

In Omaha, Farmers and Chefs Are Good Together

By STEVE
REDDICLIFFE



The bar at the Boiler Room. Credit Chris Machian for The New York Times

Choice Tables

Farm-to-table dining starts with the farm, so that's where this story will begin.

Consider the homely and humble sunchoke. At [Omaha](#) restaurants of a certain style — close to the land, in cooking and consciousness — it's something of a star. At the Grey Plume it's been the showcase attraction in a soup. The Boiler Room has a substantial sunchoke playbook; it's served roasted, or done as a confit, or cooked at high heat until it becomes a potent powder called a soil.

A lot of those chokes are grown by the Rhizosphere Farm in Missouri Valley, Iowa, 20 minutes from downtown Omaha. Matt and Terra Hall are the Rhizosphere farmers, and she is an unabashed sunchoke advocate.

"I love that they're crisp, kind of like a water chestnut — that's just a fun thing to eat as far as texture goes," she said on the phone recently. "And the taste is outstanding. It's a bit nutty."

There are other all-star ingredients, of course: the chicken from Plum Creek Farms near Burchard, Neb., for example, served by the Grey Plume, the Boiler Room and J. Coco. Dean Dvorak, who began Plum Creek with his wife, Amy, a decade ago, said Omaha's chefs deserve the credit for why his chicken stands out, but will allow that the fact that "we don't do anything to it" also may have something to do with its appeal. "You're just getting a chicken that's how a

chicken should taste,” he said.

And the pork? The pork is pretty much required eating, thanks largely to Travis Dunekacke. His TD Niche Pork in Elk Creek provides memorably delicious meat to a number of Omaha restaurants (the hogs, mostly Berkshire and Red Wattle, are raised outdoors, without antibiotics).

Like Ms. Hall and Mr. Dvorak, he is excited about what has happened in the city’s restaurants since 2009, when Paul Kulik, a chef, opened the Boiler Room in the smartly preserved Old Market district.

“I think Nebraska, as far as I can tell, is the leader in local food and farm-to-table,” Mr. Dunekacke said, “especially when you take into account our population. I just think it’s a reflection of the work ethic of the people and the agricultural infrastructure and heritage that’s here, still here, that’s maybe disappeared in a lot of places.”

That respect for tradition is also apparent on the premises of some of the city’s most inviting restaurants, every one of which offers at least a tip of the hat to the past (sometimes that hat is a bowler, and sometimes it’s a ball cap); several are housed in buildings on the National Register of Historic Places.

The chefs and owners tend to be homegrown as well, but that’s not necessarily what draws the farmers to these tables, Ms. Hall said. “When you grow food like we do and then you go in and see how excited they are by the food, it’s pretty amazing.”



The Boiler Room’s grass-fed lamb with gnocchi. Credit Chris Machian for The New York Times

The Boiler Room

With its two metal-heavy levels, the Boiler Room puts you in mind of a movie — Chaplin’s “Modern Times,” with its gears and assembly lines, maybe, or Martin Scorsese’s “Hugo,” with its clockworks and anaconda-size pipes.

And then it hits you that what it really evokes is the performance of the title song in “Jailhouse Rock,” in which Elvis Presley’s Vince Everett and his fellow inmates do some memorably kinetic dancing on a two-floor prison set.

There were no jailbirds at the Boiler Room (which actually was the boiler room for the Bemis Bag complex, dating to 1896), but there was plenty of energy, much of it coming from the accomplished kitchen, led by Mr. Kulik and Tim Nicholson, the chef de cuisine.

But a good portion of it is due to the dining-room staff, personified by [Timothy Siragusa](#), the waiter for our table. Mr. Siragusa is an actor, playwright, artist and photographer, and it seems just about everyone in town knows him.

At the Boiler Room, he is an excellent choreographer — telling a funny story about performing with a tie that lights up and a small shovel (“At least I’m not going to be nude”), recommending a nimble Schloss Gobelsburg sparkling wine from Austria (the list is extensive), explaining the provenance of some of the etched glassware and enlisting the bartender, Colin Breen, to suggest Scotches from a solid list.

And then, when the food was on the table, he made himself scarce (in a good way). There were brandade beignets, an artful balance of mild (the cod within) and zesty (a tonnato sauce made with Calabrian chile and shaved fennel); tender tortellini filled with rabbit and pumpkin, crunchy pumpkin seeds on top, a drizzle of pumpkin oil pulling it all together; a strip loin (the breed is Piedmontese) with deep beef flavor matched with meaty braised calypso beans; and that Plum Creek chicken, served with tangy mustard spaetzle, round Paris Market carrots and a smidgen of that sunchoke soil.

