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Final Edition

Starlu goes dark; Even a talented young chef can't overcome the inherent risks of the restaurant business

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On Nov. 28, a few minutes before 2 p.m., Durham chef Sam Poley sent the e-mail he never wanted to write the one announcing the closing of his restaurant, Starlu.

Starlu would close Dec. 22, he told his customers. He invited them to come for a last meal and to say goodbye. "We want to go out with the same grace with which we entered," he wrote. "We do not want to be the place that suddenly went dark with no explanation."

The reason he offered: not enough routine business. The explanation that went unsaid: location.

Poley, 38, is one of those rare chefs who is a master in both the front and back of the house. He's an inspired chef but also a charming presence in the dining room. In his white chef's jacket, khaki cargo shorts, black clogs and brightly colored socks, he knows how to make diners feel welcome. He calls many of his customers friends.

Starlu was Poley's first restaurant. After a decade of working in other people's kitchens, Poley decided he had to open his own. He says he invested \$50,000 of his own money and estimates roughly \$950,000 from a private investor. By the end of November, Poley's wife, Stephanie, tapped the last of the company's savings to make payroll.

The death of Poley's dream illustrates a crucial truth about the eat local movement: In a community where farmers' markets thrive and restaurant menus list that the Camembert came from Chapel Hill Creamery and the pork belly came from Cane Creek Farm, a commitment to eating local has to include dining local, or the restaurants that support those farmers will fail.

In this age of Food Network stars, it seems everyone harbors a dream of running a restaurant. The reality is restaurants are risky ventures. The average profit margin for a full-service restaurant is 4 percent, according to the

National Restaurant Association. The failure rate though not the often-cited 90 percent in the first year hovers at about 60 percent after three years, according to academic research. It is a daunting undertaking to open a restaurant and make it a continued success.

"There is something incredibly immature about opening a restaurant," Poley says, "and something terrifyingly mature about closing it."

A career change

Poley ended up in the Triangle for the same reason so many others did: IBM. Poley's father, an engineer, moved the family to Cary when Poley was in high school. Poley was drawn to Durham, a post-industrial town like Kingston, N.Y., where he grew up. After graduating from Appalachian State University, Poley worked for a prominent public relations firm in Kentucky. He hated it. He moved to Durham and found jobs in public relations and advertising sales. By 25, he wanted a career change. "I essentially crumpled up my degree and got busy," Poley says.

He juggled four jobs, including selling men's clothing and working as a prep cook at Parizade in Durham. He moved from there to Pop's trattoria. He soon decided food was his calling. For many years, Poley was content to work in a kitchen and learn how to cook. He did not want his own restaurant.

"I didn't want the stress of it. I didn't want the hassle. I didn't want the potential to fail," Poley says.

He went on to work as the chef at Squids in Chapel Hill and later at The Weathervane at A Southern Season.

But if you work in kitchens long enough, you start thinking about what you would do differently if the place were yours. That's what happened to Poley. He had to open his own place. Poley concluded he was a risk taker. He wrote a business plan, started looking for financing and scouting locations.

Poley found an investor who made the restaurant's location a condition of support. The space was on the first floor of a six-story office building at the intersection of Shannon Road and University Drive, known largely by the upper-floor tenants, first EMD Pharmaceuticals, then Wachovia. The restaurant's entrance was around back, unseen by passing motorists. Despite the \$14,000 sign declaring Restaurant Starlu's presence in 24-inch letters, 30 feet up on the side of the building, first-time visitors would still wonder whether they were in the right place.

The investor agreed to pay for the renovations. Although the location wasn't ideal, Poley agreed. He reasoned that proximity to Durham's most affluent neighborhoods Duke Forest, Hope Valley and Forest Hills would help.

Poley kept the copper-topped bar and changed almost everything else. His restaurant was a bright space with clean lines, an open-air kitchen and space to move between tables. The name, Starlu, is a reference to his wife, Stephanie, and their dogs, Arthur and Lu. The restaurant's motto, "It's all about the good stuff," refers to them.

