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Dining Out: Fable

By Karin Edmondson

Mario, Daniel, Charlie, Thomas—weep! Their temples of haute cuisine, while housed in lofty aeries—literally, Thomas Keller’s Per Se floats above Central Park in the Time Warner Center and Charlie Trotter’s C shimmers incandescent atop an oceanside cliff in Los Cabos, Mexico—lack a sublime yet wildly esoteric element: the scent of fresh basil that inundates, positively invades the senses upon arriving at Fable, a new dining experience at Stone and Thistle Farm in Delaware County. Sun-warmed basil mingles with languid air that drifts from country fields the very moment I heave open the door to my decidedly un-green Forest Green 1970 Toronado and step out onto Tom and Denise Warren’s Stone and Thistle Farm. Two of the three servers—Ashley Briggs and Winsome Zinkievich (young lady neighbors of the Warrens)—stand, knee deep in the herb garden and snip basil, other herbs and edible flowers for the evening’s meal. Katey, the Warren’s eldest daughter and the third server, calls to them from Fable’s bluestone patio: “More, cut more!” Fable is farm to table dining. Literally, on-farm dining. As July’s Gourmet magazine states in one of three articles dedicated to The Farm: “the farmer has emerged as the object of every obsessive eater’s fixation, the personality to be trotted out by au courant restaurateurs.” Well, in the far-flung world of global gastronomy, there may be several chefs who’ve started farms or contracted with farms in order to supply their restaurants but, as Denise says: “There aren’t many farmers who’ve become chefs.” Delaware County is now firmly on the culinary map thanks to Fable. Farmer Tom leads guests on a 30 minute farm tour (optional—relaxing with a glass of wine or chilled lager on the patio is fine too) across the road that separates Fable—a modern concrete, wood, glass and stainless steel extension of the 1860’s white plank-board farmhouse—from the three-story barn, the farm pastures and the various goats, pigs, chicken and cattle. A solitary, adventurous Saanen goat follows the group of diners across the stream and up the dirt road to the sloping, verdant pasture that houses (for today) the moveable chicken coop full of Rhode Island Reds or



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Barred Rocks laying hens. A comment overheard: "This is free-range, right?" The Warren's chickens lend a new cache to the term free-range: the views from their current field encompass miles of Delaware county fields, dolloped with hills that gently slope and mound, pastoral images so lovely they might be the envy of any human or chicken. Dinner begins slightly after 7:00 pm as light—burnished and voluptuous from the setting sun—glows through the walls and windows and doors of glass, illuminating the spare, modern interior. Denise receives credit for conceiving of Fable (albeit after years of prompting from friends, neighbors and customers who've been asking her for recipes for their pastured meat products), although only after Tom designed the building, initially as a larger kitchen for their family. The Warrens had to get an architect's stamp on the plans but the architect made a big mistake so the space is higher and wider than it was intended—another inspiration for Fable. "I stood in the huge space and said, 'What is our family going to do with all this space?'" The design was inspired by the Friedman Residence in Charlottesville and the majority of the artisans are Delaware County locals. The bathroom walls and floors (and eventually the entrance way) are tiled in round rubber tiles that are modern, stylish and yet highly functional, perfect for easy washing, especially with the big drain in the floor so children, dogs, etc. can be hosed down. The dining space engages the outdoors with the concrete north wall built right into the hillside and welcomes inside the sunlight and dynamism of the weather with the east and west wall of windows.

Fable seats 24 folks at two large, sturdy wooden tables (boards from the farmhouse pantry were recycled). Table settings are colorful woven mats and napkins; centerpieces are pairs of smooth, flat fieldstones strewn with nasturtiums and highlighted by single votive candles. The six-foot fireplace is aglow not with logs (but will be in winter) but with a wrought iron candelabra of votives. The prix fixe menu (anywhere from \$40 to \$50 depending on season and ingredients) is three courses with an amuse-bouche, and there is only one seating per Saturday night. Opening night, following the champagne toast on the patio—Denise in a dress of vibrant, hot pink sunflowers and Tom barefoot in clean jeans and a tee shirt and having "washed the shit off my hands"—the amuse bouche was grilled bruschetta with fresh herbs, chèvre from Sherman Hill Farmstead in Franklin and roasted red peppers. A salad, fresh snipped, of greens with roasted shallots, golden beets—sweet marvels—and shaved hops cheese followed. Edible flowers—nasturtiums (taste like radish) and borage (sweet)—adorned the salad plates. The main course—poussins or squab chickens—were harvested (a polite, non-offensive way to say slaughtered) the day before. Herb-crust and glazed with lemon-balm (since no lemon trees are currently growing in Delaware County) honey, the poussins were encircled on the plates (a little too small for the generous portions) by garden peas—succulent bursts of sweetness—and summer squash and Beatrice mushrooms sautéed in garlic and fresh basil. Errant peas, escapees from crowded plates, dotted nearly every diner's table space. The vegetables were harvested not two hours before the meal. Adirondack Water—flat or sparkling—was served with the meal for those folks not quaffing beer or wine. Fable is awaiting their beer and wine license so, for now, you are welcome to bring your own beer or wine. When they do get their beer and wine license all beer will be organic or from local breweries and all wine will be organic. Denise baked the no-knead bread and the butter—glorious in creamy, flavorful vibrancy (better than anything any European country can churn)—came from Evan's Farmhouse in Norwich, New York. The dessert and, in my mind the most significant course of any meal and deserving of its own paragraph—Pavlova with fresh raspberries—nearly consumed the entire plate and melded crisp-yet bouffant vanilla meringue with voluptuous whipped cream (also Evan's Farmhouse) and the sweet-tart, minute orbs of raspberries—all of it drizzled with basil (!!) syrup. "We planned on picking wild raspberries for the dessert but the lack of rain slowed their growth and they were not ready to pick. The farmers market provided us with beautiful just-picked raspberries from John and Amanda Heller's Market Farms in Bainbridge." Strawberries are traditionally

