



Oh, Pioneers!

An award-winning, über-seasonal chef from the suburbs joins forces with Chicago's hottest restaurant group for delicious results. | *By Michael Nigrant | Photography by Anthony Tablier |*

Laura Ingalls Wilder is my homegirl. As a kid, I often snuck a flashlight under the sheets and read *Little House on the Prairie* books for hours after my parents had gone to bed. I can still imagine the oily tang of freshly laid tar paper on the Ingalls' lean-to cabin or the coolness of the mud walls from the dugout next to Plum Creek.

Though I was a preppy white boy from the suburbs of Detroit, the travails of a pioneer girl provided a fascinating historical anthropology. I vividly remember lusting for the Ingalls' dinner table, loaded with gravy-slathered chicken, baked beans larded with pork and golden-crust blackbird pie. I would literally fall asleep and dream about that kind of food.

But up until about seven years ago, this type of super-seasonal rustic food was the province of a few elite chefs, mostly of the Alice Waters' school. The style of cooking really hit Chicago after chef Paul Kahan headed out to California to try Waters' cuisine. He returned inspired and opened Blackbird shortly thereafter.

In 2004 a cook named Paul Virant, who once worked at Blackbird, launched Vie in the suburb of Western

Springs. A fan of French regional cooking, Virant made sausages with his grandfather's stuffer, canned more jam than Smucker's and pickled local farm vegetables like a Vlasic heir. Here was the guy who could get me in touch with the tasty side of Ingalls' log cabin canon.

Vie quickly became one of the best reasons to venture out of the city and earned Virant a *Food & Wine* Best New Chef nod in 2007. But with so many excellent Chicago restaurants, making that trek wasn't always a priority.

Thankfully, Boka Restaurant Group owners Kevin Boehm and Rob Katz tapped Virant to helm their new incarnation of Perennial, aka Perennial Virant, across the street from Virant's hangout, the venerable Green City Market. Though it seemed like an odd fit, this melding of high-profile restaurateurs and the low-key jar star certainly got the food world talking.

The new Perennial Virant—with its stark gray palette, string lights and assortment of large potted trees—looks like a mashup of the back porch of a Martha's Vineyard shack and a greenhouse. Reinforcing the beach feel, the picnic-style communal tables are

Perennial Virant

RATING ★★

1800 N. Lincoln Ave.,
312.981.7070

What the stars mean:

★ = fair, some noteworthy qualities;
★★ = good, above average;
★★★ = very good, well above norm;
★★★★ = excellent, among the area's best;
★★★★★ = world-class, extraordinary in every detail. Reviews are based on multiple visits. Ratings reflect the reviewer's overall reaction to food, ambiance and service.

HOURS *Mon.-Wed. 5-10PM,
Thu.-Sun. 5-11PM; brunch
Sat.-Sun. 10AM-2:30PM*

WHAT TO WEAR *Khakis and Ralph Lauren polos for the guys, gingham sun dresses for the ladies*

WHAT TO ORDER *Crispy Carnaroli rice and Brunkow Cheese curds, the Parisienne gnocchi and the Templeton rye panna cotta*

WHAT TO KNOW *The house-baked bread is made with grains from Heritage Prairie Farm and barley malt from Goose Island Beer Co.*

WHO GOES *Old Town residents and locavores*

WHAT IT COSTS *Small plates \$7-\$11, medium plates \$8-\$17, large plates \$15-\$27, desserts \$8*

SEASONS GREETINGS Clockwise from top left: A canning-jar-inspired fixture in the dining room; chef/partner Paul Virant; Carnaroli rice with Brunkow Cheese curds. Below: Klug Farm strawberry tart with goat's milk gelato



outfitted with flickering candles that throw their light against jars of jams and pickles along the wall. The only thing left décor-wise from the old Perennial is the gorgeous patio trellis, the perfect spot for a weekend brunch featuring French toast with seasonal berries or gooey cinnamon rolls.

The clientele, as in the early days of Perennial, is an assortment of one-shoulder-tunic-top-wearing blondes and Old Town's rich eccentrics: men clad in camo-cargo pants and crocodile penny loafers. Replace the plush high-back seats with Adirondack chairs and throw down a few American flag blankets and you'd have a Tommy Hilfiger magazine centerfold. Not that there's anything wrong with that; it's just that the place is almost too clean.

Then again, this starkness is the perfect complement to Virant's simple plates. Virant confronts pristine seasonal produce like it's an 18-wheeler bearing down a mountain pass. That is to say, he gets the hell out of the way and lets it rule his kitchen. There are no chemicals, no lasers and not even a drop of liquid pectin in his kitchen.

Perfection for Virant is a small plate of fresh spring peas, pea shoots and shaved curls of feta dewy with a sheen of a luscious bacon-bit-studded vinaigrette.



Unfortunately his commitment to seasonality means this dish was off the menu in a matter of weeks. In fact, half the menu—divided into small, medium and large plates—had changed by my second visit. Don't fret. There are a few stalwarts, including Virant's modern riff on mozzarella sticks with gooey, caramelized, crispy Carnaroli rice and Brunkow Cheese curd planks.

But in this type of simplicity there is no place to hide. And so, minor errors like slightly dry rabbit sausage poking out of an otherwise well-made pierogi or an unsalted hunk of beef belly paired with wilted mustard greens feel like unmitigated disasters.

On a second visit, though, feather-light gnocchi glides across my tongue. A tangy fried green tomato is supplemented by mouth-puckering pickled snap peas and nuggets of crispy tasso ham. The cocktails, as at other Boka Restaurant Group spots, are balanced and inventive.

A soothing spring daiquiri of rum, honey, allspice and a touch of earthy porcini (yep, mushrooms) is the perfect foil to the salty tasso. For dessert, pastry chef Kady Yon's cloud-like nougat glace bobs in a pond of bracing rhubarb consommé poured tableside. Except for the oil slick on the kale chips and a grainy topcoat on some whitefish brandade, it's almost a perfect meal. Even the sweet-spicy corn nuts bar snack is killer—I want a bag for the next White Sox game.

I haven't said much about service, and that's pretty much because it was sort of non-existent on the first visit. While the second time around it felt like I was dealing with a team of overeager interns hopped up on coffee.

Ultimately, though, the grace of the food trumps any lack in the service. Virant's dishes are so pure that you don't have to spend five minutes deconstructing them. You just eat. But because it's so effortless, you almost miss the brilliance. It's like listening to Chet Baker and making out with the most beautiful girl in the world. It's easy to get caught in the rapture of the lady and push Chet to the background. But, just as he works through "My Funny Valentine," consciousness

kicks in. You forget the girl for a second and think, Damn! This guy's pipes are the closest I'll get to hanging with angels, or in Virant's case the finest of pioneer cooks. ■

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JAR HEAD Above: Virant's canned products. Clockwise from top left: Getting ready for service; the bar area; whole wheat socca with shaved spring vegetables and wheat berries