

Mohonk's Farm-to-Table Rebirth

The executive chef at the venerable Hudson Valley resort infused a “dependable” menu with purely regional flavors. The results are delicious.

Pursuits

By STEVE REDDICLIFFE AUG. 1, 2017

Can you create a farm-to-table restaurant if you have 100 tables in an 8,750-square-foot main dining room, 80 more tables downstairs, nine in a cozy lounge, 50 outside overlooking an Arcadian lake and, on certain nights, eight in a capacious kitchen?

That is the question that Jim Palmeri, the executive chef at Mohonk Mountain House in New Paltz, N.Y., spent several years contemplating.

Mohonk, the idyllic resort founded by Albert Smiley in 1869, was not a logical candidate for a chef-driven restaurant with a focus on local sourcing. It's not a cafe, bistro or gastropub. It's big. The hotel, a National Historic Landmark on more than 2,000 acres in the Shawangunk Mountains, has 265 rooms in five wings that date to 1879.

On a busy night — and there are many busy nights — its restaurant serves 600 diners. On Thanksgiving, 1,450; Mother's Day, 1,400. The kitchen orders 2,000 pounds of beef a week, 1,200 each of chicken and fish, 40 cases of eggs.

But there, in the bowls and on the plates, is a bisque made with local parsnips; polenta from Wild Hive Farm in Clinton Corners; cheese from Chaseholm Farm in Pine Plains; and a bounty of vegetables grown throughout the Hudson Valley. On tap there might be an I.P.A. from Arrowood Farms in Accord just down the hill, and

mixed into cocktails you might find McKenzie bourbon from Burdett in the Finger Lakes or 46 Peaks vodka from Lake Placid.

“It’s funny how things change,” Mr. Palmeri said early one morning in the Mohonk kitchen, where the staff was already focused on prepping for the lunch and dinner crowds. “When I first started cooking, everybody wanted the exotic. Ostrich was going to be the next red meat. Now they want to know what you buy locally. They want to know how far the farm is from the hotel.”

Mr. Palmeri, 54, has been the executive chef at Mohonk for 10 years, and although he long had an interest in local products, the volume needed at a resort that serves more than 500,000 meals a year was a hurdle.

“In the old days they’d bring us a box of lettuce and half of it was dirt and grubs,” he said. “And as nice as that sounds we can’t have a guy just cleaning lettuce.”

But new purveyors brought new opportunities to showcase Hudson Valley products, and “the next challenge for me is to implement more of that into the dining experience.”

By training and temperament, Mr. Palmeri is well suited for the job of redefining Mohonk menus. After graduating from the culinary program at Kendall College in Illinois, he worked primarily at large hotels, many with well-regarded restaurants. He was the executive chef at six Hyatt properties, from Coral Gables, Fla., to Grand Cayman Island, and jokes that he and his wife found themselves in balmy locales because of a “palm tree rule” they serendipitously ended up following.

When he arrived in New Paltz, where the trees lean toward pine and maple, Mr. Palmeri had to “get my head around” Mohonk. Unlike resorts and hotels with multiple options — or proximity to cities with plenty of good restaurants — Mohonk has one dining room for dinner. (That room, which was first used in 1893, is grand; the ceilings are as high as 23 feet 10 inches.)

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someone who wants a steak and potato and that's it.”

One of the first things Mr. Palmeri did was address the kitchen's “low, low staffing levels,” adding cooks to a crew that included Joe Serrecchio (35 years), the butcher, and Greg Becker (37 years), who makes all of the deeply flavored soups. For his stocks, most of which are made in 40-gallon pots, Mr. Becker gets 900 pounds of veal bones a week and 400 pounds of chicken.

Mr. Palmeri's second in command is Steve Anson, the executive sous-chef, who began at Mohonk as a banquet chef, left for several years to be the executive chef at a boutique hotel in Lake George, N.Y., and returned in 2011. Another returning alum is the pastry chef Audrey Billups, who was at Mohonk when Mr. Palmeri began; he helped arrange for her to work at the Addison, the acclaimed restaurant in San Diego (stints at Marea and Ai Fiori in New York City followed).