used in Pavlovas but are decidedly less celebratory. Transported on euphoric waves of the Pavlova's sugar and sweet, I ask Denise if there is a way to whip cream from goat's milk (cream). Her response: "Goat milk is naturally homogenized, so you'd have to use a cream separator to get the cream out to make the butter. It is a time consuming process and therefore no one does it commercially. Cream separators are expensive so no one does it for home use either." Alas. The cooks that evening—Martha Frame Lynch and Mark Vamos—are long-time friends of the Warrens. Martha's love of cooking with seasonal, organic and local foods is the cornerstone of her successful catering business. Since the age of 13, Martha has been creating cuisine with a Mediterranean and French influence. She caters for private and corporate functions in New York City and throughout the region, including fundraising events for groups of 300 or more. From 1995 to 1998 she owned and managed a small cow dairy and launched two specialty products: Martha's Maple Syrup and Bittersweet October Marmalade (made with Concord grapes). Martha's future plans include opening Nepenthe, a farmhouse inn in East Meredith. Mark is a beekeeper. He just left his job as editor of Fast Company to become head of the business department at Southern Methodist University in Dallas and will be selling his home in NYC and moving to Dallas in August. His second home is just around the bend from Stone and Thistle Farm. "He is an incredible cook—so dedicated to the art that he brought his own knives, meat thermometer etc. to use while cooking. Mark will assist Martha over the summer and Mark and I will try to wing it alone to give Martha a break if she wants it. We are open to the idea of guest chefs. I would love to feature a guest chef once a month."

So, what happens to Fable once winters arrives? "Après Harvest means that we will make roasts, root vegetables, apple sauces, puddings, peasant breads, warm, comforting and cozy food," says Denise. "Fable is the next step in bringing the organic food we raise at Stone and Thistle Farm to the table for people to enjoy. This dining experience enables people to connect with their food and also with each other. The farm tour before the meal provides people with a look at the farm and where their food comes from. The menu is different every week. The challenge is to create a menu that celebrates the season—to use only food grown on our farm and organic, local food from our fellow farmers. Through Fable, I want to change the way people think about their food. I want people to think twice about buying asparagus from California in April. Why not wait a couple more months and buy local asparagus? Do people really need Kiwi fruit or artichokes? I want people to rethink their food shopping experience. Why not go to the farmers market first and the grocery store second? Why eat a tomato from Mexico in February when the only great tomato comes off the vine from our backyards?" Fable's menus change weekly according to what is in season in the garden and in the pasture. For example, the menu the following Saturday (absolutely sold out!) included: Country Pâté with Grilled Mushrooms, Tomato and Caramelized Onion Tart, Herb Crusted Pork Tenderloin with Roasted Baby Potatoes and Seared Green Beans with Garlic and, for dessert, Lemon Verbena Goat Milk Custard with Fresh Berries. Stone and Thistle Farm produces meadow-raised goat, lamb, chickens, turkeys, cows and pig so the entrée will vary and change accordingly. Fable also plans to eventually incorporate a more interactive aspect to their dining experience—folks might be able to pick their own greens or herbs for the salad. Fable plans to offer a family dinner at a lower price and serve family style to include as many people as they can in the farm to table dining experience. Fable is located at Stone and Thistle Farm at 1211 Kelso Road in East Meredith. Call 607 278 5800 or e-mail warren@stoneandthistlefarm.com for reservations. Check the Web site at www.stoneandthistlefarm.com for the weekly menus. Reservations are required. Call early as the dinners are selling out!

