



Walt Alexander '97, Kevin Atchley and Brian Snyder '97, '00 MS (left to right) have brought a taste of North Carolina—with their own twists—to Portland, Ore., with biscuit sandwiches like the “Reggie Deluxe” (opposite page), which includes fried chicken, a fried egg, bacon, gravy and cheese.

**Portland, Ore.**—Homesickness can take many forms. For three NC State alumni living 3,000 miles away in the rainy northwest corner of the United States, it took the familiar form of food. Not just any food. Biscuits. Warm, buttery and flaky—and preferably served with a slab of spicy fried chicken and toothachingly sweet iced tea. “It’s what we missed after a long night of drinking,” says Walt Alexander '97. Although, adds Brian Snyder '97, '00 MS, “a hankering for biscuits can hit you any time.”



Snyder, Alexander and Kevin Atchley, who attended NC State from 1992–94, moved to Portland, Ore., a dozen or so years ago in pursuit of jobs, outdoor recreation, indie music and a thriving entrepreneurial scene. Snyder and Alexander played Ultimate Frisbee together in college, while Alexander met Atchley when they both worked at a wine bar in Raleigh’s Pine State Creamery building on Glenwood Avenue. The three became pals in Portland and found they shared a love for biscuits. They searched this food-obsessed city for a biscuit that could compete with the ones back home in North Carolina, but found them lacking in one key ingredient. “There was no love in the biscuit,” Snyder says. They felt they could do better.

In 2006, the three friends set up a tarp at Portland’s Saturday farmers market and launched Pine State Biscuits. Soon, Portlanders were lining up at 8:30 a.m. for the “Reggie” (fried chicken, bacon, gravy and cheese), the “Wedgie” (fried chicken, fried green tomato, iceberg lettuce and blue cheese dressing), or just the soul-satisfying simplicity of a warm buttermilk biscuit slathered with honey, apple butter or pimento cheese. The customers haven’t stopped coming.

To meet the demand, the partners opened their first brick-and-mortar restaurant in 2008. They’ve since opened



a second restaurant, plus a commissary kitchen with a walk-up window. Their biscuit empire now employs about 70 people. Along with the farmers market stand, they crank out 3,000 biscuits a day—all baked from scratch on site. Word has spread beyond Oregon. Guy Fieri dropped by to tape a segment of his cable show *Diners, Drive-Ins and Dives*. *The New York Times*, *Food & Wine*,

and *Esquire* have published rave reviews. *Town & Country* called Pine State’s “the best fried chicken on a biscuit outside North Carolina.” (Their secret: a generous splash of Texas Pete in the coating.)

On weekends, the wait for a table can be as long as 45 minutes—often in the rain, a fact that has some of the restaurateurs’ family back home scratching their heads. “Cold weather breeds hardy people,” Snyder says, explaining Portlanders’ passion for carb-fueled breakfasts. “And hardy people need hardy food.”

### Starting from scratch

Along with pulled-pork barbecue and small-batch bourbon, biscuits are part of a holy trinity of Southern culinary culture being embraced from New York to Seattle. While Snyder, Alexander and Atchley don’t claim to have started the trend, they were ahead of the curve. And they’re quick to acknowledge their inspirations.

It might make a better story to say these Wolfpackers grew up watching their grandmothers roll out biscuits on a big old farm table. But the truth is they cut their teeth on fast food. Whenever Snyder goes home to Albemarle, N.C.—even before he says hello to his mother—he stops at Bojangles’ for the Cajun biscuit combo. The partners named the “McIsley” for a friend who is fond of the fried

A cartoon by Raleigh artist Paul Friedrich (above), a longtime friend of Alexander and Atchley, invites customers to try biscuit sandwiches (below, left to right) like the “McIsley” (fried chicken with pickles, mustard and honey), the “Wedgie” (fried chicken, fried green tomato, iceberg lettuce and blue cheese dressing), a BBQ biscuit (pulled pork, Carolina bbq sauce, slaw) and the “Regina” (egg over easy, braised greens, Texas Pete hot sauce).



PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY OF PINE STATE BISCUITS/BISCUIT PHOTOGRAPHS BY DAVID L. REAMER AND TRASK BEDORTHA; FRIEDRICH CARTOON PHOTOGRAPH BY JEN DOWNER, SHE SAID THINGS PHOTOGRAPHY



“COLD WEATHER BREEDS HARDY PEOPLE. AND HARDY PEOPLE NEED HARDY FOOD.”

—Brian Snyder '97, '00 MS



Signs of North Carolina, such as the Wright brothers depicted in custom-made lamp shades, shelves of Texas Pete hot sauce and sweet iced tea served in Mason jars, abound in Pine State Biscuit restaurants.

PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY OF PINE STATE BISCUITS/LAMP, STOOL AND TEXAS PETE PHOTOGRAPHS BY TRASK BEDORTHA; SWEET TEA PHOTOGRAPH BY DAVID L. REAMER



BISCUITS ARE GOOD FOR YOU SIMPLY BECAUSE "THEY MAKE YOU HAPPY."

- Native Portlander, Brian van Nice



While Pine State Biscuits has its share of Southern touches, including Sir Walter Raleigh on a chocolate bar, its customers and vibe are clearly at home in the Pacific Northwest. But one of the restaurant's regulars (above right) shows off his tattoo that includes a shout-out to North Carolina and its state bird.



PHOTOGRAPH BY DAVID L. REAMER

PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY OF PINE STATE BISCUITS/SIGN PHOTOGRAPH BY TRASK BEDORTHA



chicken sandwich at Chick-fil-A. As kids, they pressed their noses to the window at Hardee's and watched the biscuits being made. (They borrowed the idea for their restaurants, putting the bakers out front so people have something to do besides texting while waiting in line.)

In fact, none of the partners had baked a biscuit before they got the idea for Pine State. Alexander, a Greensboro, N.C., native with a degree in industrial design, was more comfortable with a hammer and chisel than a rolling pin. Snyder, who has a bachelor of science in textile technology and a master's in textile technology and apparel management, has a day job as global apparel operations director at

PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY OF PINE STATE BISCUITS/TATOO AND CHOCOLATE BAR PHOTOGRAPH BY DAVID L. REAMER; EXTERIOR PHOTOGRAPH BY TRASK BEDORTHA

Merrell, the outdoor shoe and clothing company. Atchley, a Durham County native whose father, Bill Atchley, is a retired NC State professor of genetics, waited tables at Park Kitchen, a Northwest-inspired bistro in Portland's upscale Pearl District. "But we were expert consumers," says Snyder. They also spent months refining their recipes and technique. (To find out what they learned, see p. 45.)

Atchley's former boss, Park Kitchen owner Scott Dolich, was on the board of the farmers market and helped the partners bring Pine State to fruition. At first, he thought their idea for a biscuit stand was a little crazy. "I was more of a bagel guy myself," says Dolich, a New York native and Duke University graduate. But he was quickly converted. "It's great stoner grub food," he says. "Who doesn't want a well-made biscuit?"

## Like home, only better

At the Pine State Biscuits on Portland's busy Alberta Street, bearded dudes in trucker hats and women in nerdy glasses sip cocktails from canning jars and swivel on barstools made from metal tractor seats. Over the booths, the light shades are printed with sepia-toned images of





"THERE'S A CERTAIN NOSTALGIA TO THE TASTES AND SMELLS OF HOME.  
WE COULDN'T FIND IT OUT HERE, SO WE MADE IT OURSELVES."

- Brian Snyder '97, '00 MS



Customers have flocked to Pine State Biscuits for down-home treats like biscuits and gravy (right) and an assortment of biscuit sandwiches that are made by hand.



Richard Petty and the Wright brothers. Hanging on the wall over the grill are vintage farm implements and a rusty North Carolina license plate. A small red wolf sticker is plastered to the commercial coffee grinder near the cash register.

