

The Magic City Casts a Spell

MEET SIX VISIONARIES SHAPING BIRMINGHAM, ALABAMA'S WINE AND SPIRITS SCENE *by Scott Jones*

BIRMINGHAM, ALABAMA, boasts its fair share of award-winning, nationally recognized chefs and restaurants, but its drinking scene has historically been more of a sideshow than a main attraction. Today, however, the latter is emerging as a force in its own right. We asked six beverage industry stars for a snapshot of their unique contributions to the Magic City as they elevate its profile one sip at a time.

PHOTO COURTESY OF BRANDON LOPER



Trent Stewart and Brandon Loper.

BRANDON LOPER AND TRENT STEWART

Owners, Golden Age Wine

To hear Trent Stewart tell it, when he and Brandon Loper opened Golden Age Wine in 2019, the Birmingham wine scene was missing something: "a wine shop that had a point of view," as he puts it. "Our goal was to share terroir-driven wines through the lens of organic farming and low-intervention winemaking." The two friends knew that while interest in natural wines was growing, they'd have to educate skeptical consumers. "Deciding to include a wine bar in the shop definitely helped our customers understand that natural wines can be clean, pleasurable, and classic," says Stewart. Five years on, their award-winning venture has not only garnered national attention but become ground zero for a steady stream of events and educational tastings.

PHOTO: TOSHA GAINES



LENELL CAMACHO SANTA ANA

Owner, LeNell's Beverage Boutique

Located in the historic Norwood neighborhood, LeNell's Beverage Boutique, which opened in 2018, offers a singular retail experience courtesy of owner LeNell Camacho Santa Ana, who says she's "passionately in love with the ritual of beverage and how it connects and contributes to a sense of belonging and community." While this may sound like a lofty mission statement, from day one, she has delivered on her commitment to the neighborhood where she does business, earning the loyalty of everyone from locals looking to stock their home bars or attend one of her in-store yoga sessions to out-of-towners hoping to score one of her barrel-select whiskeys. In the wake of the pandemic, Camacho Santa Ana also recognized the growing desire for nonalcoholic options and responded by growing her selection. "People drank themselves stupid," she says frankly, "and many came out on the other side having decided either not to consume alcohol at all or to consume less with tasty alternatives also on their bar carts."

PHOTO: IVAN IARFA



JOSÉ MEDINA CAMACHO

*Beverage director and operating partner, Adió*s

José Medina Camacho is no stranger to the Birmingham beverage scene, having created some of the city's most respected cocktail programs for fine-dining venues and upscale bars alike. In 2017, when he and a friend organized an agave spirits-focused pop-up, *Bad Hombres*, the seeds for *Adió*s were planted. "We took it to Nashville and San Francisco," he explains, and "that's when the concept was born, whether I knew it at the time or not." A few years later, he met fellow cocktail pro Jesús Méndez, and the two nurtured the idea of an agave-forward bar: "We felt like our community—the Latino community—could use a space, because you just didn't see many Hispanics in local cocktail bars and restaurants." *Adió*s opened in 2023 to great fanfare, allowing Medina Camacho to not only showcase his mixology mastery but share his heritage and culture with Birminghamians.

PHOTO: JOHNNY HARRINGTON



CARLOS CISNEROS

Sommelier and beverage director, Bocca Ristorante, Bistro 218, and Sloan's Whiskey Bar

In a wine-centric town like Birmingham, many are surprised that only one of its sommeliers works on-premise: Carlos Cisneros. When he's not interacting with customers at *Bocca Ristorante*, this Level 2 Certified Sommelier also oversees the wine lists at sister establishments *Bistro 218* and *Sloan's Whiskey Bar*. "I love being on the floor; I love designing the wine lists, training the staff, and interacting with customers," says Cisneros, who laments that there aren't more sommeliers working in local establishments, though he understands the economics of having one on staff. He's fortunate, then, that "the restaurant's chef and owner, Tom Saab, gives me complete control over the wine program. He trusts my decisions and understands that he gets a return on his investment because he has a Certified Sommelier writing and pricing the lists and hand-selling wines on the floor at *Bocca Ristorante*," where Cisneros aims to elevate his guests' dining experience by recommending wines that match their preferences, meals, and budgets.

PHOTO: GORDON SAWYER



SCOTT ATKINSON

Wine manager, Piggly Wiggly Crestline Village

When meeting a customer, Piggly Wiggly Crestline Village wine manager Scott Atkinson promptly surveys what's in their shopping cart. "Seeing what they have and the types of food they enjoy is a critical step in me guiding them toward the right wine," he says. A longtime fixture in Birmingham working mainly in grocery retail, Atkinson currently leads a team of wine professionals at one of six Piggly Wiggly stores citywide, all operated by a Birmingham family. "It's just different at the Pig, because we're a pretty impressive wine shop within a locally owned grocery store," he explains, adding that this unique setup affords him the latitude to seek off-the-beaten-path labels: "We have an incredibly well-traveled customer base. People ask for wines they just had in Spain, Italy, France, Portugal, South Africa, and Argentina. Since we're a neighborhood store, we can tailor what we carry specifically to what people are asking for. It's an unbelievable benefit."

PHOTO: CALEB CHANCEY



FRANK STITT

Chef/owner, Stitt Restaurant Group

Frank Stitt took a chance on an up-and-coming section of Birmingham to open *Highlands Bar and Grill* in 1982. Since then, he has racked up an impressive list of honors, including the prestigious James Beard Award for Outstanding Restaurant in America in 2018. *Highlands Bar and Grill* closed during the pandemic, but his other two restaurants, *Bottega* and *Chez Fonfon*, are as lively as ever. However, he recently decided to recalibrate their wine programs to better align with guests' tastes and budgets without abandoning his original philosophy of "searching for wines of character, personality, and value, representing a unique experience," in his words. "That means Loire, cru Beaujolais, Jura, and Savoie in France and Alto Piemonte, Liguria, and Valtellina in Italy." To that end, he relies on longstanding relationships with venerable importers like Eric Solomon's European Cellars: "His *Indigo Wine* project is a great example of the kinds of fresh, balanced wines from forward-thinking producers we want to feature on our lists," Stitt says. **SJ**