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Cookery owners Nick Hawthorne-Johnson and Rochelle Johnson discuss the prep list for a wedding and reception being held in their event space in West Durham.

# THE FOOD HUB

By ANDREA WEIGL  
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**DURHAM** One night in October 2010, Nick Hawthorne-Johnson went to pick up a pizza for dinner. He ended up having a random conversation that has transformed not only his life but also his city.

He started talking with Drew Brown, who managed the Sausage Wagon food truck. Brown knew that Hawthorne-Johnson owned a West Durham building and suggested that he turn it into a commissary where food trucks could store and prepare food, a health-code requirement.

Hawthorne-Johnson, 34, has never lacked for ideas – maybe direction, but not ideas. He’s been a general contractor, a waiter, an acupuncturist. He’s lived in Australia and India and sailed the Caribbean. At the time of this life-changing conversation, he and his wife, Rochelle Johnson, had recently returned from a yearlong road trip to Argentina.

Before they left, Durham’s food trucks had barely hit the streets. Now, they were everywhere.

“This is it,” he realized. “I’ve had 1,000 ideas. This is what I want to do.”

Nick – and eventually Rochelle, 29, who was pulled into the enterprise – have turned that West Durham building into The Cookery, part kitchen-for-hire, part event space, part business incubator. It is a hub for food entrepreneurs who are helping turn this former tobacco town into a drinking and dining destination written up in The New York Times one week and Southern Living the next.

Hawthorne-Johnson’s path to that turning point started years earlier with each

A WEST DURHAM COMMISSARY, THE COOKERY, HAS BECOME A MELTING POT FOR TRIANGLE CULINARY STARTUPS

decision creating the next opportunity.

Not wanting to go to college, he worked as a carpenter’s assistant for a high-end homebuilder in Chapel Hill. Those skills helped when he and a friend decided to refurbish a sailboat and sail around the Caribbean. He sold the boat and used the money to buy a run-down historic house in West Durham, which he renovated and sold. His renovation won an award from Durham’s historic preservation society.

That success helped Hawthorne-Johnson persuade his mother to use a small inheritance to buy a series of dilapidated homes in the same neighborhood he had fallen in love with and wanted to improve. Starting a business together called Bull City Restoration, he renovated several houses and duplexes, which his mother manages as rentals. They offer about 14 rentals at below-market prices so that low-income folks can still afford to live there. They wanted to improve the neighborhood but not price longtime residents out of it.

Hettie Johnson said her son has never been deterred by a challenge. He taught himself how to tile, work with concrete, design and build out a space. “He thinks he can do anything,” she said. “So far, he’s been fairly correct in that.”

When the Durham food co-op announced it was closing in late 2008, Hawthorne-Johnson and his mom made an offer on the 3,500-square-foot building.

“I felt really strongly that this property was an anchor property in the neighborhood,” he said. “If I could get my hands on it, I had to do it. It was a responsibility.”

At the time, he figured he and Rochelle would return from their road trip and then SEE THE COOKERY, PAGE 6D



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The Cookery’s kitchen opened in April 2011, followed 18 months later by the Front Room, an elegant event space.

## For dad and daughter, music makes memories

“So Dad, are we going to have a father-daughter dance at the wedding?” She paused. “Which song shall we choose?” She already knew both answers.

My oldest daughter was getting married in D.C. and she was going down her checklist of a thousand details and decisions. With my wife as the de facto wedding planner/project manager, the two made a great team. Emails, spreadsheets and texts crossed our kitchen table daily.

When our oldest daughter was born, as young sleep-deprived, first-time parents, my wife and I had to figure out what we were supposed to do, how to help each other out, and find out what we were good at.

One thing I knew I was good at was making mixtapes. I made the best “baby” mixtape of all time, full of favorite songs from the ‘60s and ‘70s.

Off we went on long winding walks, my daughter and I: through the woods, over the old roadways surrounding our house and neighborhood.

She would turn her head this way and that, cuddled in a Snuggli, head bobbing, our happy dogs at our side. I sang her every lullaby I knew and every pop song from my youth, heavy on the Beach Boys and Beatles. Our hearts beat as one. With it’s aching, opening lullaby line, “Little surfer, little one, made my heart come all undone,” “Surfer Girl” became our song.

