



# Unassuming Excellence

Canyon Grill's perfect mix of fine foods and casual atmosphere makes the restaurant worth the drive for any occasion.

story by MEREDITH CUMMINGS | photos by MEREDITH CUMMINGS and RANDY GRIDER

If not for the chef's coat, Jason Greer's boyish looks might have first-time visitors to Canyon Grill mistaking him for the host or a server. But rest assured, he is one of the secret ingredients to the rural restaurant's current and long-lasting success. That's because behind his youthful smile lies generations of experience in the restaurant business.

It was Greer's grandparents, Lawton and Karen Haygood, who 18 years ago founded the restaurant atop Lookout Mountain near Trenton, Ga. Before that, Lawton Haygood pioneered the even-heating, wood-burning grill. Greer, 23, is able to draw on his impressive pedigree while at the helm of the culinary experience that regular customers have come to expect from Canyon Grill. And though the restaurant recently changed ownership, Greer maintains his family's connection to it.

I knew I had stumbled onto something different when I first met Johnny Holland, who along with his wife, Jessica, are the new owners. Unlike any other restaurateur I've ever spoken with, Holland immediately deflects all

attention away from himself. The former general manager of the restaurant, who watched Greer grow up and remembers him drawing photos of food as a child, counts on his mentee to carry on the fine tradition of quality food and service set by his grandfather.

"Jason is young and excited, he loves food and has a true passion for it," Holland says. "He's bringing the new-school ideas, as far as adding a little flair. It's amazing to see him back there in the kitchen."

Greer says he can't imagine being anywhere but the kitchen in this beautiful, character-filled restaurant. "A cubicle, to me, is where dreams go to die," Greer says of his brief foray into the office world. "This," he says, surveying diners enjoying their food, "gets in your blood."

It is that sense of family, togetherness and wanting each other to succeed that drives the Canyon Grill to be filled to capacity most nights. And that's the way I find the place on a pleasant, summer night.

I had recently reconnected with my college friend Randy Grider (pub-

lisher of this magazine), who joins me for Sunday dinner. A small garden just off the parking lot greets us and tells me this is going to be a unique experience. Stepping inside, I can't imagine a better setting for hanging out with friends, new or old.

Despite its unassuming nature, Canyon Grill draws patrons from throughout the region – with some diners regularly driving more than two hours to get there – and on this night, the two tables on each side of us are lively with conversations and laughter. One can quickly tell that those who visit Canyon Grill come as much for the atmosphere as the meal. The soft white lights that dot the two dining rooms add to the ambience. It's a place where anyone would feel right at home dressed in Sunday finery or simple shorts.

Therese Parker and her husband, Scott, are seated at an adjacent table and are celebrating Scott's birthday. Though they could have chosen a restaurant closer to home, Scott picked Canyon Grill. Therese says they often drive from Chattanooga, Tenn., to eat here. "It's amazing," Therese says. "Nothing is bad."

Scott agrees and, when pressed to name his favorite dish, he comes up short. "I don't ever get anything bad," he says with a smile. "It's my favorite spot."

Amanda Hickey, their friend along for the celebration, raves about the rosemary pork. "It was unbelievable, and I don't even like pork," Hickey says. "It's definitely worth the drive." The group also gives a thumbs up to the amaretto brownie and the grilled okra.

It's time to order. I am every chef's nightmare – hard to please because I am allergic to seafood and usually eat only vegetarian fare. Yet I take a leap and am so glad I do. The chicken piccata is exquisite, yet simple after a satisfying appetizer of spicy feta dip with roasted garlic, extra virgin olive oil and lemon. Based on previous reviews, I try the grilled red cabbage, which is incredible in a way that I never knew cabbage could be (and I already like cabbage).

Randy selects the sautéed red snapper complemented with capers and almonds – and a side of wood-grilled vegetables. Despite our ongoing conversation, he makes quick work of the fare and pronounces his meal delicious, the snapper the best he's ever tasted and the grilled vegetables amazing.

Wood grilling is the restaurant's claim to fame. More than a decade before opening Canyon Grill, Lawton Haygood developed cooking techniques using mesquite at a restaurant he operated in Dallas. He sought a wood-burning grill that worked on the same principle as even-heating convection ovens. Tired of waiting for someone in the industry to develop the idea, he designed his own grill. The patented, second-generation Turf Grill now used at Canyon Grill utilizes his technology. Though Lawton has sold his interest in the grill-manufacturing company he and a partner formed, many

**CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:** Jason Greer is part of the restaurant's proud heritage; Canyon Grill has been a popular destination for many during the past two decades; Reservations are recommended as the restaurant is often filled to capacity; BYOB policy for beer and wine

renowned restaurateurs count his invention among their kitchen must-haves.

Many of the ingredients for our dinner come from the quaint garden we overlook while enjoying our meal. Fresh tomatoes, squash, blueberries, raspberries, basil, thyme,

rosemary, mint and chocolate mint, as well as other herbs and vegetables, grow there.

Some ideas, like using shishito peppers, Greer gathers as he travels. The pepper idea came from a Chicago restaurant. The Canyon Grill serves them fresh from the garden and blistered, with kosher salt and romesco sauce. Bread pudding and coconut cake are among Greer's favorites to serve for dessert, but we opt for the key lime pie, which can hold its own with any in Key West.

Tammy Williams, our server, is attentive, patient and helpful, answering our questions about the food as well as the history of the place. "I enjoy the personal touch," she says, and adds that on special occasions like wedding proposals, staff members are more than happy to get involved and do their best to honor guests' requests.

Becky Pennington, service manager, has been at Canyon Grill from the start. For almost two decades, she watched the heartbeat of the restaurant grow and change. It evolved from a local spot to an eatery with a national reputation.

NFL quarterbacks Eli Manning and Peyton Manning and their families have eaten here, and publications such as Southern Living and Taste of the South have given a nod to Canyon Grill's food.

"It's kind of a destination since we are far away from a lot of things," Pennington says. "But if you do the food right, people will come. And we just get a lot of people sent this way because we have a reputation for quality."

Jessica Holland, who quit her job as a surgical technician to join her husband Johnny at Canyon Grill, says it wasn't a hard decision for her. She had worked here as a hostess for several years before.

"I have loved Canyon Grill for a really long time," she says. "There's just something about it. There has to be some kind of charm or people wouldn't drive so far to get here." 🌿

## If You Go

▶ **GETTING THERE:** Canyon Grill is located at 28 Scenic Highway, Rising Fawn, GA 30738, just off Georgia Highway 136.

▶ **HOURS:** Wednesday through Sunday, 5-9 p.m. EST. Although not required, reservations are recommended to avoid wait times. Visit [canyongrill.com](http://canyongrill.com) or call 706-398-9510.

▶ **WHAT TO KNOW:** Canyon Grill has a BYOB policy for beer and wine. (Dade County prohibits the sale of hard liquor.) The staff is happy to provide you with glassware and an ice bucket. Bring your own opener.

▶ **CHECK OUT NEARBY ATTRACTIONS:** Cloudland Canyon State Park ([gastateparks.org/cloudlandcanyon](http://gastateparks.org/cloudlandcanyon)), located less than a mile away, offers amazing vistas and miles of hiking trails (see story, page 36). Overnight accommodations include cabins, yurts and tent and RV campsites. Lookout Mountain Flight Park ([hanglide.com](http://hanglide.com)), less than a 10-minute drive from the restaurant, is a great place to watch hang-gliding enthusiasts soar from the western bluff of Lookout Mountain – or to try it yourself with a licensed professional.