

Staplehouse

Atlanta

The story of how Staplehouse came to be will tear you apart. But after you eat here, it will build you back up. Welcome to the best new restaurant of 2016

AMERICA'S BEST NEW RESTAURANTS 2016

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Ryan Smith is not happy with the flatiron steak that just landed in front of him. It's grilled to an on-the-nose medium-rare, but a thin streak of gristle runs through the middle of each fanned-out slice. Most chefs would let it slide, but not Smith. He tells a cook to do another one "on the fly," kitchen-speak for "drop whatever the f*#% you're doing and make it again!" Smith, a burly 36-year-old who could pass for [Seth Rogen's](#) lost twin, may look like a laid-back guy. But not right now. His intense focus at this moment gives that steak exactly no chance of leaving the kitchen. Too many people have sacrificed too much opening [Staplehouse](#) for things not to be perfect.

More dishes—seared sablefish bathed in a piquant sauce of puréed celery; duck confit on a swish of vadouvan-spiced yogurt—arrive for his approval. He cleans each plate's edges with a vodka-moistened towel and raises his right arm—inlaid with a tangle of octopus, sea urchin, and clam images—extending his index finger. It's his quiet way of telling servers that food is ready for pickup. But from where I'm standing a few feet away, sipping on a can of beer that Smith insists I drink while reporting this story, I read it as something else. He looks like an MVP who has just won a championship. It's funny because in a way he has. Staplehouse is this year's best new restaurant.



Chef Ryan Smith at the pass.

The story of Staplehouse doesn't begin with Ryan Smith. It starts with another Ryan—Hidinger—and his wife, Jen. The two met in Indianapolis, fell in love, and moved to Atlanta in 2004. He settled in as the chef at [Muss & Turner's](#), a neighborhood place that's a favorite of my family, and she worked at a kids' clothing store. But they dreamed of opening a restaurant of their own. As a first step, from 2009 to 2012, the couple hosted more than 60 sold-out underground suppers and other events in their home. Restaurant-industry pros and those in the know filled the seats. Among them was Ryan Smith, who met Hidinger's sister, Kara. The two would later start dating.

For the Hidingers, a bricks-and-mortar restaurant was beginning to look like a very real possibility. They even had a name: Staplehouse, a nod to the importance of simple ingredients in Hidinger's cooking. The restaurant would be a philosophical extension of those dinners in their home.

In November 2012, Jen gave Hidi (as those close to Hidinger called him) an anniversary present: a day trip to New York City. Smith tagged along. Over a 12-hour period, Smith remembers hitting 15 places, including [Roberta's](#) for pizza and [Momofuku Ssäm](#) for late-night pork buns.



Honorary chairs.

Back in Atlanta, Smith got a call from Hidi, who said he wasn't feeling so great. Four days before Christmas of that year, Ryan Hiding, age 35, was diagnosed with stage IV gallbladder cancer. He was given six months to live.

In the frantic months that followed, the Atlanta restaurant community rallied behind the couple. Team Hidi, a charity gala, raised \$275,000 to fund expenses associated with Ryan's treatment. With the leftover money, Hidi's boss at Muss & Turner's, Ryan Turner (yes, another Ryan), suggested starting a nonprofit to help other restaurant workers facing unanticipated hardships. [The Giving Kitchen](#) was born. Soon after, the couple secured a turn-of-the-century brick building in the historic Old Fourth Ward neighborhood. Ryan Smith and Hidi's sister, Kara, were now dating, and both signed on to help run Staplehouse.

It was in early 2013 that I first heard the story of Ryan Hiding. My mom sent me a clipping from *Atlanta* magazine in the mail, as she often does. The story hit me hard—Hidi was just a few years younger than I am. Despite the diagnosis, Hidi and Jen were trying their best to lead a normal life. They held more underground suppers while Ryan underwent round after round of

chemotherapy. He gave talks about his illness and the mission of the Giving Kitchen. They continued to develop Staplehouse. Hidi had already beat the odds and outlived the doctor's original prognosis by many months.



Jen Hiding.

Then on January 9, 2014, my mom forwarded me an [obituary](#) in the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*. A little more than a year since he first walked into the hospital with flulike symptoms, Ryan Hiding passed away at his home. He was 36 years old.

Hidi was gone, but Staplehouse was still alive. Jen would be the business manager and the Giving Kitchen spokesperson. Kara would be the general manager. Smith: the executive chef. After months of the usual bureaucratic red tape, Staplehouse debuted on September 4, 2015. This wasn't just another opening. The restaurant represented the passion and perseverance of a community. To that end, Staplehouse was set up as what's called a for-profit subsidiary of the Giving Kitchen. All of the restaurant's profits after payroll and taxes go to the charity, which has raised nearly \$3 million to aid crisis-stricken restaurant workers.

As an Atlanta expat in New York, I was proud when I heard about the opening of Staplehouse. I looked forward to eating there and supporting the restaurant's mission. And yet I couldn't help but wonder: Would I genuinely like the food?

