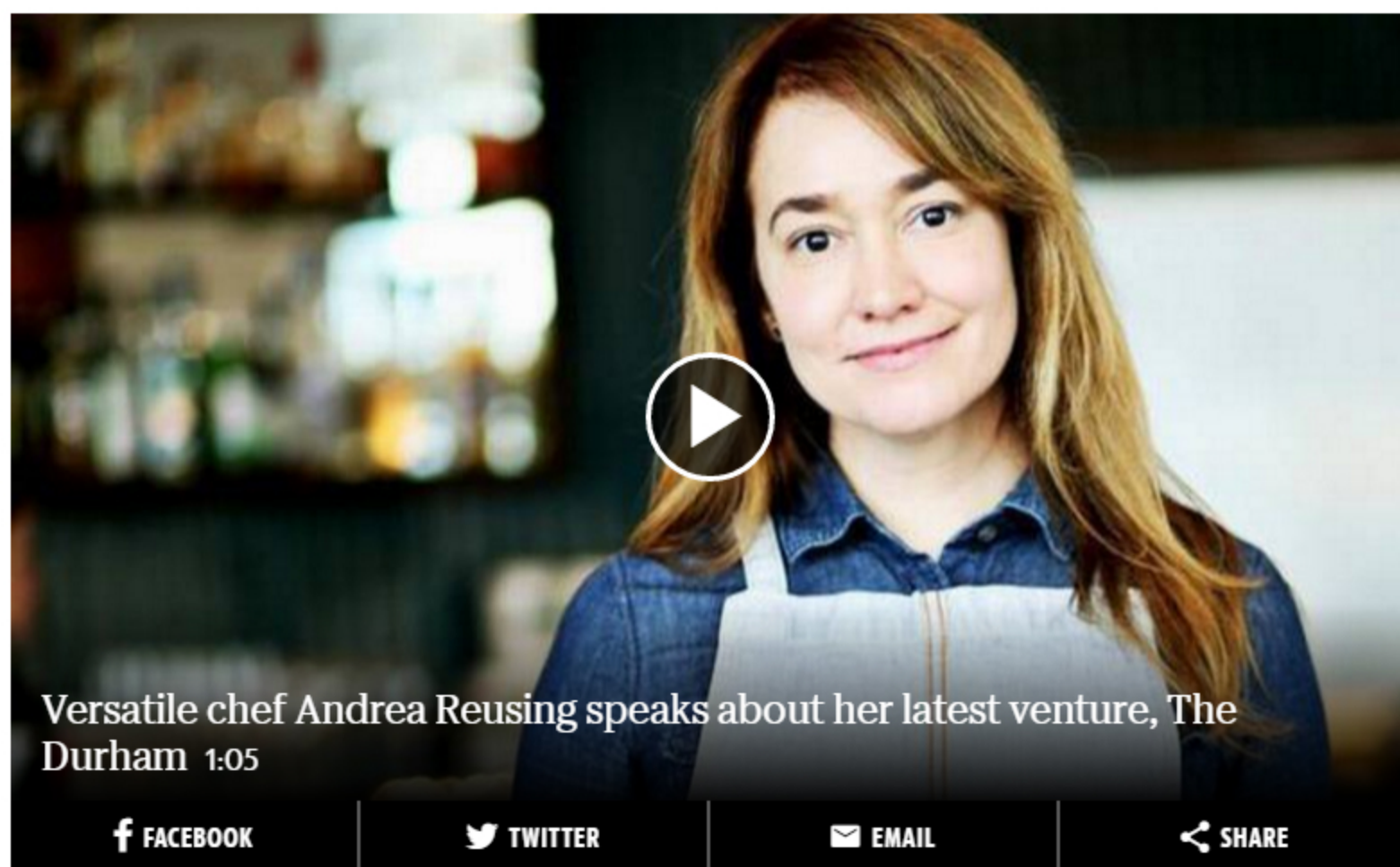


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James Beard Award's NC semifinalists include chefs Ashley Christensen, Andrea Reusing



Reusing's passion for North Carolina ingredients can be found throughout the menu at The Durham. **Juli Leonard** - jleonard@newsobserver.com

BY JESSICA BANOV
jbanov@newsobserver.com

The list of 14 North Carolina chefs named semifinalists for the James Beard Foundation Awards includes some familiar names, including repeat winners Ashley Christensen and Andrea Reusing of the Triangle.

But in a list well represented by Triangle chefs, the semifinalists also include newcomers in the Rising Star Chef and the Best Chef Southeast categories. In the Southeast category of 20 chefs, nine are from North Carolina.

