

WILLAMETTE WE

A Texas Transplant Found Inspiration For His First Restaurant in the Last Place He Expected: Home

WW's 2019 chef of the year

By **Andi Prewitt** | Published November 5 at 9:49 AM Updated November 7 at 8:32 AM

Doug Adams, Bullard

As soon as Doug Adams turned 18, he got the hell out of his hometown and didn't look back.

Adams grew up in Bullard, Texas, a swampy dot on the map about halfway between Dallas and Shreveport, La. It was "very small, very religious, very football," he says—a town "with more churches than gas stations" and, back then, not a drop of alcohol. (The entire county was dry.) Adams hated it so much, he moved to Montana for college at his first opportunity, to get as far away, geographically and spiritually, as he could, and eventually found his way to Portland.

Nearly 20 years later, Adams, a Top Chef finalist with a résumé featuring stints in some of Portland's finest kitchens, has not only returned to his roots—he's put them on the marquee.

Earlier this year, after a long series of delays, Adams finally opened his first restaurant, inside the skyscraping Woodlark Hotel, and packed the menu with Texas-sized cuts that brought back memories of the barbecue shacks of his youth. And he named it after the place he'd spent the previous two decades running from: Bullard.

"Nostalgia creeps up on you," he says. "Things that drive you crazy when you're younger pull at your heartstrings the older you get."

☰ All of Portland should be grateful. With Bullard, Adams has solidified his place in the Portland dining landscape. And his commitment to smoking meat, along with his determination to see the business through the frustrating two-year process it took to open, has earned him the title of WW's 2019 Chef of the Year.

Adams is no stranger to working in immense hotel dining rooms that feed hundreds of people each day. He was head chef at Vitaly Paley's Imperial, located just a few blocks away in Hotel Lucia, which was named WW's Restaurant of the Year in 2015. Around the same time, he was chosen to compete on the Bravo program Top Chef, fighting his way to the finals. That experience, combined with having nowhere to level up at Imperial and his own, admittedly healthy ego, prompted Adams to start thinking about opening his own place.

"When you work for somebody, you hit a roadblock, because somebody else designed the space," he says. "Somebody else designed the idea of the restaurant, and you can only take it so far before you're ready to do your own thing."

For Adams, that was a calling to smoke huge cuts of meat in a historic building, which sounds simple enough for a rising-star chef of reality show caliber. But the days of scoring a 40-seat slice of any close-in property as a restaurateur are over, he says. So when he was given the chance to operate a 78-seat, ground-floor kitchen in a new downtown hotel, he jumped at the opportunity, even though restaurants catering to itinerant guests traditionally have a pretty sleepy reputation.

"For a long time, the formula worked for hotels: eggs Benedict, Caesar salads, Oregon pinot. And they didn't want to fuck with it," Adams says. "What I found with this deal, we got a lot more freedom than most because we just fought it until we got it."

He also had to fight his own goal-oriented personality when construction delays on the building at Southwest Alder Street and 9th Avenue dragged on. (It's worth noting that while the Woodlark is managed by Provenance Hotels—the hospitality group founded by Gordon Sondland, the Trump-appointed ambassador to the European Union caught in the middle of a presidential impeachment inquiry—its majority ownership is local real estate firm NBP Capital. Adams and Jennifer Quist, formerly of Multnomah Whiskey Library, formed Holler Hospitality to open the restaurant.) He thought he was facing a six- to eight-month gap before he could fire up the burners. When that timeline stretched to two years, Adams found it hard to focus on anything else.

So what does an impatient chef from Texas do when caught in limbo? Simple: Perfect your 'cue.

"I used the time to practice and practice and practice," Adams says. "I was writing recipes—Weber would send me a grill and I would R&D it, and then Traeger would send me a smoker and I would R&D it."

His own smoker, a 250-gallon converted propane tank parked on a trailer outside his home in St. Johns, was also working for hours on end, loaded up with chicken and beef ribs—two items he always knew would end up on the menu at Bullard. All those rehearsals paid off. You'll find yourself gnawing off every morsel of Adams' hickory-

hued wings (\$9), all the way down to the bone. A two-day process by themselves, the chicken is covered in a sweet and peppery dry rub of ginger, smoked garlic, habanero and honey, creating an addictive smoulder that builds but never burns.

But it's the rib (\$59) that will truly instill an appreciation for the way Adams elevates a primitive cooking method into high art. The meat, which diners can stuff into a warm flour tortilla and heap with fixings like housemade guacamole and tomatillo sauce, comes precut so that it's easier to share, and presented next to the curved bone—as long as a man's forearm—seemingly for pure pageantry. You can't see the basement smoker at Bullard, but you can taste the fuel in the thick Painted Hills beef. The Oregon white oak is lit at 8 am and then attended to all day. You can tell the protein has been in the belly of a smoker for hours, because slicing through it is like plunging a spoon into warm butter.

"With smoke," Adams says, "it's not like a piece of equipment that you just turn on, set it at 375 and just walk away. It's constant watching."

The prospect of operating both a seven-day-a-week restaurant with lunch service and a smoker, which can be unpredictable, even risky, would scare a lot of chefs away. But Adams zeroed in on his objective: bring a chef-driven joint downtown that had a unique identity yet remained approachable. He's managed to accomplish both.

The interior of Bullard looks like a rural Oregon hunting lodge, with antler-bedecked walls, penny-tiled floors and the centerpiece, a melding of the Texas and Oregon state flags—the golden tableau of a pioneer's covered wagon takes the place of the Lone Star on the red, white and blue banner. (The soundtrack of Guns N' Roses and ZZ Top adds to the shitkicker ambience.)

You might even half expect the food was bagged by Adams himself, given the presence of rainbow trout (\$28) and braised elk (\$36) on the menu. Although he doesn't actually catch the protein served here, Adams pays careful attention to sourcing, so diners get sustainably farmed fish that aren't pumped full of hormones as well as Roosevelt elk from Vancouver, B.C., rather than the more common venison-elk cross branded as Cervena.

Despite those thoughtful touches, don't expect any pretentiousness. Even though that lean, tender elk shoulder comes showered in paper-thin slices of pungent, robust black truffle, it's also ringed by the modest spud.

"Very early on in meetings with Jen, I was like, 'I want to serve fucking mashed potatoes downtown,'" Adams says, referring to business partner Quist. "Nobody does it! At what point did we decide that was uncool? Because we did, as chefs. It became this thing."

Challenging dining norms is just one task in what's shaped up to be a year of firsts for Adams. He started 2019 with the new title of "business owner," married 10 Barrel brewer Whitney Burnside in June, and come November, he'll be known as "Dad" to a baby girl. Given all that, it's no wonder he's shed some of the bravado of his youth and adopted a more nurturing leadership style in the kitchen.

☰ Suddenly, Adams feels like he has two families to look after—a life-altering change that would inspire anyone to revisit their heritage for guidance. 🔍

"You get to a point in your career, and it's like, 'OK, what kind of food do you want to make?'" he says. "Especially when you've worked for somebody for so long, you start to say, 'Well, what am I? What's my identity?' For me, it was a journey of looking back at where I came from."

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