I would take the exhausted, baby-bundle handoff from my wife, pop her in the baby carrier, adopt my most plaintive Brian Wilson voice, and we would hit the trails. She’d be asleep in three minutes. I made up words and whole choruses

SEE VALENTINE, PAGE 7D



Our Lives  
John Valentine

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## A rockin’ erotic romance

Chapel Hill author’s spicy novel appeals to Duran Duran fans

By DAVID MENCONI  
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Write what you know, the saying goes. Chapel Hill author Karen Booth knows the music industry from having worked for record companies (including Mammoth Records during its 1990s heyday), and she knows about being a fan of ‘80s new-wave heartthrobs Duran Duran from having been a teenage girl during the group’s pop-star prime.

Thus we have “Bring Me Back” (Turquoise Morning Press), a chick-lit bodice-ripper that features Duran-esque rock icon Christopher Penman as an object of desire for rock journalist Claire Abby. The heroine grew up idolizing and fantasizing about Penman and his band, Banks Forest. When she gets a magazine assignment to interview Penman on the eve of his big comeback album’s release ... well, mayhem ensues and nature takes its course.

Booth has already published three earlier erotic-romance novellas, and “Bring Me Back” is the first of three full-length novels that will be published over the next year (all of them set in the world of music, including a sequel). It’s plenty explicit, although well short of the line that “Fifty

Shades of Grey” crosses.

Upcoming promotional events include an appearance at this October’s “Durandemonium” conference for Duran Duran fans in Chicago. Meantime, she has two local readings. We caught up with her to talk romance literature.

**Q:** Since your Duran Duran fandom was an inspiration, which member is Chris based on?

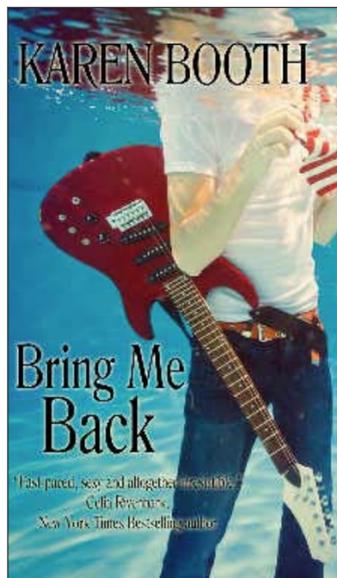
**A:** Chris is very much an amalgamation of bits of different rock stars I’ve known personally. Also John Taylor from Duran Duran, who was and still is my favorite. I was trying to tap into the way I felt about him

as a teenager to write about the way Claire felt about Chris, in terms of the superficial fan/rock-star relationship. But while Chris started out as a combination of a couple of different people, he very quickly became his own person.

**Q:** How has the book gone over among Duran Duran fans?

**A:** It’s been amazing. A lot of women are like me – remembering what it was like to be 15 or 16 and idolizing Duran Duran as this sort of ultimate escape – and I very much wrote this for myself. Duran Duran fans have been insanely supportive and the book is full of what I call Easter eggs, little Duran Duran

SEE ROMANCE, PAGE 7D



COURTESY OF KAREN BOOTH

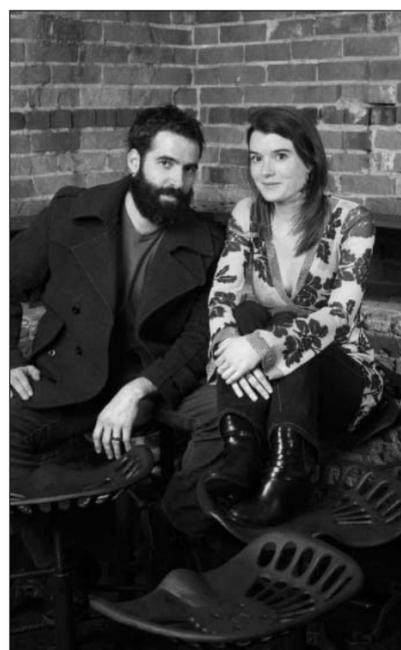
### Meet the author

Karen Booth will read from and discuss “Bring Me Back” at 7:30 p.m. Wednesday at Flyleaf Books, 752 Martin Luther King Jr. Blvd., in Chapel Hill; and at 2 p.m. June 30 at McIntyre’s Books, 220 Market St., in Farrington Village. Admission to both is free.



PHOTOS BY TAKA AKI IWABU - tiwabu@newsobserver.com

Scott Richie, instructor for culinary workshops at The Cookery, gives a lesson about cocktails.



Nick Hawthorne-Johnson and Rochelle Johnson own The Cookery, an event space and hub for food entrepreneurs.

