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a coastal magazine for women

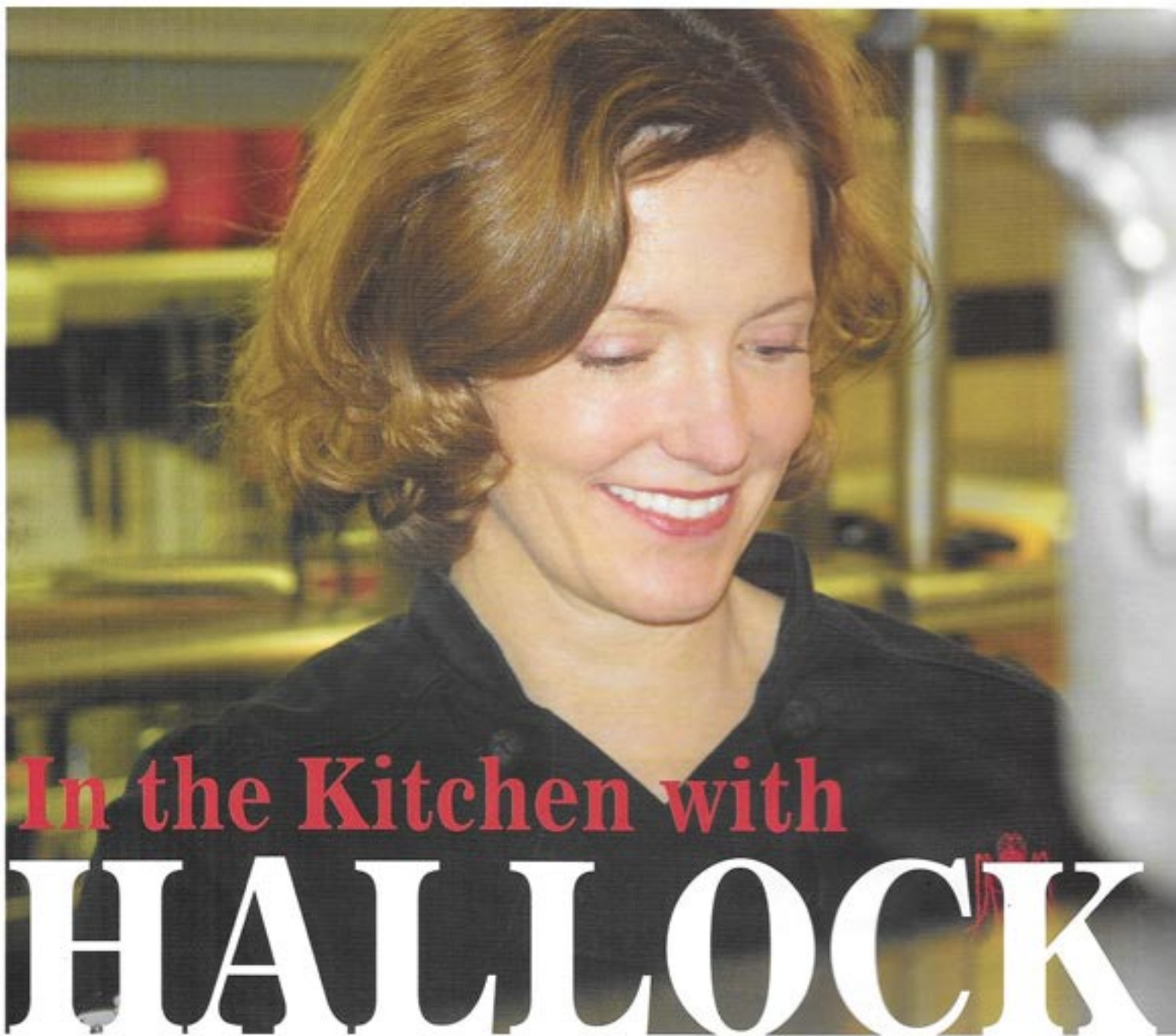
May-July, 2011



The Women of **BIG ROCK**

BEACH BOUND
Summer Guide to Picking
the Perfect Bathing Suit

BITTEN BY THE BUG
In the Kitchen with Amos
Mosquito's Chef Hallock Howard



In the Kitchen with
HALLLOCK

“Knock, Knock”

“Who’s there?”

“Amos”

“Amos who?”

“Amos Mosquito”

It seems too easy to say that the naming of one of Carteret County's most popular restaurants, and one of the only ones run by a female executive chef, earned its name from the mistelling of a childhood riddle. But that's exactly where it came from.

Amos Mosquito's owner and chef Hallock Cooper Howard knew she wanted to bring the outside into the décor, but found herself struggling with a name for her new restaurant. It was her mother, Pam Cooper, who kindly reminded her that as a child she always told the joke wrong (the correct response would be "a mosquito") and thought it would not only make a fun name for a restaurant, but a nostalgic one for the family as well.

It stuck. And while that could easily be the end of the story, it was merely the beginning for this fledgling chef and local success story. On the home front, kitchen memories are full of the women in the family – it is mom's apple pie we talk about after all. But when it comes to a professional kitchen, the space has traditionally been dominated by men. That posed no threat to Howard, a petite dynamo with a fast smile, soft voice and infectious laugh. It wasn't even until graduation that she fully acknowledged that there were only four women out of the 30 who graduated with her from culinary school in 1993. But even then, she noticed that more women were in the graduating classes to follow and would soon be joining her in the kitchens around the country.