With an expanded team — there can be as many as 70 staff members during the summer in a kitchen that is quiet only between midnight and 3:30 a.m. — Mr. Palmeri set about elevating the food. Mohonk began making its own pasta two and a half years ago. It also started smoking brisket, bacon, pork belly and other meats. And Ms. Billups has transformed the desserts: lemon-thyme posset with shortbread, apple brown-sugar cheesecake with apple cider caramel and a dusting of brown butter sugar.

But the most significant change has been the profusion of New York State products from suppliers like Farms2Tables, which delivers produce and meats from more than 90 Hudson Valley farmers, and FingerLakes Farms (70 Normandy ducks a week).

“We can get all these things now easily,” Mr. Palmeri said of the local produce and poultry. “Before, we were so busy and we were short-staffed, so you had to give your attention to the most pressing thing, which was surviving the day.” (Of course, not everything is local; no one is pulling sea bass and blue cod out of Lake Mohonk.)

Last summer, Mohonk introduced a Chef's Table meal in the kitchen, with seating for eight. It is a chance for the chefs to show what they can do but not show off (Mohonk is not braggy): 11 courses, matching wines, spirited group, total fun. On

the night I went, the procession included a silky cylinder of Hudson Valley foie gras with compressed apples and plum compote; a poached local egg with hollandaise foam and English muffin crumbles; a smoked sea scallop and velvety Iberico lardo atop potato cream; and a crisp-skinned Finger Lakes duck breast with sherry sauce and duck-confit tortellini. As J. K. Rowling wrote of the dishes that awaited Harry Potter at Hogwarts: “He had never seen so many things he liked to eat on one table.”

And then there were desserts, which included vanilla wafer cones filled with Chambord ice cream made tableside by Mr. Anson, and a showstopper orchestrated by Ms. Billups. After the table was covered with a white plastic mat (“a blank canvas,” she said), Ms. Billups spooned and scattered the following for each diner (this a partial list but you’ll get the picture): hot fudge sauce, pistachio sabayon, an ounce of warm chocolate cake, cubes of amaretto gelée. It was a finger-painting with one burst of flavor — sweet, tart, tangy — after another.

At meal’s end, Mr. Palmeri and Mr. Anson said a modest good night and did a slow fade out of the kitchen à la Rick Blaine and Louis Renault — “Casablanca” but with stockpots.

Mr. Palmeri’s latest project is the rethinking of the Granary, the cliff-top outdoor restaurant. This year, there is flavorful grass-fed beef in the burgers, and savory chicken, both from the region.

“The Granary is outdoor barbecue,” Mr. Palmeri said. “It should all be local, right?”

None of this happened overnight, which is in keeping with Mohonk, where it’s not supposed to (employees were still harvesting ice from the lake in 1965). One of the hotel’s infinite charms is how steadfast it is. There have never been televisions in rooms. A sign tells guests that “horseplay” is prohibited at what is still called the bathing beach. Meditation sessions are held every morning. Tea and cookies are served each afternoon in the Lake Lounge.

You go back to Mohonk looking forward to doing the things you did the last time: strolling on a trail or scrambling up the rocks to Sky Top Tower, with a sweeping view of the cliff called the Trapps. Finding serenity on a bench in one of the

scores of gazebos known as summerhouses (the view from Huntington Lookout is spectacular). Making a paper lantern in an afternoon craft session. Piling into the Parlor after dinner to see the ventriloquist Sylvia Fletcher or to venture an answer in a rock 'n' roll quiz conducted by Bruce Morrow, a.k.a. the longtime D.J. Cousin Brucie. (I won a Gladys Knight & the Pips CD; totally wanted it.)

Any changes to the place are deliberated by the Smiley family.

The expansive spa, for one, was discussed for a decade before it opened in 2005. As Eric Gullickson, the general manager and a fifth-generation member of the Smiley family, said, it's important that Mohonk is "not just reacting to something that's a trend." ("Disruption" is not in the Mohonk vocabulary.)

The small bar called the Carriage Lounge was a similar story. Albert Smiley, from a temperate Quaker family, did not serve alcohol when he opened Mohonk in what had previously been a 10-room tavern owned by John Stokes, which most definitely did.

That didn't mean some guests didn't drink. "They would bring these suitcase travel bars to their room, and they would try to get enough of a shine on to get them through dinner and sometimes they overshot," Mr. Palmeri said. "The way they judged the captain in the dining room was, was he able to carry a guest back to their room?"