What I did know was that Ryan Smith was an incredible chef whose cooking I'd loved when he'd worked for two of the city's best: Hugh Acheson at [Empire State South](#) and Linton Hopkins at [Restaurant Eugene](#). The two were instrumental in ushering in the new Southern food

movement, where well-sourced local ingredients fused with traditional dishes to reenergize one of America's unique regional cuisines.



Grilled Isle Dauphine oysters with popcorn butter.

I visited Staplehouse in November 2015. After sitting at the eight-seat bar with a friend and eating our way through the menu, I quickly saw that Smith wasn't just replicating what Hopkins and Acheson had already pioneered. Scraps of carrots, potatoes, and other veg (the stuff most chefs just toss) were puréed, dehydrated, and then fried so that they resembled puffier (and tastier) Funyuns. The subtle surprises continued with the oysters. Anyone can serve them raw or fried. Here, six grilled Isle Dauphine bivalves arrived in their shells with a sauce made from popcorn butter and nutritional yeast. I was about to order another round when Grandma Lillian's warm potato bread showed up with a side of whipped bologna. Later, I asked Smith to share his grandma's recipe, and there is a reason why he politely declined. I wouldn't give that away, either.

A few months later, I returned with my parents—tougher critics than I am. "Sorry, Mom, but this chicken liver is better than yours," I blurted out. Those are fighting words in my family, but my dad nodded in agreement. And so did my mom, begrudgingly. Smith's chicken liver mousse was silky smooth, glazed with burnt and raw honeys and served in a tart shell. Shortly after, as we were devouring toothy farro piccolo tossed with a pestolike sauce, roasted mushrooms, and peanuts, a whiff of another dish, the red snapper, stopped us mid-bite. It was pungent in the way kimchi can be. I tasted the broth, which was made with fermented shrimp. On its own, it was too much. But when you combined it with a bit of the fish and creamy-but-firm Sea Island red peas, the dish came together. Did it taste Thai, or was Smith simply expanding the boundaries of what Southern food could be? As the meal evolved, I was leaning toward the latter.



[Chicken Liver Mousse with Burnt Honey Gelée.](#)

Yes, Smith's food is technical and intricate, made with dehydrated this and preserved-for-24-days that and plated with tweezers, but it never sacrifices flavor for gimmicks. Classic Dixie staples like collard greens, pecans, buttermilk, and benne seeds share the plate with *ats jaar* vinegar, golden-raisin koji, and vadouvan. This is the next step in modern Southern cooking, and Smith is leading the pack as its brightest practitioner.

I was on my second Hemingway daiquiri on my third visit when A Tribe Called Quest's "The Low End of Theory" came over the speakers. A server asked me if I'd watched the Falcons debacle on Sunday. And had I noticed the *National Lampoon's Vacation* mural of John Candy on the restaurant's garage door ("Sorry folks. Park's closed. Moose out front shoulda told ya.")? Despite its tragic roots, this wasn't a somber restaurant; it was a seriously great time. The food may have been three-star Michelin stuff, but unlike how I tend to feel at those types of places, I was at home here immediately. It's by design. There's a front entrance at Staplehouse, but you enter the restaurant by walking up the driveway and going through the garage door, like you're visiting an old friend's house.

Standing in the kitchen one night, Kara handed me a can of beer. I'd had a few, so I finally got the courage to ask her about the shield tattoo that she, Jen, and Ryan all have on their arms. "It's a Team Hidi shield," she said. "I guess it's a reminder of a lot of things. Mostly good things."



Plating the beets with *bresaola*.

A few feet away, Smith started to plate a beet dish. It looked like a rose made of thinly sliced beets and house-cured bresaola. A hibiscus-and-sunflower-seed purée rested beneath. I’ve had plenty of lackluster beet dishes in my life, so when I sat down later to eat, it wasn’t necessarily the course I was most looking forward to. I was wrong. The beets were cooked but crunchy; the sauce nutty and creamy; the cured meat gave it richness. It was like eating the greatest roast beef sandwich of all time—without the bread. It was both clever and comforting.

As I looked up, I saw Jen running around, clearing plates, greeting customers out on the floor, and, like me, enjoying every moment of the experience. That’s the thing: At Staplehouse, there are no tears, just smiles. The joy coming out of the place is palpable.

Let me make one thing clear: Staplehouse didn’t become my restaurant of the year because of a heart-wrenching story. It became my restaurant of the year because of the smart, innovative cooking of Ryan Smith and the warm, welcoming, unwavering hospitality of Kara, Jen, and the entire team. In every way imaginable, it floored me. It’s the best restaurant experience I had this year. Hands down.

In the open kitchen at Staplehouse, there’s an exposed wood beam covered with inspirational quotes, mostly from boxers. “Everyone has a plan until they get punched in the face.” (Mike Tyson.) “If your dreams don’t scare you, they aren’t big enough.” (Muhammad Ali.) But the most powerful words come from a different kind of fighter. They are painted nearby on a wall that the staff of Staplehouse sees every day.

“Anything long-lasting or worthwhile takes time and complete surrender.”

It’s a quote from Ryan Hidinger, a person I never met but whom I feel as if I knew. A person who’s no longer with us but whose vision informs everything about this outstanding restaurant. I felt it. And I imagine a lot of people lucky enough to eat at Staplehouse will too.