



Green-Market Dorks

MADO AND THE MAKING OF A NEIGHBORHOOD RESTAURANT

By Michael Nagrant

“We’re the green-market dorks,” says Allison Levitt, chef and co-owner with her husband Rob of the just-opened Bucktown restaurant, mado. Levitt’s referring to the band of chefs who get up at dawn most every Wednesday and Saturday to scour the Green City Market looking for the best responsibly grown food for their restaurant kitchens.

These chefs aren’t who you think they are. There are very few big-time local chefs. Most of those guys drop by occasionally, but usually only for a photo-op. The real “green-market dorks” are more likely line cooks, sous chefs and young restaurateurs, a group of inspired, hungry unknowns.

What these folks do is generally unsung. The expectation these days is that all good restaurants operate on a farm-to-table principle, and the idea of a chef going down to a green market is given. This is a mythology.

Many chefs in this city, even the ones who say otherwise, get most of their produce and meat at the back door of their restaurants shipped directly from vendors in cardboard boxes and portioned cryovaced plastic. That’s not to say the stuff they are using isn’t high-quality, often it is, sometimes even from the same farmers who are at the market.

But the green-market dorks are a special breed. These folks seek the best of the best, by looking through everything that’s available, instead of what’s given to them. They pickle and preserve this bounty, so they can serve these quality ingredients even through the heart of a Midwestern winter. They forge relationships with heirloom and artisanal farmers, buying whole animals and making their own charcuterie from those animals. Many of their methods would be familiar to the chuckwagon set, the prairie matriarch or the early twentieth-century Italian grandmother. The green-market dorks are smart business people, but the bottom line is almost always in service to the quality of the food they serve.

And by this definition, Allison and Rob Levitt might just be king and queen of the “green-market dorks.”

BUT THE LEVITTS WOULD PROBABLY NEVER ACCEPT SUCH ROYAL MONIKERS. In a world of celebrity chefs and culinary-school students and young line cooks dreaming of Food Network stardom, they’re truly just out to train great cooks and provide a community gathering place and a great meal made from the best-tasting and most responsible products available.

Rob says, “The world doesn’t need chefs, people in tall hats telling them what to do. My mom is a learning-disabilities teacher. She was involved in one of the longest teacher strikes in Illinois history because of the threat of losing benefits. She should be making money. You’ve got chefs driving a Mercedes and owning three houses. Why? Because they can cook? My mom can cook. It’s not like I’m doing the greatest thing ever.”

Two weeks ago, standing in their newly acquired restaurant space, the old Barcello’s Pizza on Milwaukee, watching them deal with a leaky water meter, a drippy ceiling, a burst pipe, warped flooring and a kitchen covered with thirty-one years of grime, the beginnings of their new Bucktown restaurant, mado, was anything but royal.

Cleaning the space was like performing an architectural dig, with each unearthed layer of old Saran Wrap and detritus a clue to the history of a kitchen. The chef’s office was full of icons of the Virgin Mary and a drained bottle of Mezcal with a worm on the bottom.

A week after visiting the unheated “raw” space, I return to find Rob, clad in a t-shirt depicting Charles Mingus shrouded in a phantasmic cloud of cigarette smoke, and grease-spattered jeans rolled up to reveal a “Billy Jean”-era Michael Jackson combo of white socks tucked in to a pair of black clogs. He works the grit away from a drawer slide with the flat side of a screwdriver, while Alli scours stainless-steel prep drawers. Her parents drove in from North Carolina and are helping with some tile

and grout work and dining-room clean-up. Danielle Eiseman, a former line cook under Rob at Fiddlehead Café, pitches in as well. She's given up on the cooking industry and isn't going to work at mado, but as she says, "Rob is like a big brother to me. I would do anything to help him and Alli out, especially when it is to help them realize their dream."

Two days before, while trying to light the pilot on a vintage conveyor pizza oven the size and shape of an old Bluebird school bus, a ball of flame engulfed Allison claiming part of the left side of her front hairline and half an eyebrow. Their oven guy told Rob that his sous chef, Chris Turner, who sports a forelock Mohawk, should be responsible for lighting the oven from now on, because "he doesn't have any hair."