The dining room sat 100. The patio could seat 40 more. And the banquet room could serve 100. At 9,000 square feet, Starlu was an ambitious space for a

first-time restaurateur.

After eight months of renovations, Starlu opened in November 2004.

Three months later, Poley received a phone call from Greg Cox, [REDACTED] restaurant reviewer, who was fact-checking his upcoming review.

The 10 days before the review came out were nerve-racking. Poley and his bar manager were at the newspaper racks at 4:30 a.m. They bought six copies for themselves and the others waiting at a nearby apartment. They agreed to read the review together, and not before. They all sat on the dining room floor and opened the paper at the same time.

The review started, "I have just enjoyed, over the brief span of 10 days in January, the two most memorable meals I've had in at least a year." Cox went on to call Poley a "prodigy when it comes to understanding and respecting ingredients, too, and in terms of execution, he rarely falters." Starlu earned 3 out of 4 possible stars.

Before the review was published, Starlu had 12 people booked for dinner that Friday night and 23 for Saturday. Afterward, the restaurant had 83 reservations for Friday night and 123 for Saturday night. That didn't include walk-in customers. Business only got better, Poley says, going from an average of 60 diners on a Saturday night to 250, essentially overnight.

Economy turns

Business boomed throughout the spring of 2005. But, as the restaurant business goes, it was a slow, lean summer. The first weekend after school started in the fall, Poley says, the dining room was packed. During the Saturday night dinner rush, he recalls exchanging a look with his wife: "They remember us. They like us. We're going to be OK."

But then Hurricane Katrina hit. After that, inexplicably, business slowed. Poley theorizes that although his restaurant benefited from the nearby affluence, those same residents tightened their belts as the economy soured.

Sam and Stephanie Poley say they tried a number of things to revive the business: a lounge area called "Porter's Parlor," named after their 16-month-old son, wine tastings, wine dinners, cooking classes, a chef's table, catering events for Playmakers Repertory Company in Chapel Hill. They even expanded their "Bottles of Change" program, which donated 50 cents for every glass of wine and \$2 for every bottle sold to a local charity. Once a month, they donated a cut of a Tuesday night's sales to charity. In three years, the restaurant raised more than \$43,000 for needy causes.

Nothing could turn the restaurant around.

The sign comes down

On Dec. 21, Poley stood outside the office building watching workers remove the Restaurant Starlu sign from the side of the building. At 9 a.m., the temperature hovered at 40 degrees with a brisk wind making it seem colder.

With a cup of coffee in his hands, Poley chatted with those who work in the

office building or were headed to workout at the first-floor gym. The conversations were all about the restaurant closing.

One man drove up and stopped to talk. "Are you going to reopen anywhere else," he asked Poley.

"I'd like to," Poley said.

"Location. Location. Location," the man replied.

"I'm going to try to do something with a little more visibility next time," Poley told him.

Saying goodbye

Funny thing is, Poley's closing e-mail filled the dining room. The upswing led one waitress to quip: "They didn't come to the hospital. They came for the funeral."

For Starlu's last supper, the kitchen stores were spare: four salads, no desserts, a little wine, bottled beer and some liquor. Poley decided to serve the restaurant's former late night menu of fancy hot dogs on buttered, toasted buns. One hot dog is topped with foie gras and maple syrup. Another is wrapped in bacon, deep-fried and served with chopped red onion, mayonnaise and peanut butter.

Twenty-four people were booked for dinner. One loyal customer brought ribs so Poley wouldn't have to cook something to feed the staff at the end of the night.

The mood in the dining room recalled a wake, as if it might be offensive to laugh too loud. An occasional shout filled the air, followed by an exchange of hugs as former employees walked through the door. Some customers left when they learned hot dogs were the only things on the menu. Loyal customers scattered at tables reminisced about Poley's onion rings, and about how welcome they felt even when dining alone at Starlu.

At dinner's end, Poley and his wife started removing items from the walls. Down came artwork, the portraits of their dogs, the framed copy of Cox's review, the sanitation score, the occupancy permits.

By 9:15 p.m., it was time to take down Petunia.

