



Swamp to Table

A culinary retreat like no other invites the world's top chefs to hunt for their own dinner.

By JULIA MOSKIN

HARDEEVILLE, S.C. — "I am sitting in the most amazing puddle of mire," Matt Jennings, the chef at Farmstead in Providence, R.I., announced into the dark from his perch atop a 12-foot-high hunting blind.

He had already been frog-marched deep into the forest by a local guide at dawn, ripped open his hand sliding down a ladder

and hauled his large frame up another ladder and into a rain-filled swivel chair.

But it wasn't his damp jeans, bleeding finger or lack of sleep that were bothering him. It was that, with one shotgun shell and no hunting experience, he was poised to bring down a deer or wild pig that his guide said would surely cross through this particular stand of trees, where the forest floor is thick with acorns.

Mr. Jennings, along with 20 other chefs from around the world, was in this neck of the woods in October because of Cook It Raw, a prestigious and peculiar annual culinary gathering that has become one of

Matt Jennings, the chef at Farmstead in Providence, R.I., with a freshly killed alligator during the Cook It Raw gathering of chefs in South Carolina. It was the first time Mr. Jennings had participated and the first time the event was held in the United States.

the most coveted invitations in food.

The night before, he had butchered a freshly shot alligator with a Bowie knife by the headlights of a pickup truck, sawing off the arms while Jeremy Charles, a chef from Newfoundland, cut out the tongue. For dinner, he had deftly trimmed and then grilled a deer's heart, lovingly cutting it into thin, tender slices.

But he was having doubts. "If a beautiful, innocent deer wanders in front of me, am I really going to blow its brains out?" he said.

In the end, Mr. Jennings never saw his
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prey. But this is precisely the kind of question that is supposed to arise during Cook It Raw, held in a different (and usually remote) location every year since 2009.

Cook It Raw has nothing to do with raw food. Its guiding idea is to strip cooking to its raw elements: foraging, hunting, fishing, farming and low-tech skills like butchery and cooking over fire. A taste of the wild — hunting deer, gathering mushrooms, pulling wasabi from creek beds — is part of each carefully orchestrated and extensively documented program. (The first gathering, in Denmark, included 11 chefs and about 20 journalists.)

Also, the chefs themselves are stripped raw: airlifted out of their restaurant kitchens and planted far away from their families and customers, their sous-chefs and sous-vide machines, for a week.

European luminaries like Pascal Barbot, Albert Adrià and Massimo Bottura have camped out with New World comers like David Chang, Sean Brock and Alex Atala. Acclaimed chefs from Asia like André



cal beef, aged for 40 days and grilled over pecan wood; on top, roasted Tokyo turnips and a salad of raw turnips, grated turnips and turnip leaves, dressed with a sesame-sorghum vinaigrette with fresh fennel seeds and pollen; and a shower of wood sorrel and peanut leaves. Oh, and there was a salty-sweet smoked-oyster ice cream on top. "I did it for the sheer joy of making myself uncomfortable," she said. "You don't get to do that in your own kitchen very often."

This year's gathering was based in Charleston, and the area of study was the Lowcountry, the coastal marshes and fertile barrier islands that stretch from North Carolina down to Georgia.

At Turnbridge, a former rice plantation here, the channels that once irrigated

Chiang and Yoshihiro Narisawa have yawned at predawn wake-up calls alongside Scandinavian influencers like Magnus Nilsson and René Redzepi.

"I just wanted to suck the marrow out of the experience," said Mr. Jennings, who was at Cook It Raw for the first time and more than slightly cowed by all the world-famous chefs. "But I made a strict rule for myself on the plane: you do not talk to Albert Adrià unless he talks to you first."

The chosen ones are considered kitchen innovators whose work displays a respect for agricultural tradition and a command of culinary technology. (And they are almost invariably men; the first woman included was Ana Ros, a Slovenian chef who attended the 2012 event in Suwałki in north Poland; this year, the British-American chef April Bloomfield made the cut, as well as Connie DeSousa of Calgary's meat-focused restaurant Charcut Rosset House.)

In the same way an overnight hike at summer camp gives children a safe but exhilarating taste of the wild, Cook It Raw is an artificial, educational and highly enjoyable field trip into food.

It began in Copenhagen, an offshoot of the acclaimed restaurant Noma and the work of its chef, Mr. Redzepi, the face of the so-called New Nordic cooking style: hyperlocal and seasonal ingredients (of course), with added layers of agricultural tradition, naturalistic presentation and high-minded culinary innovation.

In Lapland, they witnessed the slaughter of a reindeer; on the west coast of Japan, they tried to catch ducks in midair, using traditional nets strung on long poles; here in the Lowcountry, they foraged for yaupon, the only plant native to North America that contains caffeine (Native Americans and early settlers made tea from its leaves). The final event is a grand



many acres of plants hold shrimp, blue crabs and alligators; its old-growth trees are home to bald eagles, flocks of doves and sometimes pink flamingos. The estate also holds 20 acres of Carolina Gold rice, a rich and fluffy strain that died out in the 1920s but has been revived here by multiple twists of fate (and the persistence of Dr. Richard and Patricia Schultz, who bought the land in the 1970s).