Sitting in the subtle overhead lighting of Amos Mosquito's Restaurant and Bar in Atlantic Beach, Howard is a long way from her first career choice of becoming an attorney. To some degree, Howard has her brother, Atlantic Beach Mayor Trace Cooper, to thank for the hard right her career path took. The mayor was in New York attending college as his sister was home struggling with the notion of filling out applications for law school.

"I was really questioning what I wanted to do and Trace was in New York by himself. I had always enjoyed helping in the kitchen and he told me New York would be a great place for me to be since one of the best culinary schools, CIA (Culinary Institute of America) was right down the road," Howard said.

Even though she was convinced her brother wanted a little company in the big city, it worked, she said laughing. She filled out an application and once accepted was ready to embrace the challenge and see where the road took her.

"And I fell in love with it," Howard said. "It was very different from any education I've ever had. I thought that I'd go and take a condensed version and if I didn't like it, well, I could do something else. But that isn't how it worked out at all. I knew pretty early on that this was where I wanted to be."

After two grueling winters in the north, Howard sent resumes to all points warm. It paid off. The chef spent the first few years at work in kitchens in Costa Rica, Hawaii and San Francisco. Along the way, she said, she benefited from working with a variety of different people, different philosophies and more importantly different food. It helped her formulate her own approach to the kitchen – and gave her a clear guide for how she wanted her kitchen of the future to operate.

On her way to a new gig in Florida, she stopped at home to spend Thanksgiving with her family. Her father, Buddy Cooper, broached the idea of opening a restaurant once he had his daughter at home, but Howard was hesitant.

"I kept thinking, 'no, no, I'm not ready.' There was so much more that I needed to experience and learn," she said.

But her thoughts quickly changed once she saw the original location of Amos Mosquito's on the Morehead City waterfront, where Ruddy Ducks operates today. She was asked to "sit in" on a meeting, she remembers, smiling.

"As soon as I saw it I thought I'd be a fool not to take advantage of that great location," Howard said.

She ran the show by herself in Morehead City for four years. A server stepped up to fill the role of assistant manager

and helped carry the load in the front of the restaurant while Howard was running the kitchen behind the scenes. She credits a "talented staff" for the restaurant's success. It was a lot of fun, she remembers, but a lot of work. And on the verge of getting married, she found herself wondering exactly what her next step should be.

Once again, fate, and her father, charmingly intervened. Her father owned the parking lot that Amos Mosquito's now uses and when the building adjacent to the lot went on the market he thought it may be ideal for his daughter's restaurant.

"At first I think I thought 'oh, no, here we go again,'" she said with a laugh, shaking her head back and forth. She jokes, but she does so in jest, for the new Mrs. Sandy Howard jumped into the project full throttle and asked her husband to join her for the ride. Sandy, who was previously co-owner of a New Bern auto dealership, took on the role of restaurateur along with his vows and the pair haven't looked back since. They renovated the vacant building and continue to make improvements as the years go by, building upon the groundwork they've laid.

The menu was the easiest, she said, a wide smile spreading across her face.

"You can change the name and the décor, but the reputation of your food is going to stick with you," Howard said. "We had one main goal – I wanted everything to be fresh – fresh produce, fresh local seafood. And I wanted to cook from scratch, which we continue to do today. All our sauces, desserts, everything is made from scratch with fresh, local products when available.

And it shows. From the creamy corn and crab chowder to the shrimp and scallop alfredo, local seafood plays a prominent role on the menu. So does Howard's penchant for the flavors of Southeast Asia, which she brings to the table on sushi night and in her steamed pork dumpling appetizer. Of course, if it's fun you're looking for, just about everyone in town will point to Amos Mosquito's as the only place in town where you can make your own s'mores right on the table.

"From the first day of culinary school I think I've romanticized food to some degree," said Howard. "I wanted to create an environment, not just a business – the lighting, the ambience, the service. It's a package."

And that philosophy has translated into the kitchen as well. Chef Ramsey she is not – instead of yelling in the heat of the moment, Howard has found a team that works well together and respects each other as people as well as chefs.

"You learn as you go that if you are fair with people, they're going to be fair with you," she said. "But you also know that if you want something from people you have to be very specific about what you want and how you want it done, in a respectful manner."

And while she's learned to lead her staff, she has also learned to let go a little as well. The now mother of two has found a partner in the kitchen in Richard Alexander, while husband Sandy handles the front of the house. With a second lead "on the line" she has the ability to pare her schedule back a little this year and enjoy her role as business owner as well as wife and mother.

"I've really enjoyed having someone who could step in and could take some responsibility and I've thoroughly enjoyed the chance to have more free time," she said. "It's funny, but honestly, now he's the one who has a hard time delegating and stepping back to let someone else do it."

And while she's home spending some free time with her daughters, she said she may not necessarily encourage them into the restaurant life. Long hours, working holidays and late nights make it a challenge for anyone. But Howard has learned to do it with style and maintained a smile on her face every step of the way, proving that a woman's place isn't just in the kitchen at home – but just about anywhere she wants it to be.