The iron work sculpture of a flying pig was a gift from the contractor when the restaurant opened. Petunia hung above the open-air kitchen, witness to Poley making thousands of meals. Her nickname was Mistress of the Dining Room.

With his hands on his hips, Poley strode up to the pig. He gazed up at her. He paused and turned to look at his wife. His face cracked with emotion. He whispered, "I don't want to take her down."

Poley walked to a back hallway. He crouched down for a private moment, his wife beside him. A few minutes later, Sam came back, wiping away tears.

This time, without hesitation, he walked over and took down Petunia. As he wiped dust off the pig's wings, a couple got up to leave. Putting on their coats, they called out: "Goodbye, Sam. Goodbye, Starlu."

Epilogue: Poley is thinking about getting a tattoo of the Starlu logo. He has lined up a couple of interviews for food industry jobs. Will he open another restaurant? He says he's not sure; maybe as an employee for someone else, maybe on his own. About Starlu, Poley says that ending the dinner service was the easy part. The hard part is now dealing with the lawyers and accountants working to close the business.

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GRAPHIC: 'We love Sam,' said Bonnie Banerjee of Chapel Hill, with her hand on Sam Poley, owner and chef at Starlu, on the Durham restaurant's final night Dec. 22. 'We're really, really bummed that it's closing,' said Banerjee, dining with her husband Neil Banerjee, back right, and friends.

A customer left this thank you note on a wine bottle. Poley was known for his innovative cooking and for his easy charm. One reason for the eatery's demise was not enough routine business.

Restaurant Starlu opened in November 2004. Poley and his wife, Stephanie, said the restaurant struggled to overcome an economic downturn that started in 2005. Restaurants are notoriously risky ventures anytime, and Starlu also had a problematic location.

Sam Poley, right, owner and chef at Starlu, hugs line cook Eric Tucker as, from left, waitress Robyn Stewart hugs fellow employee Lilian Menendez.

Poley had long resisted starting his own place, but he embraced the challenge. Poley drinks pink Champagne with his wife, Stephanie, on Starlu's final night last month.

Poley rearranges the restaurant's dismantled sign on Starlu's final night. Even with the sign, the place was hard to spot. Staff Photos By Ted Richardson

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Return of the pitmaster; An Eastern North Carolina barbecue whiz aims for a comeback with a Raleigh restaurant

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On a Saturday in November, Ed Mitchell stands in front of his new staff wearing frayed overalls, a flannel shirt and scuffed work boots. He's ready to let them in on a secret.

Many of the waiters and cooks are holdovers from Nana's Chophouse, the white-tablecloth restaurant that closed to make way for The Pit, Mitchell's comeback venture. Mitchell, a 61-year-old barbecue pitmaster with a bushy white beard, looks out of place against the dining room's gleaming glass and polished maple interior. But here's what his new staff needs to know: His clothes are a costume.

"This is a persona. This is an image. Back in the day, they wore bib overalls. This is what the pitmaster is," Mitchell says. "This is what got me national fame. This is how I ended up on the front page of The New York Times." Later in an interview, Mitchell explains: "I can't market the old-fashioned way of barbecue if I got a three-piece suit on."

It is Mitchell's knack for self-promotion, as much as his skill at cooking Eastern North Carolina barbecue, that has helped him survive the recent turmoil of his life. But then, Mitchell will tell you that his recent troubles were due in part to his need to chase the limelight.

In 2005, a bank foreclosed on Mitchell's nationally lauded restaurant in his hometown of Wilson. A year later, tax problems landed him in jail for a month. Mitchell filed extensive litigation against the bank, which was settled a few weeks ago. While he has the keys back, Mitchell says the Wilson building will never be a restaurant again. Instead, he's focused on his new venture.

About a year ago, Mitchell formed a partnership with downtown developer Greg Hatem, whose devotion to historic preservation has moved beyond buildings to barbecue. Mitchell is one of only a few African-American pitmasters cooking Eastern North Carolina barbecue, and he remains a national foodie icon. Together they opened The Pit in November.