### More information

The Cookery is 1101 W. Chapel Hill St., Durham, 919-908-8974, [durhamcookery.com](http://durhamcookery.com). Check the website for information about upcoming cooking and beverage classes as well as special events.

## THE COOKERY

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he would open an acupuncture practice in the space. Then came that fateful conversation with Drew Brown about food trucks.

Within months, Hawthorne-Johnson was turning the back half of the building into a commissary. He called in favors from his contractor friends. He scoured Craigslist for used kitchen equipment, hauling a range back from Charlotte, recycling fixtures from a Mexican restaurant going out of business in Cary. In April 2011, the kitchen opened. Eighteen months later, The Cookery's Front Room, an elegant event space, opened to host wedding receptions, business meetings, even pop-up restaurants, a limited engagement dining experience.

### Love and partnership

While the business began as Hawthorne-Johnson's dream, it became his wife's as well. The couple realized

that these food entrepreneurs would need much more than a kitchen and storage space. They would need help with business plans, marketing and website design. That's where Johnson came in. After graduating from UNC with an advertising degree, she taught herself how to design websites and ran her own marketing and design firm.

It's clear the two are a team and that theirs is a labor of love. Their skills complement each other. He's the risk taker. She's the list maker. She is terrible at math. He keeps the books. He admits that grammar is not his best skill. She edits his emails.

"The places where our abilities fall short, we fill in each other's gaps really well," Hawthorne-Johnson said.

The pair met when she was a senior in college and a regular at the now-closed 3Cups coffee shop in Chapel Hill, where he was a barista.

The proprietors of 3Cups, Lex and Ann Alexander, are elder

statesmen of the Triangle food scene, former owners of Wellspring natural foods stores in Durham and Chapel Hill, which were bought by Whole Foods. Ann Alexander marvels at what the young couple has been able to accomplish.

"They remind me of Lex and I, 30 years ago," she said.

### The next generation of foodies

Not only are the young couple entrepreneurs themselves, they are helping Durham's next generation of enterprising food professionals. A big part of Johnson's job is organizing classes and mentoring events to help The Cookery's "members," as they like to call them, grow their businesses. Some current and former members include Mark Overbay of Big Spoons peanut butters; Lindsay Moriarity, who has since opened Monuts, a doughnut shop and cafe in downtown Durham; and Vanessa and Yoni Mazuz, who started The Parlour ice cream shop on a food truck.

Vanessa Mazuz said starting their business wasn't easy. Typically, food truck owners meet the commissary requirement by finding a restaurant owner or caterer willing to let them use their kitchen during off hours and share dry storage, refrigerator and freezer space. The Mazuzes needed a permanent place for their 700-pound ice cream maker and lots of freezer space — both available at The Cookery, but unlikely to be found at a restaurant or catering kitchen. After almost two years on the road, the Mazuzes opened their brick-and-mortar shop in downtown Durham in April.

Without The Cookery as a launching pad, Vanessa Mazuz said, "We wouldn't have been able to do it."

As their members have seen success, so have Nick and Rochelle. They have even hired two employees: a shop steward who manages the kitchen and Rochelle's sister, Clay Woodward, who has taken over

the office duties.

These days, Rochelle focuses on organizing special events to spotlight Cookery members and their products. On a recent Monday morning, she and the couple behind American Meltdown, a gourmet grilled cheese food truck, were hashing out the details of the upcoming Durham Cheese Festival.

During the discussion, Nick wandered in. The talk turned to décor, specifically linens.

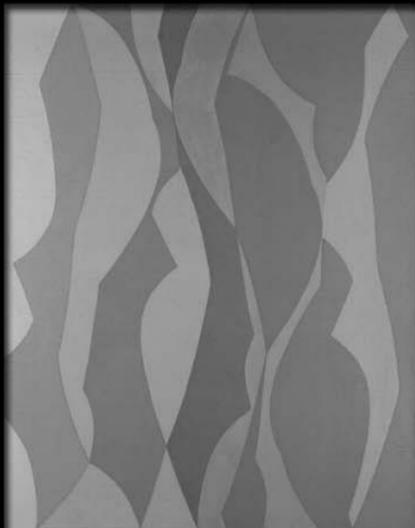
"We could go rustic and just get some burlap sacks from Counter Culture," he said, referring to a Durham-based coffee roaster.

"That's not a bad idea," his wife responded, "but they won't cover the tables."

Nick leaned over and kissed her on the forehead. "I love so much that you take the cockamamie ideas that come out of my mouth seriously," he said.

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