

EDIBLE TWIN CITIES

As Featured

Spring 2006

Dining Out

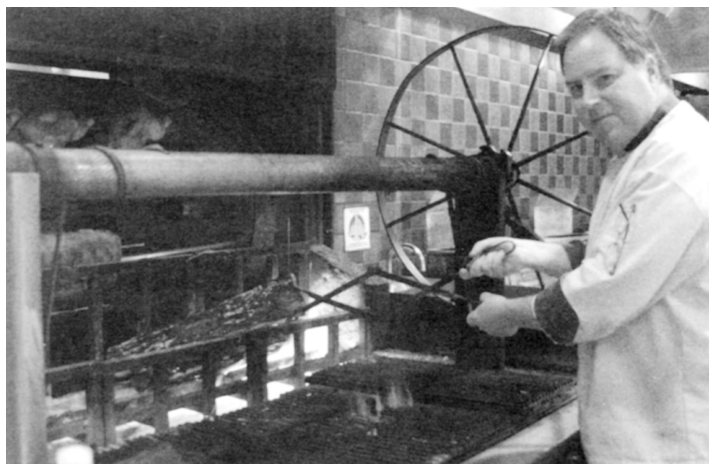
FireLake

The Philosophy Behind the Fire

Story by Beth Jones

Rarely would one look to a hotel restaurant when searching for regional cuisine, but FireLake Grill House in the Minneapolis Radisson Plaza features a menu dedicated to local foods and Chef Paul Lynch is responsible. Lynch opened the restaurant in 2003 and since then has been hunting down locally sourced ingredients. Availability, distribution, and pricing are just some of the issues that Lynch encounters when ordering for FireLake, but personal connections with area farmers, and his involvement in the development of the Heartland Food Initiative, have aided him in his efforts to “keep it local.”

Lynch grew up in El Paso, Texas, and learned early to appreciate homemade food fresh from the garden. “My mom was a great cook. Growing up then, everything was fresh. Just being around that gets into your spirit,” Lynch says. Every year he helped in the garden. “But in return for that, I learned the roots of food, the importance of the soil, and the caring and the love that go into those things.”



Chef Paul Lynch tends the fire



details

FireLake Grill House & Cocktail Bar

31 South Seventh Street
(Next door to the
Radisson Plaza Hotel Minneapolis)
Minneapolis, Minnesota 55402
612.216.3473 or 612.216.FIRE
www.firelakerestaurant.com

Lynch went on to work in restaurants as a teenager, and later, while pursuing a physics degree at Texas Tech, took a job at Howard Johnson's. After two years of college he began focusing on the restaurant industry as a career. His early twenties were spent working his way up several restaurant chains. “It wasn't high-end food,” he admits. At age 27, after climbing the ranks at Bennigan's, he realized, “I'm cooking someone else's menus, someone else's food, and this is not making me happy.”

After attending the New England Culinary Institute and working in such places as London and Maui, Lynch eventually ended up in the Twin Cities after a weekend recruiting trip with Radisson.

The Radisson's FireLake Grill specializes in open fire cooking, and features a hickory rotisserie, mesquite grill, and pit smoker. Lynch says, “I have a restaurant that is near and dear to my heart because it embodies so many things that I think are correct. It's all about regional, local, a taste of place, which I'm very active in. You should know where you are when you're dining.” To achieve this regional quality, Lynch began sourcing local foods. “I began developing a network of individuals I could count on. In my first year in Minnesota I met Pat Ebnet at Wild Acres Game Farm, and started buying his ducks. Through Pat I was introduced to others.”

EDIBLE TWIN CITIES

As Featured

Spring 2006

The task of sourcing large quantities of local foods proved difficult. “I found the process of sourcing to be far more cumbersome than it needed to be. It was through a conversation I had at a Sysco food show . . . that the whole idea of the Heartland Food Initiative (HFI) came into being.” In 2003 the Minnesota Project and the Experiment in Rural Cooperation, along with other local organizations, began sketching out a plan for the Initiative. At a glance, the Heartland Food Initiative is a network that encourages the purchasing of local, sustainable, or organic foods while also working to increase their availability and variety through diverse distribution systems. It includes farmers, chefs and distributors such as Sysco and Bix.

Lynch says that because of the HFI, “It’s easier for other restaurants to decide to buy local. The HFI, in its simplest description is a network...that ties together the entire food chain, from those producing and growing, to the users, and tying them together for the first time in one continuum, instead of having those gaps in distribution that used to cause the breakdown.”

Lynch says that before the HFI came to be, “There was no easy way to support the small farmer.” In terms of creating menus with a taste of place, he believes, “If you talk to chefs, they’re all going to say that’s a good idea, but how many have the time, the ability, or the desire to...source those ingredients.”

He gives an example: “If one guy comes to your dock saying ‘I’ve got a load of squash,’ that does me a little good today, but it’s not going to do him or me much good the week after. So how can we make this thing good on a continuum?” According to Lynch, the HFI has solved that problem.

This does, however, create a dilemma. By making local foods available through large-scale distributors like Sysco, does this hurt those local farmers who have found ways to by-pass the middle man and sell directly to restaurants? Lynch doesn’t believe so. “The point is that there is a lot of product...that cannot physically get out of the farm into service in a quick enough manner.” He continues, “It’s going to provide more farmers with greater potential for success, than the opposite.”

Lynch does admit, “This will never supplant the one on one relationships.” For example, Eichten’s Farms delivers to FireLake every week. “I worked with them a year and a half before we opened this restaurant. They had never made a white cheddar before. A year and a half before I sold my first hamburger here, they set aside cheddar to start aging.”

In addition to Eichten’s Farms products, FireLake’s menu features Pepin Heights apple cider, locally raised six-point Berkshire pork, Bushel Boy tomatoes, and breads from Franklin Street Bakery in Minneapolis. Local ingredients are also used to create the seasonal monthly specials.

Paul Lynch hopes that Minnesotans will think of FireLake as an institution. “What I want is for FireLake be part of this community. I want people to say ‘Oh, you’re going to Minneapolis? Stop by and eat at FireLake.’ The busier I get the more I can buy from local farmers.”

RECIPE

Asparagus, Leek & Potato Soup

Recipe courtesy of FireLake Grill House

- 2 ounces butter
- 1 bunch leeks (white part only), washed, and sliced
- 1/4 cup flour
- 2 1/2 pounds asparagus stems
- 1/2 gallon chicken stock
- 1 1/4 pounds russet potatoes, peeled and diced
- 1 tablespoon fresh thyme
- 1 bay leaf
- 1/2 half bunch parsley
- 1 cup cream

Use flour and half of the butter to make a roux.

Set aside. In a small sauté pan, sweat the leeks using the other half of the butter. In a stockpot, combine the chicken stock, potatoes, asparagus, and leeks. Make a sachet of the thyme and bay leaf, and add the sachet to the stock. Bring to a boil and simmer uncovered for 20 minutes.

Remove the sachet and purée the soup. Return soup to stockpot on low heat. Season with salt and pepper, add the cream and the roux. Adjust consistency with stock if too thick. Add the parsley and purée again. Put soup through a chinois.

Garnish with thinly sliced asparagus and tips.

Serves 10