Mitchell hopes the new partnership will lead to the success he dreamed of years ago: a chain of restaurants. This run at building a restaurant empire is different. His previous failure acquainted him with his limitations. He's leaving the front of the house and the books to Hatem and his Empire Eats company. Mitchell will tend to the kitchen and the marketing.

Cultivating his image is Mitchell's long suit. It has made him a media darling, more so than any of the other North Carolina barbecue stalwarts east of Interstate 95.

In the foodie kingdom

In June, as in every summer since 2003, Mitchell cooked at The Big Apple Barbecue Block Party in New York City. In September, producers of Gourmet magazine's "Diary of a Foodie" filmed a segment on Mitchell that will air on public television in April. (UNC-TV airs the show at 3 p.m. Saturdays.) In October, he returned for a third time to cook at the Southern Foodways Alliance's symposium, a gathering of food devotees and media tastemakers that has embraced Mitchell as a god of pork.

At the alliance's annual gathering at Ole Miss, you never know whom you might end up talking to over a glass of whiskey a New York Times food writer, a James Beard award-winning chef, a curator at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History, a country ham purveyor from Tennessee, or Roy Blount Jr. Most symposium veterans know Mitchell, either shaking his hand over the buffet line or sneaking a peek inside the tractor-trailer where he was cooking his hogs.

Standing behind a spread of pork in those well-worn overalls, Mitchell looks the part of the old-school pitmaster who has spent his life tending the coals. It surprises even some of his closest associates to learn that he spent about a dozen years wearing three-piece suits as a midlevel manager for Ford Motor Co. before taking up his current profession.

At 6 a.m. on an October Saturday in Oxford, Mitchell and his brother Aubrey are inside a 53-foot trailer that has Mitchell's smiling face painted on the outside. Two hogs, each weighing more than 170 pounds, wait to be cooked on a pair of grills. A couple of symposium attendees stand outside the trailer in the morning chill and watch Mitchell work.

For their benefit, Mitchell narrates as the hogs are butterflied. As Aubrey cuts sheets of fat from a hog's rib cage, Mitchell says, "Later on, we're going to heat that stuff. We're going to make soap. É We're going to do that in the new restaurant." (An hour later, Aubrey dumps the scraps of fat in one of the nearby Dumpsters. Asked if the soap at The Pit will be made of rendered pig fat, Hatem said they are open to anything.)

After the pigs are ready, Mitchell uses a garden hose to fill two aluminum trays with water. He empties a bottle of his own Pitmaster brand barbecue sauce into the trays, followed by apple cider vinegar.

"This is a real trade secret I'm getting ready to show you," Mitchell says to the couple, his breath coming out in wisps.

Mitchell adds black pepper to the trays, and then places a log in each. "We're marinating the wood," he declares.

Eventually, Mitchell tells his small audience what he learned about barbecue from his father and grandfather. They taught him to soak the wood in a vinegar and pepper marinade, not to sit up all night with the pig, replenishing the coals. He learned to "set it and forget it," arranging the hog over banked hot coals and wood, not lifting the lid until the pig is done.

Mitchell's mom and dad owned a small grocery store on the east side of Wilson. After high school, Mitchell earned a sociology degree from Fayetteville State University, served in Vietnam and lived outside North Carolina, including some time in Boston.

In the mid-1980s, Mitchell returned to Wilson to help care for his ailing father. This time in his late 30s, by Mitchell's own admission, was marked by immaturity, a love of all-night poker games and a belief that he was "a special gift" to the ladies. His father disapproved of the gambling and urged Mitchell to start a business, often lecturing while his son drove him to Greenville for cancer treatments. "If you use your talents, you could be a multimillionaire," was his familiar refrain.

Two weeks after his father died, Mitchell again found himself at a poker table. But he couldn't win a hand. In his frustration, Mitchell's mind flashed to his father's words: Stop playing poker and use your talents. "That's the turning point of Ed Mitchell being redefined," he says.

Cooking up a new business

His father died in June 1990, and his mother, Doretha, returned to the grocery store. One day, Mitchell says, he stopped by to find her depressed by the slow pace of business. She had sold only \$17 worth of groceries that day. Mitchell offered to make her lunch to cheer her up. She said, "I have a taste for some old-fashioned barbecue."