THE LEVITTS CULINARY LIFE HAS ALWAYS BEEN A LITTLE INAUSPICIOUS. Rob was a music major at the University of Illinois in Champaign and at 21, he came relatively late to cooking. He was a tenor saxophonist, a devotee of John Coltrane, who'd fill his practice books with scales and exercises, forming a six-hour daily regimen. He gigged on weekends at weddings and bar mitzvahs in Chicago, but needed another job to pay to the rent, so he started as a dishwasher at a local hippie grocery.

As a dishwasher, Rob was meticulous. The cooks used to throw their dishes wherever they wanted, but when Rob started, he created a hierarchy of organization for plates, small utensils and other serveware. One afternoon, a prep cook disappeared, and his boss handed him an apron and a knife and told him to work.

A roommate's father turned out to be a chef at Le Titi de Paris in Arlington Heights and got him a stage. A line cook dropped out while he was staging, and the only guys there to replace the cook were Rob and a Kendall College extern who bowed to the pressure of working the frenzied line. Rob stepped up. He says, "I was like, 'Show me what to do,' and we banged out 150 covers that night." Pierre Pollin, the chef at the time, told Rob he didn't have a place for him, but that he didn't want to lose him based on that performance and gave him a job. Rob left Le Titi after a year to attend the Culinary Institute of America in Hyde Park, New York.

Allison started out as a self-described "granola-girl" and studied environmental biology in the SUNY college system before realizing she "didn't want to wear a white coat and work in a lab all day." She made the switch to the Culinary Institute of America where she started with a class on gastronomy, which required some writing. As a former science major, she hadn't written a paper in years, so went to see a tutor to proofread her work. That tutor was Rob.

As a writing tutor, Rob endured a slew of badly written reviews of CIA cafeteria meals punctuated by hyperbole and cheap adjectives like "good" and "delicious" from his schoolmates. Allison's well-written paper was his salvation. The next day after reading her paper, Rob was delivering bread when he noticed her coming out of class. He hurried downstairs and dropped the bread off, and ran back up and "accidentally" bumped into her and, as he says, "I actually summoned up the balls to ask her out."

Their first date at a Barnes & Noble coffee counter was a long way from the fair-trade Metropolis coffee they'll serve at mado, but it ended up with them talking through the evening on the banks of the Hudson River.

While at CIA, Rob took a job at Park Avenue Café in New York City, which proved to be his most influential culinary experience. The executive chef Neil Murphy was a hard-charging old-school guy with serious chops. If you put a plate up on the pass that was under-seasoned, Murphy would allegedly call a cook over and get really close, until you could almost feel his breath, and then throw a handful of salt and your face and say, "taste your food." One afternoon, Levitt called in sick. When he came back the next day, Murphy allegedly said, "You know who worked your station last night? I did, and I kicked ass." Some cooks might have bristled at this old-school-chef behavior, but Murphy's leadership transformed Levitt into a guy devoted to cooking not as job, but as a lifestyle.

While Rob worked at Park Avenue, Allison took a job at Gramercy Tavern in New York working under the celebrated pastry chef Claudia Fleming. Under Fleming she developed a style grounded in economy, rustic presentations and subtle repetition of flavors that celebrate seasonal ingredients. A typical plate might be fresh raspberries paired simply with whipped vanilla panna cotta and almond pizelle. Or she might use orange flower water and orange zest to enhance the inherent citrus notes in a moscato sabayon.

The Levitts eventually moved to Chicago (Rob grew up in the north suburbs), and worked at a variety of spots including La Tache, North Pond, Marché, 312 Chicago and Uncommon Ground. Most nights when Rob finished his shift at 312 Chicago, he'd head over to Marché for a drink or a snack before picking up Allison and heading home. One night, while sitting at the bar, he noticed the kitchen was in the weeds, frantically trying to catch up. He went in the back and saw the manager washing dishes. He grabbed an apron, stood in his rolled up jeans and flip-flops and washed dishes until they got caught up. Rob said, "The kitchen needed help, I would have been an asshole if I just sat there at the bar with my drink. That's what cooks do."