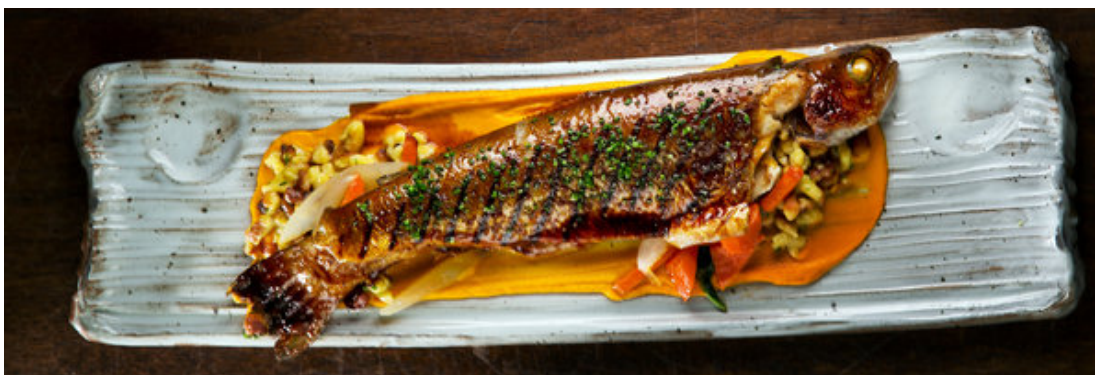
To finish, there was a chocolate pavé animated by Espellette pepper, and a terrific Gouda from the Dutch Girl Creamery (Charuth van Beuzekom is the cheesemaker) in Lincoln.

We realized we had been there for almost three hours, and told Mr. Siragusa we didn’t mean to shut the place down.

“If you see me twirling my keys, then you know it’s time,” he said.

So we finished the Scotch.

The Boiler Room, 1110 Jones Street; boilerroomomaha.com. Entrees from \$28.



Steelhead trout at the Grey Plume. Credit Chris Machian for The New York Times

The Grey Plume

Let’s talk trout, specifically the steelhead that is atop Clayton Chapman’s entree list at the Grey Plume in the Midtown Crossing neighborhood.

It’s a beauty — a roasted whole fish, basted with a fish jus, burnished skin the color of a just-poured espresso.

(A note from Dave Claridge, the general manager of Blue Valley Aquaculture in Sutton, whose fine trout this is. He would like to remind everyone to please eat that skin. “It’s not only edible,” he said. “To me if you’re not getting a bite of skin with each bite of flesh you’re missing the boat and every chef will agree.”)

Just as impressive was a sampler of pork from TD Niche: fresh and andouille sausage, well-salted pork belly, succulent tenderloin. A sweet potato purée made it lush; roasted Mountain Rose apples supplied a tart counterpoint.

Crisp fries cooked in duck fat came with a fried egg (nice), and for an additional charge (\$8), cubes of house-cured pastrami (even nicer). Gnocchi was made with goat cheese from the Honey Creek Creamery in Iowa; a honeycomb is an option with that (\$4); you would be smart to exercise it. A green salad featured creamy feta and a fennel meet-up (fronds among the greens and a dab of verdant house-made fennel jam on the plate).

In addition to its estimable food, the Grey Plume is also known for a laudable commitment to sustainability. The floor in the contemporary dining room is made of reclaimed barnwood, bread plates are from old wine bottles. The restaurant grows some of the herbs it uses, and emphasizes its commitment to local farmers.

That kind of rigor made the service all the more perplexing. No one seemed to be working in the entry area when we arrived at a prime dinner hour, and the situation did not improve once we were seated.

I asked if we could reserve for dessert a duck-fat doughnut listed on the bar menu; despite assurances, it never came. The waiter secured a wine recommendation but was unsure of the price, which provided a certain suspense-novel aspect to the evening. When we were done with our main courses, he cleared two of four places and then disappeared.

Ten minutes later I walked to the front of the restaurant and asked a manager type if someone could perhaps finish the job. As much as I loved the trout, I didn't want to marry it.

To her credit, she made it so. Desserts followed, including an inspired rye vs. rye production: devil's food cake with caraway powder and a sauce with Templeton Rye whiskey.

No doughnut, though. I'm going back for that (and if I have to thoroughly enjoy another trout or pork platter while I'm there, so be it).

The Grey Plume, 220 South 31st Avenue; thegreyplume.com. Entrees from \$24.



Lamb chops with harissa at J. Coco. Credit Chris Machian for The New York Times

J. Coco

It seems right that Jennifer Coco's restaurant is in a building in the Dundee-Happy Hollow section of town that once was home to two well-remembered grocery stores — Ben Newman's, starting in the 1920s, and then Wohlner's,

which took over the space in the 1940s (the latter has relocated to Midtown Crossing).

