, chefs knives that were discovered in a warehouse in New York from circa World War II. The knife broker (whose actual name is Jeff Edges, no joke) said that I had gotten the last of the lot. I have given out all but two of these knives along the way to the cooks in my life who have meant the most to me.