



David Perry

Mark Baldwin: "I'm able to bring that interest in various cultures into menu planning and recipe development."

Cheesecake lollipops and barbecue, oh, my! >

Executive Summary:

OK, so it's not going to win any design awards. That's not Blue Ridge Catering is about. It's about food that's so good it'll make you weep.

By David Perry

Chef Mark Baldwin is the secret weapon behind Blue Ridge Catering, a Salem Avenue kitchen that doesn't look like much from the street. The one-story brick building is decorated with wooden pallets blocking one door, trash dumpsters and a no parking sign that is more prominent than Mark's own modest shingle. But the working-class digs belie the gastronomical delights that Mark and his staff whip up within for Roanoke's weddings, luncheons and special events.

Mark has no formal training in the culinary arts. In fact, this local boy and 1996 Patrick Henry High School graduate received degrees in anthropology and sustainable development from Appalachian State University in 2001. Perfect background for a foodie.

Like many liberal studies majors, Mark found himself without a clear plan after college. In high school, he worked in the same building he now occupies when it was Jimmy's

Barbecue. Mark found himself there again post-baccalaureate, and when Jimmy died, Mark was suddenly running the business for Jimmy's family.

He kept Jimmy's afloat for about a year and a half, and then decided to start his own business in 2003, reaching out to Jimmy's customers and even keeping the same phone number. He still leases the building from the late owner's wife.

"I had some existing clients," he says. "I was able to grow at a comfortable pace and not jump in and get overwhelmed."

Thus, the social scientist became a chef, but he tries to mix in a little of his book learning, too. "I'm able to bring that interest in various cultures into menu planning and recipe development," says Mark.

Mark had to shake a perception that he was just a barbecue guy: "People would show up to a nice breakfast or brunch event and say, 'What—no barbecue?'"


At the top of his grocery list is a determination not to be typecast. He tries to "stay dynamic," he says, and to "not get into a mold: this is what you do, this is what you're known for."

Today, business is hotter than a habanera pepper, and Mark employs a staff of three to four full-timers and a rotation of 50 part-timers.

Through involvement in the International

Caterers Association, Mark has been able to form a strong network and keep fresh ideas pumping into the Roanoke Valley. His signature treat: cheesecake lollipops.

Sometimes, even the best new ideas are no match for plain old human error. Early on in the business, Mark catered his best friend's wedding—and forgot to cook the roast beef. More recently, Blue Ridge was asked to provide some airline catering for President Obama during the campaign. The hot meals were to be prepared in advance and packaged in tins for reheating on Obama's plane. Problem was, no one sent the tins. Mark and his staff got FedEx on the horn and ended up chasing the truck down to get POTUS his dinner.

Looking back, Mark says, "You learn a lot as you go, and how to do damage control." President Obama might agree. 

In Brief

Name:	Mark Baldwin
Age:	31
Company:	Blue Ridge Catering
Location:	Roanoke
Type of business:	Catering
Title:	Chef
History:	This Patrick Henry High School grad studied anthropology and sustainable development at Appalachian State. Fate put him in the kitchen at Jimmy's Barbecue. As the man behind Blue Ridge Catering, Mark puts a little of the local people and produce into all of his dishes.

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