That's not entirely true. Observing kitchens, I've seen chefs pull foul-smelling fish from their prep drawer and cook it anyway, when all they had to do was walk ten feet to grab a fresh fillet from a lowboy. I've seen sloppily plated presentations shoved up on the pass in the heat of service. There's also a cover-your-ass mentality in kitchens, your station and nothing more. Rob is not that kind of chef.



mado, 1647 North Milwaukee, (773)342-2340

COMING FROM FINE-DINING ROOTS, you'd expect the Levitts would be opening up a four-star palace outfitted with Limoges china and Riedel crystal. But Rob says, "During the foie gras ban, I started thinking about how the city was working so hard to ban this rare luxury ingredient, when all the grocery stores were selling factory-farmed boneless, skinless chicken breasts. Most of the people at my income level and below are feeding their children this stuff. I wanted to find a way to give those people something casual where they could get an affordable panini and glass of wine, where the panini was made from homemade pancetta from a whole pig or from chickens a few days old that are organic or responsibly raised."

It's not just chef-preening either. Rob risked his livelihood based on this commitment in the past. Prior to opening mado, he worked as the executive chef at Fiddlehead Café, where the own-

ers seemed to share his vision of providing the best available seasonal product year round. But during his tenure things started to change. He was asked why he was making green salad from fresh heads of lettuce, rather than the pre-mixed stuff.

Levitt said one night he got a great Gunthorp-farm pork shoulder that he turned into fresh sausages with black pepper and rosemary. He served them with a warm salad of toasted faro, roasted root vegetables and grilled radicchio, and charged twenty dollars. The owner allegedly asked him why they were charging so much for sausage. He said, "Because it's organic, was killed a few days ago and it's delicious." It was suggested that maybe Rob needed to use cheaper pork. Levitt says, "So I took the sausages off the menu, gave it to the staff, and put on a pork chop, and thought, 'Great, now we're just another restaurant with another pork chop.'" He quit soon thereafter. He doesn't begrudge the owners of Fiddlehead, and says he understood that their money was on the line and not his.

Free of these types of constraints, the Levitts' vision behind mado reflects the early nineties DIY spirit of Wicker Park, rather than the hipster mag mile of boutiques hawking \$200 shoes that it has become. Their plans remind me of Avec crossed with Lula Café, a spot to grab affordable rustic fare in a casual no-fuss setting that's committed to the farm and the community.

Mado refers to Marie-Louise Point, the wife of Fernand Point, chef/owner of La Pyramide in Vienne, France. La Pyramide is one of France's most legendary restaurant, a three-star Michelin classic that trained chefs like Paul Bocuse, Alain Chapel and the Troisgros brothers, the folks who created nouvelle cuisine and

the chefs who inspired modern American chefs like Charlie Trotter and Thomas Keller.

Though it was a fine-dining temple, La Pyramide was a real "chez," a home where customers became cherished family. The lore is that the restaurant did not really take off until Fernand married Mado, and no new dish would ever leave the kitchen without Mado's approval. According to the cookbook "Ma Gastronomie," which chronicles the restaurant, Mado "remembers tastes as a musician remembers melodies; she was able to point out the subtle difference between success and failure." After Fernand died, Mado managed the restaurant and maintained its three-star status for another thirty years.

For the Levitts, Fernand and Mado's symbiotic existence represents their own partnership. Rob says, "You can call me the savory chef or her the pastry chef, but that doesn't matter. This

is *our* restaurant, our house. Everything that goes on the menu has to be something we'll both eat."

Allison's also going back to her environmental roots, making sure they use low-chemical-emission paints in the dining room, green cleaning products (after the initial clean-up), recycled paper for their business correspondence and filtered, not bottled, water. They're also eschewing printed food menus in favor of two large wall-mounted chalkboards.

There's a no-chef's-coat rule in the kitchen. Rob wears a t-shirt and a faded New York Yankees cap to cook. He says, "There was a time I wanted to wear an Egyptian cotton Bragard jacket and a long bistro apron, but that's an old-fashioned French mentality. Now, I just want to make good food and I just don't need a uniform to do that." He adds, "That's at least fifty bucks a month I'd be spending on uniforms, which I could be spending on better food products."

Except for beef, the Levitts plan to buy whole animals and butcher portions of meat in-house. This is important because, with most restaurants buying portioned loins and chops, farmers are sometimes left with less desirable cuts that occasionally end up on compost heaps.