Ms. Coco has some grocery history of her own; her great-grandfather was an owner of Kotera & Sloup Staple and Fancy Groceries in the city (he was the Kotera), a photograph of which is prominently displayed in J. Coco, the restaurant she opened in 2012 after winning praise at the Flatiron Cafe downtown.

In a sleek space with a marble-topped bar and big windows that look out on Leavenworth Street, Ms. Coco serves a wide-ranging menu with a focus on emphatic flavors: savory pork belly in steamed buns made in the restaurant, tender lamb chops dressed with harissa sauce (tzatziki is an accompaniment), pork tenderloin rubbed with coffee and cocoa and served with a chorizo-cornbread stuffing and a butternut squash sauce spiked with chipotle.

There's a whaleboat-shaped olive plate with both fried and marinated editions; drag those through the citrusy hummus and you'll be really happy. Put some of that hummus on the house-made pita, same result. Deftly cooked sea bass got a lift from a ginger and soy sauce.

There are solid classic cocktails to start — including a Martinez with Old Tom gin and dry vermouth from Ransom — and a wine list that included a Domaine du Salvard sauvignon blanc from Cheverny, suggested by our waitress, Catrina Hotz, that went well with everything.

The only demerit to the evening was the seating, in high chairs at a bar-style table at the back of the restaurant. (There are traditional tables upfront.)

Still, the staff is so cheerful that you are inclined to forget you have lost some feeling in your legs. When I inquired about a cappuccino to pair with a crunchy coffee crème brûlée, Ms. Hotz said that J. Coco did not offer it but that she would be happy to zip through a hallway and get one from Legends, the adjacent coffee bar and comic book store.

That's old-time neighborhood grocery store service.

J. Coco, 5203 Leavenworth Street; jcocomaha.com. Dinner entrees from \$17.



Chicken chow mein, left, and sweet-and-sour pork at King Fong Cafe. Credit Chris Machian for The New York Times

King Fong Cafe

This is an entry that really is about the tables. And booths, chandeliers, silk embroideries on the walls and a rather mysterious third floor.

The restaurant, King Fong Cafe, has been at 315 South 16th Street (or, as the numerals over the front door have it, 315½) since the early 1920s. (It opened in either 1920 or 1921, making it the oldest restaurant in Omaha in a tight race with the steakhouse Johnny's Café, owned by the Kawa family since 1922.)

It's a remarkable place, a dining diorama — with eggplant-size egg rolls.

Almost everything is as it was when it opened: the teakwood tables with mother-of-pearl inlays, the four ornate chandeliers, the ornamental woodwork carved to resemble a golden-hued aviary, dark wooden booths that seem safe for secrets.

Everything was imported from China, according to Nancy Huey, the president of King Fong. "Must have been a big boat, huh?" she said.

(The stunning Tiffany windows, however, predate King Fong, installed for a lavish, ambitious and short-lived restaurant opened in 1908 that was called Hanson's Cafe but was popularly known as Cafe Beautiful.)

The menu is its own kind of time warp: chow mein, chop suey and those egg rolls, filled with shrimp, pork, cabbage and peanut butter. My mother-in-law, who made road trips to King Fong with friends when she was a high school student in Lincoln in the late 1940s, was not unhappy with her chow mein. "I like celery," she offered, because she is an upbeat Nebraskan.

If it's not already clear, you're here for the history, not the food. Stick with the egg foo young and the fried rice and you'll be O.K.

The building opened in 1899, when it was occupied by a furrier. The Chin family started King Fong and ran it for many years, and the Hueys have been in charge for the past five decades. Jim Huey, Nancy's brother, is the friendly presence at the cash register. Ms. Huey said there is not another generation that will take it over: "Oh, no, this is it." (The building is now owned by the film director Alexander Payne, who has a place in Omaha, and his friend Ann Beeder, who grew up in the city.)

Scott E. Schlarbaum, an Omaha native who is now a forestry professor at the University of Tennessee, has done considerable research on the building and the restaurant. He can report that in the Cafe Beautiful days there was a grand staircase to the second floor (somewhat steep stairs now lead to King Fong on that level; the ground floor is vacant), and that an order of chop suey at King Fong in the 1920s was 35 cents.

But even with the hours he put in, he said, he was never able to persuade the Hueys to let him see the third floor, which has been closed since the 1950s.

Was it once, as legend has it, a speakeasy?

"Some people say that," Ms. Huey said with a laugh. "I wasn't here then."

King Fong Cafe, 315½ 16th Street; 402-341-3437. Entrees from \$5.85.