Its red-gold stalks waved around the chef Dan Barber's ears as Glenn Roberts, the owner of Anson Mills and the South's premier expert on grains, taught the group the multistep process of harvesting rice, from cutting all the way through threshing, pounding and polishing.

"You become very connected to the ingredient when you're literally standing in



experimental dinner, with each chef improvising a single course inspired by the local terrain — usually with names like Earth and Sea or Strange Fruit or even Frustrated Mackerel. This year, it took place at Mr. Brock's avant-garde, high-end restaurant, McCrady's, in Charleston.

But more important than the particular place is that the chefs are at the same place at the same time. "The idea of chefs voluntarily sharing information and techniques with outsiders is still new," said Daniel Patterson, the chef at Coi, in Northern California. Traditionally, hostility has coexisted with camaraderie, as expensive restaurants competed for the same wealthy customers in a given community. But as haute cuisine has become global and chefs have become more educated, collaboration is more appealing.

Chefs who are famously combative in their restaurants become collegial, even cuddly, at Cook It Raw.

"It was magical," said Mr. Patterson, who has attended five times. At first he was so afraid to fall in front of other chefs that he carried his own potatoes from California to Denmark to ensure that his dish would turn out well. "Encouragement from your peers, especially if you're doing

Top, Ben Shewry, left, and Dan Barber harvesting rice during the Cook It Raw chefs' conference in South Carolina. Second row, from left: Matt Jennings on venison-hunting day; Jeremy Charles, Kevin Patrick, Eric Werner and Mr. Jennings checking on dinner; venison on the grill. Third row, from left, fresh blue crabs; Rosemary Brown Lee fishing the old-school way. Fourth row, from left: Mr. Charles, Andy Wiley, Laura Jean Leal, Howard Morrison and Bill Eswine as the alligator is measured; Mr. Charles and Mr. Jennings, butchering the alligator. Bottom row, from left: Mr. Jennings preparing his and J. P. McMahon's dish, served on a brick, for the grand dinner at McCrady's; the dish (squash, smoked-chestnut porridge, pickled butterout squash and onion); Albert Adrià helping.

things that are new or experimental, is not easy for chefs to come by."

That first group was collected by Mr. Redzepi; Andrea Pettrini, a food journalist; and Alessandro Porcelli, a charismatic former basketball player from Italy who worked at Noma and is now the prime mover of the conference, which pays for the chefs' travel, room and board. This year's event was the first held in the United States and the first to accept commercial sponsors.

Mr. Porcelli, with extensive financing from government tourism agencies in countries like Denmark, Finland and Japan, has driven much of the global publicity for the New Nordic movement. Mr. Pettrini is no longer involved and has restarted Gelinax, a traveling show for chefs.

Not so long ago, chefs were neither globe-trotters nor public figures. Now, showing up at meetings like these — and at Omnivore, Madrid Fusión, MAD Food Camp, Mesamérica and on and on — is virtually required for any chef who wants to be in the public eye, to learn new techniques, or to simply eavesdrop on the newly global conversation on food.

The gatherings have contributed to huge changes in the culinary world in the last

decade. The first big shifts happened at Madrid Fusión, which began in 2003: it fueled an exchange of ideas that helped the avant-garde chefs of Spain identify their scientifically calibrated cuisine as a new national style. Suddenly, chefs like Ferran Adrià and Juan Mari Arzak were stars, and the longtime hierarchy that put France at the pinnacle simply collapsed.

Fine dining began to include traditional agricultural skills and native products. Now, a chef can open an ambitious, hyper-local place like Raymonds in St. John's, Newfoundland, or Hartwood, in Tulum, Mexico, and still cook for members of the global food media, who flock to conferences for their convenient access to multiple chefs. Some of the serious food conferences are now considered a drag by most chefs, but Cook It Raw is still adventurous and outdoorsy enough to appeal.

"It's important to keep pushing yourself, to learn and stretch as a cook," said Ms. Bloomfield, who has just opened Tosca Cafe, a restaurant in San Francisco, adding to the four kitchens she runs in New York. She is known for unfussy food, simply but expertly prepared.

But for the chefs' dinner here, she composed a plate of seared rib-eye steaks of lo-

it," said Mr. Barber, who is deep into a study of heirloom and hybrid grains at his famous, idyllic farm-restaurant just north of New York City, Blue Hill at Stone Barns.

Mr. Jennings, by contrast, is the little-known chef at a small restaurant in a small city. Providence diners like their food recognizable and hearty, and he cooks accordingly: bowls of mussels, boards of local cheese and the charcuterie he makes by hand, and an exceptional grilled cheese sandwich with strawberry jam. He is thickly tattooed with the names of pig parts, and doesn't look like a member of any elite group. But his efforts to support New England farms and fisheries, and to organize a Northern Alliance of chefs in Canada and New England to celebrate mussels, maple syrup, potatoes and other cold-weather staples, won him admission to the magic circle of Cook It Raw chefs.

While there, he said a week later, there were only a few moments when he went cold with fear.

"At one point Albert Adrià was working on my right, Ben Shewry was to my left, and Dan Barber and April Bloomfield were behind me," he said. "I thought, 'O.K., I'm just going to go throw up, and then I'll be fine.'"

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