Mitchell says he cooked a 34-pound pig on a cooker outside the store. He chopped the hog and his mother seasoned the meat. While they were eating lunch, a customer came in and asked, "Oh, Mrs. Mitchell, you all selling barbecue, too?" She looked at her son. Mitchell nodded. When Mitchell returned that night to see his mom home, she had perked up. She had sold all the barbecue. Just as they were closing up for the night, another customer asked if they had any more. Mitchell says he told them: "We'll have some more tomorrow."

"That's how it happened," he says. "That is how it started." Within months, Mitchell says, he was making barbecue at the store full time, and eventually the grocery became Mitchell's Barbecue.

It's a great story. It's just that the details change slightly with each telling. In Bob Garner's book, "North Carolina Barbecue: Flavored by Time," Mitchell's mother sold only \$12 worth of groceries and explicitly asked for old-fashioned barbecue and "not that gas-cooked stuff." Garner writes that Mitchell cooked the pig the next day and it was a couple of years before barbecue became Mitchell's full-time job.

In Mike Mills' "Peace, Love and Barbecue," Mitchell says he was working for the state Department of Labor in Raleigh at the time. Mitchell is quoted as saying, "Got to where I was driving home from Raleigh like a wild man, pulling my tie off as I was driving down the highway. Had to get home to put the pig on."

Labor officials say Mitchell worked for the department for three months in late 1978 and not in the 1990s.

Despite the fuzzy details, the story gained attention for Mitchell after Garner, a UNC-TV reporter and producer, wrote a chapter about him in his 1996 book. It was the first bit of notice Mitchell garnered outside of Wilson, a town dominated by such barbecue institutions as Bill's and Parker's.

By 1999, Mitchell says, the business had outgrown the family store. Erader A. Mills Jr., a local developer, agreed to do a \$1.4 million expansion of the restaurant. Mitchell agreed to pay Mills back with a collateralized loan on the new building. In 2002, the new restaurant opened with its "pig bar," automated pits, a drive-through window, a private party room and classrooms to train staff and, Mitchell hoped, to one day offer cooking classes.

That summer, Southern Foodways Alliance director John T. Edge invited Mitchell to cook at the group's annual symposium. "For the people at the symposium, his barbecue was a revelation," Edge says. By the weekend's end, The New Yorker writer and barbecue-obsessed keynote speaker Calvin Trillin was fawning over Mitchell's pork. New York Times reporter and gourmand R.W. Apple Jr. wrote a front-page story about the event featuring a photo of Mitchell.

An invitation followed to cook at the inaugural The Big Apple Barbecue Block Party. Television chef Anthony Bourdain stopped by the restaurant to eat chitterlings and souse meat for his Food Network show, "A Cook's Tour." Mitchell got a second invitation to cook in Oxford.

As Mitchell looks back on his first appearance at Oxford in 2002, he says of the Wilson restaurant, "The Southern Foodways Alliance was the beginning of the end of this building."

Money troubles begin

By 2004, Mitchell was struggling to make the loan payments to Southern Bank & Trust. In October 2004, the bank foreclosed on his restaurant. Mitchell and Erader Mills say bank officials mishandled the loan and the foreclosure. Their arguments persuaded a Superior Court judge, who stopped the foreclosure and wrote in his ruling that he cannot find that the bank "comes into court with clean hands."

Mills and Mitchell also filed a federal lawsuit claiming that bank officials racially discriminated against them and conspired with Wilson's white barbecue establishment and pork producers in Eastern North Carolina to put Mitchell out of business. Mitchell's theory for the conspiracy: He was starting to get national attention for his idea of cooking only heritage-breed pigs instead of confinement-bred hogs. "Who would have an interest in trying to derail something that went counter to what they represent?" Mitchell asks. "It's all about money."

The bank, through its lawyer, declined to comment about the litigation or the settlement. The owners of Parker's declined to comment. Bill Ellis of Bill's did not return messages seeking comment.