Snyder, Alexander and Atchley have re-created a taste of home, right down to the Cheerwine cartons and Texas Pete bottles on the tables. (They used to smuggle the hot sauce in their luggage until the Winston-Salem company got a West Coast distributor.) The grits are from South Carolina's Anson Mills. The country ham is from Johnston County. (If you order it, be prepared for a sodium warning from the helpful young hostess — something you're not likely to get in North

Carolina.) They've also given their recipes a Portland twist, like putting goat cheese in the pimento cheese and shiitake mushrooms in the gravy.

Ezra Stuetzel, a 28-year-old software engineer from Asheville, N.C., who now lives in San Francisco, Calif., stops by Pine State whenever he visits Portland. He appreciates that the biscuits are made with butter, not shortening or lard, and that many ingredients are sourced from local organic farmers. "It tastes like good home-cooked food," he says, then reconsiders. Actually, "it's hard to find a biscuit this good in Asheville."

But don't let the bicycle racks fool you: This isn't health food. That's the inherent contradiction in a place like Portland,

where people worship kale and pork belly with equal fervor. Waiting in line at the farmers market to order the "Moneyball" (biscuit and gravy with an over-easy egg), native Portlander Brian Van Nice argues that biscuits are good for you simply because "they make you happy."

Snyder, Alexander and Atchley couldn't agree more. That — and a touch of homesickness — explains a lot about why they started the business in the first place. "There's a certain nostalgia to the tastes and smells of home. We couldn't find it out here, so we made it ourselves," Snyder says. "We put a lot of love into what we do and hopefully other people will love it, too."

Sharon Overton is a writer in Portland, Ore.

## OUR DAILY BREAD

by Sharon Overton

After hundreds of years, we still can't decide on what makes the perfect biscuit. We just know we love them.

Human beings have been baking biscuits since at least the time of Pliny the Elder. So you'd think we'd have gotten it right by now. Actually, we can't even agree on what a biscuit is.

In England, a "biscuit" is what Americans call a cookie or cracker. What we call a biscuit, the Brits call a "scone." The Italian "biscotti" may come closest to the true origins of the word, which derives from the Latin *biscotum*, or "twice baked." Rock hard and bone dry, biscotti (like the similarly durable but presumably less delicious hardtack or "sea biscuits") could be stored for a long time, which made them reliable road food for soldiers and sailors.

The Southern biscuit, as we know it, is thought to have originated in plantation kitchens before the Civil War. Its fluffy texture was thanks in part to the availability of soft winter wheat, which has a lower protein and gluten content. (Which explains why many Southern bakers swear by White Lily flour.)

With the rise of convenience foods in the 1950s and '60s, busy cooks turned to boxed biscuit mixes and refrigerated dough. (As a kid, who didn't love peeling the foil label off a can of Pillsbury's, whacking the can on the counter and watching the dough explode?) Now a new generation is discovering the art of making biscuits from scratch.

The process is deceptively simple: Combine the dry ingredients, cut in the fat and stir in the liquid. But like so many things, the devil's in the details. Dropped or rolled? Butter or shortening? Smothered in gravy or served neat with a slice of country ham? It all comes down to personal preference — and regional differences.



## biscuit baking tips

Walt Alexander '97, Brian Snyder '97, '00 MS and Kevin Atchley — partners in Pine State Biscuits — baked dozens of batches before settling on the recipe for their cream-top buttermilk biscuit. While the precise formula is a secret, they'll happily share a few baking tips.



- ★ Have a gentle hand. Biscuits are not like other breads that you knead. "It's almost a cross between a cake and a croissant," says Snyder. Mix just until the dough starts to come together.
- ★ Use a sifter to lightly flour your work surface before rolling out the dough. And "don't overdust," says Alexander. "It's okay if the dough is sticking a little bit. The wetter the better."
- ★ Roll the dough firmly on the first pass, fold and roll again, easing up on each pass. "Three passes is optimal" for flaky layers, says Alexander.
- ★ Don't twist your biscuit cutter. It will prevent the biscuit from rising properly. "Plunge straight down and oscillate back and forth to help separate the dough from the rolling table," says Alexander.
- ★ And most importantly: Practice makes perfect. If your first batch of biscuits resembles hardtack, don't give up. "It's like riding a bike," says Snyder. Once you get the feel for it, you'll be rolling out light and fluffy biscuits in your sleep.