The dining room began serving liquor in 1970. The Carriage Lounge opened in 2005, and Spirits on the Sunset, drinks on a broad porch with the Catskill Mountains as backdrop, in 2016.

The emphasis on local food, though, isn't a change as much as it's a back-to-the-garden moment. For decades Mohonk had its own farms — at one time there were seven — which provided food for its dining room. (Mohonk Farms Milk was still listed on the menu in 1958.) One farm, Mountain Rest, is now part of the hilly Mohonk golf course, and others, like Home Farm and Spring Farm, have prominent places in the 85-mile Mohonk trail system.

The kitchen's recent focus on Hudson Valley farms aligns with "health and wellness and nature and all the things that emanate out of that," Mr. Gullickson said.

"Mohonk is very much founded on those principles," he continued.

Whether they featured local items or not, Mohonk's menus, some of which are displayed at the vast Barn Museum on the property, are a captivating chronicle of American cooking.

For supper in the 1890s, guests could order cornmeal mush and choose from 10 different kinds of cold meat, among them roast beef and tongue. (The story goes that Stokes's tavern was known to serve peacock, a dish Mohonk did not carry over to its own dining operation.) There also was a list of stomach-soothing waters, including Saratoga Vichy and Apollinaris from Germany.

In 1934, straight out of Escoffier, poached eggs Colbert (the recipe has them in a tartlet with béchamel). Diners could get a leg of veal with pan gravy in 1958 and, for a starter, jellied turkey bouillon.

In 1972: sautéed frog legs Provençal, creamed Welsh rabbit on a Holland rusk, and, in a gust of brand names, "Hollywood Diet Bread" and "Steamed Uncle Ben's Rice."

For those interested in how those dishes were prepared, a visit to the museum — Jim Clark, curator — is in order. On display are a swing churn for butter, a supersharp bread slicer that worked like a guillotine for gluten and a milkshake maker that really shook. ("You don't get a milk *shake* now," Mr. Clark said, hitting a Louis C. K. note. "You get a blend!")

My first visit to Mohonk was in 1987, when my wife and I celebrated our first anniversary on what we remember as a muddy May weekend. Our dinner orders have been lost to time, but we were so taken with the place — including the warmth of the longleaf-pine-walled main dining room — that we have returned on a number of occasions with our three children (first as grade-schoolers, then as grown-ups), a grandmother or a passel of friends.

Dinner was always dependable and, in recent years, became much more ambitious and delicious. It wasn't a thunderclap; true to Mohonk tradition, Mr. Palmeri plays a long game. (He also knows which flames to keep — he loves Thanksgiving at Mohonk — turkey, stuffing, gravy, cranberry sauce. “It really glows. I think it's us at our best, to be honest.”)

“Our goal is to have people come here for the food,” Mr. Palmeri said. “Someone who will remain nameless — they laughed at me — they said, you can't really think that, can you? My response was: How could you not expect me to?”

In late spring, Mr. Palmeri's menus had a honey-glazed local chicken with braised leeks; a pan-roasted Millbrook venison loin with a grand veneur (hunter's) sauce made with gooseberry jam; and, from Ms. Billups, a warm molasses cake with salted caramel and citrus meringue.

There was also house-made pappardelle pasta Bolognese, a dish that is close to Mr. Palmeri's heart.

Mr. Palmeri grew up in a large Italian family in Greendale, a suburb of Milwaukee; his mother, Mary, was an accomplished cook who read *Bon Appétit* and watched “The Galloping Gourmet.”

“I just fell in love with the passion that she had for food,” he said.

Which is why the pappardelle and a sauce made with 40 pounds of ground meat for each batch is a regular on the Mohonk menu, though Mr. Palmeri said there was some initial skepticism in the kitchen about offering a simple, if classic, pasta dish.

“Bolognese is something I've always done, it's one I grew up on,” he said. He paused for a beat and smiled. “Bolognese stays!”

It may not be farm-to-table but it is mom-to-table, and sometimes that's just as good.

If You Go

Mohonk Mountain House (1000 Mountain Rest Road, New Paltz, N.Y., mohonk.com) has rooms from \$660 in the summer, double occupancy (meals and activities are included). Chef's Table dinner is a supplement of \$155 per person.

Steve Reddicliffe is the deputy Travel editor for The New York Times.

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