

LOCAL FOLKS *Erica Lovelace*

BY MARY WANSE

Jacksonville native Erica Lovelace is a chef extraordinaire and a culinary influencer who is simmering on the edge of success in Avondale.

Born and raised in Mandarin, Lovelace had left for Tallahassee to study marketing and design at Florida State University, where she met Joshua Pekera. Together, they headed west and spent a decade in San Francisco, California. There, intent on becoming a cookbook writer and a culinary educator, Lovelace had the privilege of attending the renowned San Francisco Cooking School during its last year in operation.

“It’s something I always knew I wanted to do. It was meant to be,” she said, as both sides of her family have been very food-centric.

“Born in Jacksonville, seasoned in San Francisco, and simmering in Avondale.”

In late 2022, Lovelace returned to Jacksonville with Pekera by her side, a wedding ring on her finger and a cookbook draft under her arm.

“The book is about my upbringing as a biracial person,” Lovelace said.

Her dad is a native Jaxson, and her mom immigrated to the United States in the 1970s from Hong Kong.

Full time, Lovelace is a freelance marketing consultant. Both advertising professionals, Lovelace and Pekera

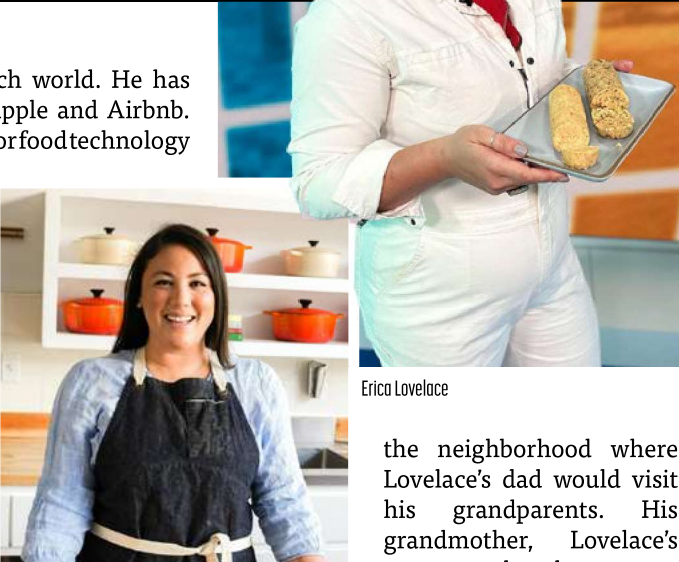
transitioned into the tech world. He has landed positions with Apple and Airbnb. She has done marketing for food technology companies like Impossible Foods and Meati.

Part time, Lovelace works on her book, which contains both southern-influenced and traditional Chinese recipes. Some of them contain custom meat she purchases from her favorite Jacksonville butcher shop, Cline’s. She also maintains a blog, where she posts her original recipes, and two social media accounts, where she uploads videos that have an extraordinary following: nearly 73,000 on Instagram and 37,500 on TikTok. She has appeared several times on the lifestyle show “River City Live” on News4JAX.

One of the reasons Lovelace returned to Jacksonville after culinary school was, she said, “We wanted to purchase a historic home, which we have.”

The 1929 build that Lovelace and Pekera found in Avondale is in superior condition. The most important renovation they had to make was the installation of special shelving to hold her collection of nearly 500 cookbooks.

Settling in her city of origin after she married, and particularly in the Avondale area, made sense for Lovelace because it was a return to her familial roots. This is



Erica Lovelace in her favorite environment, the kitchen.



Erica Lovelace with her cookbook collection.

the neighborhood where Lovelace’s dad would visit his grandparents. His grandmother, Lovelace’s great-grandmother, grew orchids here as a hobby and was a lifelong member of Jacksonville’s Garden Club, which Lovelace recently joined.

Lovelace’s paternal grandmother, Mary Treisback Argalas, grew up here and graduated from Riverside High School (formerly Robert E. Lee). She used to sew costumes for a local dance company to make extra money as a single mom after Lovelace’s grandfather had passed away unexpectedly at a young age.

“Because she was a product of WWII, she was a fantastic baker, gardener and canner. I learned how to make traditional jams and jellies from her,” Lovelace said of her grandma.

“Food has been a huge part of my family since I can remember. Cooking is in my DNA. I grew up in the restaurant world,” she said.

When her maternal grandparents had immigrated to the United States, first to

New York before making their way down to Jacksonville, they owned and operated several Chinese restaurants for decades, including Tam’s on Edgewood Avenue. That was the gathering point for the family. It was where Christmas and Chinese New Year were celebrated. The family sold that business in 2008, but the building still stands, now Sunrise Caribbean Gourmet.

Ever the foodie, even when Lovelace is not cooking, “I love going to other people’s restaurants,” she said.

Naming a favorite would be tough because it depends upon what she’s in the mood for. Josephine on St. Johns Avenue for dinner is near the top of her list, though.

She and her husband also love the outdoors and are often found either cycling around town or walking with their two golden retrievers, Canon and Cooper, through Willowbranch Park.

The couple loves to travel, too. Hence, their November trip to “eat our way through the northern coast of Spain,” as Lovelace put it.

“We’re excited!” she said of her trip, just as Jacksonville residents are excited for the future publication of Lovelace’s cookbook.

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