Mitchell's troubles didn't end there. In May 2005, he was accused of embezzling about \$75,000 in state sales and withholding taxes. Mitchell had

twice before been charged with misdemeanors for similar conduct and seen the charges dismissed when he paid the taxes. Mitchell says he was targeted and shouldn't have faced felonies.

Tom Dixon, head of the criminal investigation unit with the N.C. Department of Revenue, is unapologetic about the people who are charged with felonies: repeat offenders who typically owe more than \$70,000 and work in high-profile professions. Dixon wants as much media coverage as possible to dissuade others from not paying their taxes. "That's just the nature of the beast," Dixon says.

Mitchell admits the national attention distracted him from his Wilson restaurant.

"It's obvious Ed's strength doesn't lie in the nuts and bolts of running a business," says Garner, the author and a longtime friend of Mitchell's. "He was sloppy. He was out trying to make a name for himself. He wasn't paying close enough attention to what was going on at home."É

Mitchell paid the owed taxes and was sentenced to 30 days in jail, which he served on the weekends. He is on probation until 2009. Court records show Mitchell still has a pair of unpaid personal state income tax liens, of which Mitchell says he was unaware.

But Mitchell says his lawyer, Anthony Brannon, changed his life. Brannon, who represented Mitchell and Mills in the bank litigation, describes himself as a wannabe entrepreneur who practices law. In 2006, Brannon had Mitchell cook barbecue at his law firm's Christmas party in Raleigh and made sure Hatem was there to taste the pork and meet the cook. Less than a year later, The Pit opened.

Hatem, a native of Roanoke Rapids, grew up eating Eastern North Carolina barbecue, and had dined at Mitchell's restaurant.

While Hatem has made a name for himself as a developer devoted to preserving historic buildings, he also has a hand in the restaurant business. He owns The Raleigh Times and The Morning Times and has a stake in The Duck & Dumpling.

To Hatem, Mitchell's pit-cooked barbecue is a genuine piece of Eastern North Carolina culture worth preserving at a time when Raleigh is becoming more homogenized by national restaurant chains. Hatem believes if they stay true to the cooking method, people will wipe barbecue sauce from their mouths with cloth napkins instead of paper.

It's a gamble. Success depends on whether Raleigh is ready for a high-end barbecue restaurant selling a dinner plate of pork and two sides for \$12 when the going rate for a similar order at Clyde Cooper's Barbecue, a few blocks away, is \$5.50. Are 'cue eaters willing to pay more for the chance to drink wine and microbrews with their pork? And can this vinegary whole hog barbecue, one of a few barbecue styles that have not migrated far beyond their borders, attract enough fans beyond Eastern North Carolina to support expansion?

"The trick is getting people to understand that barbecue is down-home but also gourmet," Hatem says.

The two men, as business partners, realize their strengths. Hatem says about Mitchell, "He's a much better chef than a businessman. É I can assure you that

you don't want me cooking in the kitchen."

And Mitchell seems content to focus on the food and his image.

"I used to do it all," he said. "But I realized I can't do it all."

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GRAPHIC: Ed Mitchell prepares to chop barbecue at The Pit Restaurant in Raleigh before a dinner shift. Mitchell has made a name for himself, both in the state and nationally, for his style of barbecue. 'I'm pairing something together that's never been done before,' he said. 'Country meets city.'

The Pitmaster cooks his meats over wood coals to make authentic Eastern North Carolina barbecue.

Huddling at The Pit after the dining room has closed, executive chef Ryan Jacobson, left, and restaurant partners Greg Hatem, center, and Ed Mitchell discuss menu items.

Servers wait to pick up a plate of ribs, slaw and Brunswick stew with jalapeño cornbread crackers.

Mitchell navigates through the kitchen with his oak chopping block and past line cook Regi King, right. Mitchell became well-known for his barbecue know-how after he began serving it in his parents' store in Wilson.

Mitchell prepares to fire up the smoker with a split pig on board. He says bib overalls are part of the image of a pitmaster. Staff photos by Corey Lowenstein

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