These are the kind of cuts that Rob relishes. As he says, "One of the reasons I get up in the morning is to make charcuterie." Rob plans to cure his own pancetta, guanciale (pigs jowl), country pate and testa, a sausage made from the head of a pig.

Rob does have to make some compromises. He says, "I can buy a whole cow, but we just don't have the space. I still want to have a beef dish, maybe a hanger steak or shanks and short ribs in the winter, but that'll be rare. There won't be a filet. You can go to any downtown steakhouse for a thirty-seven-ounce filet pumped up on steroids if that's what you want."

The rest of the menu will be made along the philosophy that "the restaurant has an Italian grandmother with distant relatives from Spain, North Africa and southern France."

The pastas will all be homemade, except for a bucatini, because Rob doesn't have a pasta extruder. There will be rotisserie chicken, vegetable antipasti, wood-grilled meats and fish and rustic crudos. Though he doesn't really believe in signature dishes, Levitt's especially proud of his porchetta, a rib section of loin and belly meat slathered in roasted fennel and garlic puree, black pepper and chopped rosemary, that gets rolled up and roasted on a spit.

Rob also eschews high-end chef tricks like blanching and shocking which provide a neon-green hue to those greens on your plate. He says, "You think some old Italian grandmother is heating up a big boiling pot of salted water for her vegetables. She's probably using a coal-fired oven and cooking beans in a bit of olive oil and salt in the hills of Tuscany."

He adds, "I'd rather slow-cook my broccoli and get a good caramelization. So yes, I'm sacrificing pristine greenness to have my greens taste fabulous."

When I first interviewed Allison last year, she talked about a dream of providing customers with a good bowl of seasonal berries and homemade whipped cream, something that she'd been unable to do working for others because of the simplicity. At mado, she's already scheming up ideas like giving customers a fresh peach, or a Clementine and high-quality chocolate, as desserts. It's a testament to the fact that most people never see the quality of product she and Rob find at the markets and she understands sometimes you just don't want to get in the way of quality.

Of course, they'll be plenty of finished desserts, including blancmange, or a whipped panna cotta with two different types of caramel, topped with candied hazelnuts. She's most excited by the idea that she no longer has to serve dessert sampler platters as she has in the past.

She says, "I think that if a 'chef' comes up with a dish [pastry or savory] the components of that dish have been chosen to go together well and make a well-balanced tasty thing. Once you

start putting multiple dishes on one plate things just get messy. I don't want to eat plum tart smushed together with banana cake and pistachio ice cream."

She adds, "I also think that it's funny how a dessert platter seems pretty acceptable to most people but you wouldn't find entrees piled up on one plate like that... unless you're at the Country Buffet."

The dining room at mado is outfitted with a communal, old wooden farmhouse table with a steel stripe down the center. The Levitts expect this will be the gathering place for their monthly family dinners featuring whole-roasted goose with potatoes cooked in the goose fat drippings or a whole-roasted pig.

THREE NIGHTS BEFORE OPENING, I DROP BY THE RESTAURANT to see how preparations for a "family and friends" pre-opening meal are going. Two blocks away from the restaurant, walking down Milwaukee, applewood smoke lingers in the air, and it's coming from a stack on the mado roof. Walking in the restaurant, I see Allison applying a last bit of beige paint. All of the leaks and grime are a memory. The citrus and oil tang of Murphy's Oil Soap mingles with the campfire vibe of the kitchen smoke, and the wooden floors glint under mod, exposed halogen fixtures. There's an onyx pig proudly displayed on the bar, and the work of Rob's father, a visual artist, hangs on the wall.

Sous chef Chris Turner hands out cold, smoked, spicy lamb ribs like lollipops to well-wishers throughout the afternoon, and Eiseman segments blood oranges while Poison blares on a nearby boombox. Bret Michaels croons "And give me something to believe in..." Turner tells me how he's a industrial-music lover and looks forward to plugging in his iPod and rocking out to Ministry when he gets hammered with orders during service. Allison brews coffee, while Rob rolls out a batch of fresh silky tagliatelle. The rotisserie's stocked and the wood-fired grill is stoked. A restaurant is born.

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