Restaurant and chef award semifinalists for the 27th annual **James Beard Foundation Awards** were announced Wednesday. The awards, considered the Oscars of the culinary world, are given in 21 categories, including outstanding chef, outstanding restaurant and best chef in 10 different regions, best new restaurants, rising star chefs, pastry chefs and bakers.

Christensen, who owns Poole's Diner and several other Raleigh restaurants, and Reusing, of Lantern in Chapel Hill and The Durham Hotel, are the only North Carolina chefs out of 20 nationwide nominated for Outstanding Chef.

Reusing won Best Chef Southeast in 2011 and said it's her first time nominated in the overall chef category. She said she is honored to be included in a list that features friends and chefs she admires - and whose food she enjoys.

She has owned Lantern for 15 years and gave credit to Miguel Torres, her chef de cuisine and partner at Lantern for 14 of those years.

"We're proud of 15 years," she said. "I'm most proud of the incredible group of people I get to work with every day. The fact is, you know, we're really a family. We all love working together."

While the award recognizes her for Lantern and not The Durham restaurant that she opened last year, she said she feels the award covers her teams at both **critically acclaimed restaurants**. The Durham was "incubated" at Lantern, she said, and her pastry team works at both restaurants.

Christensen's Death and Taxes was a finalist in 2016 for Best New Restaurant. She won Best Chef Southeast in 2014. She has become known in Raleigh for her group of restaurants, which also includes Beasley's Chicken & Honey, Chuck's and Fox Liquor Bar. She also released her first cookbook last year, "Poole's: Recipes and Stories From a Modern Diner."

Gabe Barker of Pizzeria Mercato in Carrboro was named a semifinalist for Rising Star Chef, which is awarded to a chef 30 years or younger. The restaurant, which emphasizes locally sourced ingredients from the nearby farmers market, just celebrated a year of being open on Feb. 1.

Barker, 28, let out a "Wool" when reached after the announcement, but quickly became matter of fact about the honor.

"Everyone in the industry knows how hard it is to make a living and to make a name for yourself," he said. "Just to make that short list is really nice to have people know how hard you work."

If he won, he would be a **second-generation winner**. His father, Ben Barker, of the former Magnolia Grill in Durham, won Best Chef Southeast in 2000, while his mother, Karen Barker, won a national award for Outstanding Pastry Chef in 2003. They opened the Carrboro restaurant with their son last year. Karen still helps with pastry assistance and menu planning, Gabe said, while his father works on the wine list.

Barker said his parents were humble about their achievements and that cooking good food is just as important, if not more, to him. He also gave credit to his staff of about 32 people, who he said continue to push one another to improve.

"That has done everything for me as far as being able to grow, especially having a younger team who is driven to perform at a top level every day," he said. "As much as this is a personal acknowledgment, nothing I've done in the past year would be possible without them."

North Carolina chefs compete in the Southeast region, which includes Georgia, Kentucky, South Carolina, Tennessee and West Virginia.

Reusing said chefs around the country are "envious" when they learn of the state's network of small farms that provide ingredients for North Carolina's culinary scene.

"North Carolina has been a great place to eat for a long long time," she said. "It's definitely because of a huge number of chefs, but also the number of producers that make it work."

The North Carolina semifinalists are:

