

FROM THE FARM TO THE POND

A 'FRESH' LOOK | North Pond restaurant staff gets up-close view of food they prepare, serve



Bruce Sherman (left), executive chef and partner in North Pond restaurant, laughs as he hands out fresh sweet corn to his employees after Willi Lehner, cheesemaker and owner of Bleu Mont Dairy, picks it fresh from his garden during the staff's recent tour of farms that supply the produce used at the restaurant. | MICHAEL NAGRANT~PHOTOS FOR THE SUN-TIMES



ABOVE: Fresh sweet corn is right off the stalk from Willi Lehner's garden at Bleu Mont Dairy. **BELOW:** A selection of heirloom tomatoes are freshly picked from the vine and cut up for dinner at Shooting Star farms in Mineral Point, Wis.



North Pond sous chef Danny Grant (right) and bartender Tom Hogan pick fresh thyme at Shooting Star.

BY MICHAEL NAGRANT

For many fine-dining workers, sunrise is a theoretical concept.

Their backs hammered by unforgiving restaurant floors and brows sweltered by the heat of kitchen ovens, the early morning is usually spent tending to wounds or slumbering off shift-ending celebratory drinks. And yet, just before 7 a.m. on a recent Monday, their only day off, most of the North Pond restaurant team has invaded a Starbucks on Irving Park Road.

They haven't vacated their resting standards. And if there's any question, one need only glance at executive chef Bruce Sherman, whose flowing rock-star-like tresses, still wet from a morning shower, rest just above a T-shirt that declares "Closed Mondays."

Rather, it's that the North Pond team's commitment to a greater standard has trumped all. They are gathered for a trip to Wisconsin to make a connection to the farmers and artisans who tend and grow the ingredients they use at the restaurant. As Rob Essenburg, a North Pond cook, says later in the day, "Any cook wants to feel the connection to their food. At least a good cook does."

The gathering point belies a day of fording pastoral lands and meeting fervent farmers. Our first stop, Bleu Mont Dairy in Blue Mounds, Wis., is so antithetical to the corporate ideals of Starbucks that cheesemaker Willi Lehner powers his farmstead entirely via solar power and a wind generator. Lehner generates enough power to send some back to the energy company, though he says, "I did it to make a statement, plus it's really fun to watch your electric meter go backward."

Lehner's statements begin with power consumption but end with his cheeses. His muslin-bandaged, English-inspired Cheddar cheese, made from organic pasture-raised cow's milk and cave aged on cedar boards, never sees a plastic vacuum pack. Lehner's a serial experimenter who also makes a variety of Havarti and Gouda-style wheels, many of which feature rinds washed with filtered water steeped with earth from his farm. These cheeses called Earth Schmier express the terroir of the land and make up the bulk of what Lehner serves the North Pond folks.

The crew huddles over a picnic table like a surgical team surveying a cardiac bypass, as Lehner works his way through firm funky Cheddar, Havarti with a horseradish-like finish and a creamy exper-



Lehner (right) explains the cheesemaking process behind his Earth Schmier product to North Pond staff members Danny Grant (from left), Cecilia Light, Rose Perez and Jamie Karlson.

imental Gouda. He serves a wheel that's been aged extra long, prompting North Pond sous chef Danny Grant to exclaim, "I think we need seconds."

Lehner notes how the cheese closest to the rind is darker than the interior. This is where the mycelium from the mold growing on the rind sets off an enzymatic reaction that flavors the cheese. Lehner is careful to cut pieces that have both the intensely flavored end and the creamier interior. Sherman picks up on that and says that's how they'll cut the cheese in the restaurant.

Server Natalie Pfister notes that she's excited to share Lehner's story with diners. Pfister's no longer just a transport system between the guest and the kitchen, but an ambassador, the last in the human line connecting what's on your dinner plate to the guy who milked the cow. She says, "That's why I chose to work at North Pond. I could have been a server anywhere, but there's this connection and a desire to make the experience more than just about the food."

Having spent time with a cheesemaker, it's fitting that our next stop, Blue Marble Family Farm, is a microdairy. Blue Marble is run by Nick Kirch, who used to sell his milk directly to industrial processors. Milk quality is measured by a somatic cell count that indicates whether a cow has been infected with pathogenic bacteria. A higher cell count

means lower-quality milk. The standard cell count allowable in Wisconsin is 750,000 cells per milliliter and under.

Kirch's milk, which averages around 100,000 per milliliter, was valued by processors for its ability to lower the average cell count when mixed with substandard milk from other producers. Kirch, who felt his hard work was lost when it was mixed in with others, started his own processing operation in response. His hormone-free milk is pasteurized, but not homogenized, so it displays a thick cream line at the top of the bottle.

While in the milking parlor, the group surveys a parade of cows ambling toward the barn for an afternoon milking. Grant asks a question about the milking process referring to the "udder" as a "sack." This draws snickers from some in the group, but it's also emblematic of why the group is here. It says something that a sophisticated chef like Grant is disconnected from what is generally common farm knowledge.

The last stop of the day is Shooting Star Farms in Mineral Point, operated by Rink DaVee and Jenny Bonde. DaVee, a Chicago native, grew up near Broadway and Belmont, but laments that his urban childhood meant that he could never find enough local kids to put a baseball game together. After college, he worked as a farm forager contact at Chez Panisse in Berkeley, Calif., an experience that inspired him to es-

tablish his own farm.

Shooting Star is a 40-acre spread, but DaVee and Bonde only farm 5 acres, mostly by hand. They want to stay small so they don't lose their connection to the land. They focus on unique high-value crops like gem lettuces and microarugula, often used in North Pond salads.

While DaVee speaks, the group picks sweet corn off the stalk and chows on the fresh ears. The sugar content is so intense, it leaves their hands sticky. Some of the staff hunch over and pick fresh greens. Others eat vine-ripened tomatoes like apples and pop green beans in their mouth.

The evening ends over a dinner featuring homemade brats crafted by Grant, on a table with a tablecloth secured by gigantic heirloom tomatoes. Next to me is Cecilia Light, a cook who's on her second year of farm visits. She tells me that last year after her first visit she had a greater respect for the products, that she treated them with more care in the kitchen.

After dinner, as dusk descends, the crew settles into some patio furniture and surveys the rolling meadow vista of the farm. In less than 12 hours, they'll all be back to their restaurant labor. They look inspired, but exhausted. They're in need of some rest and relaxation, but that'll have to wait until next Monday.

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