Outstanding Baker

- Phoebe Lawless, Scratch, Durham
- Lionel Vatinet, La Farm Bakery, Cary

Outstanding Chef

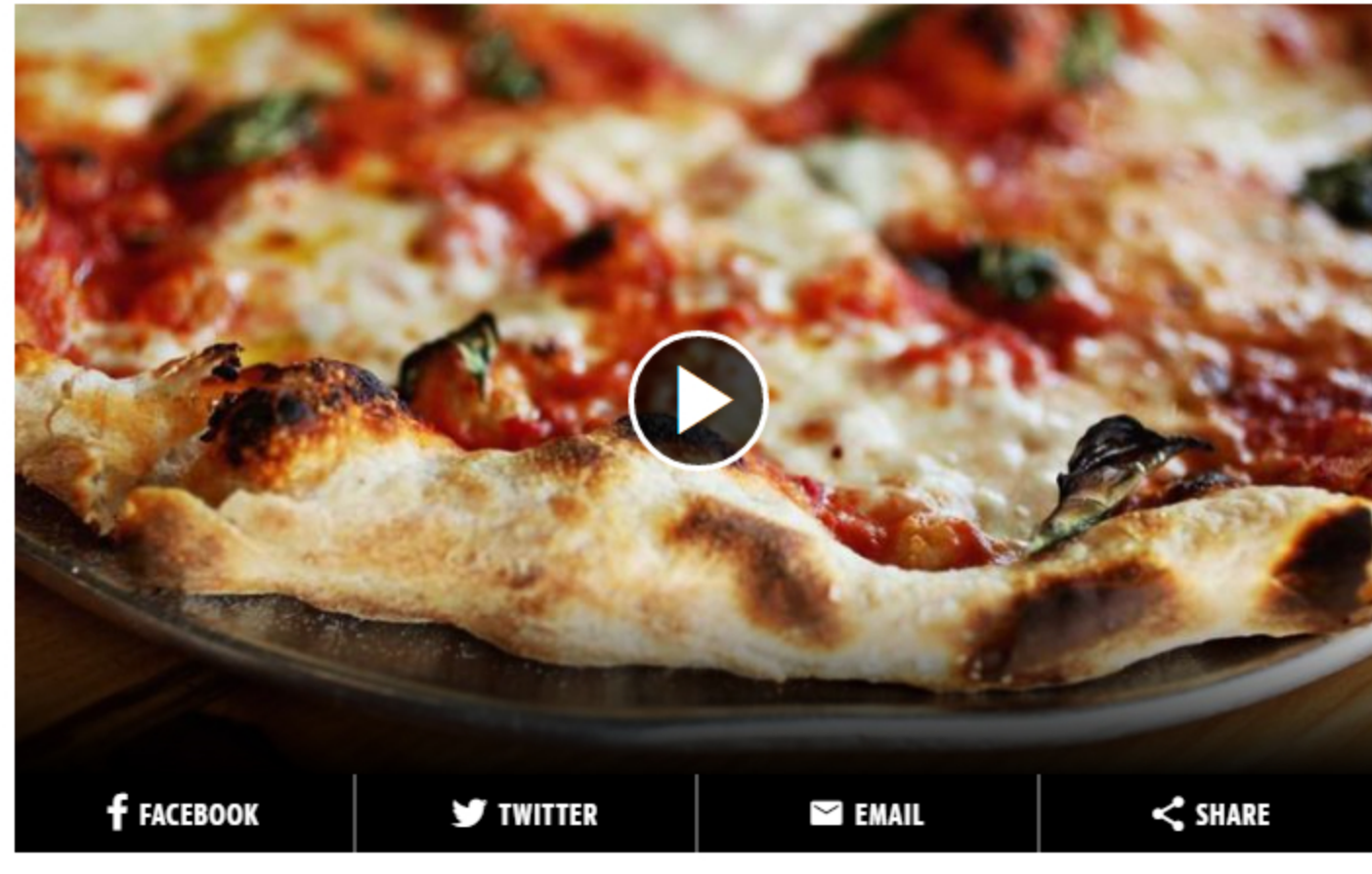
- Ashley Christensen, Poole's Diner, Raleigh
- Andrea Reusing, Lantern, Chapel Hill

Rising Star Chef of the Year

- Gabe Barker, Pizzeria Mercato, Carrboro

Best Chef: Southeast

- Colin Bedford, The Fearington House, Pittsboro
- Steven Devereaux Greene, Herons in the Umstead Hotel, Cary
- John Fleer, Rhubarb, Asheville
- Vivian Howard, Chef & the Farmer, Kinston
- Matt Kelly, Mateo, Durham
- Joe Kindred, Kindred, Davidson
- Cheetie Kumar, Garland, Raleigh
- Elliott Moss, Buxton Hall, Asheville
- Paul Verica, Heritage Food and Drink, Waxhaw



Gabe Barker's Pizzeria Mercato
Video: Gabe Barker talks about his Carrboro restaurant during an interview on Wednesday, July 20, 2016. He is the son of James Beard Award-winning chefs Ben and Karen Barker.
Video by Robert Willett, Photos by Juli Leonard - rwillett@newsobserver.com

The list of semifinalists will go to a judging panel of restaurant critics, food and wine editors, former winners and culinary educators to narrow the list to five nominees in each category. The finalists will be named March 15.

Only four North Carolina chefs have won James Beard Awards while working in the state.

For a full list, go to jamesbeard.org/awards.

The 2017 James Beard Awards Gala will be May 1 in Chicago. The 2017 Media Awards (formerly known as the Book, Broadcast & Journalism Awards) will be April 25 in New York City.

Jessica Banov: 919-829-4831, @JessicaBanov