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SUMMERTIME

SOUTHERN VEGETABLES SHINE

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in the spirit
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and alchemy*



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OUT OF TOWN

Some chefs are choosing greener pastures. / BY JAN GREENBERG

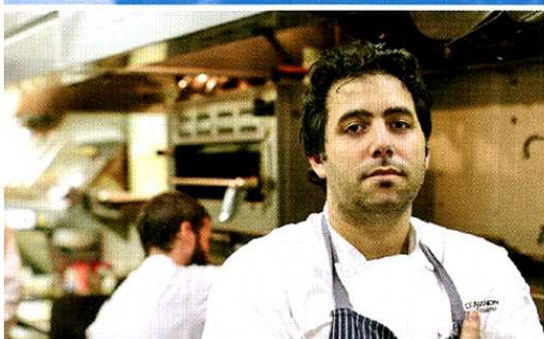
IT MAY BE A CLICHÉ, but more often than not, beginning chefs head to urban areas to start their careers. Cities offer a variety of experiences and can be a steppingstone to long-term careers in the industry. But there are downsides to city life. In addition to long hours, finding affordable housing often means long commutes, and family time is limited.

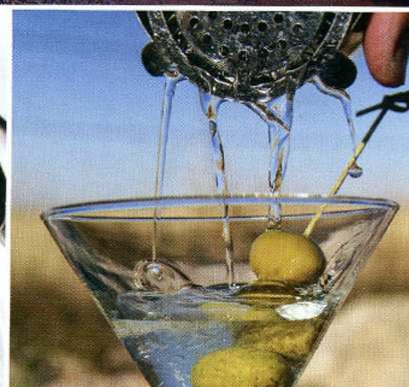
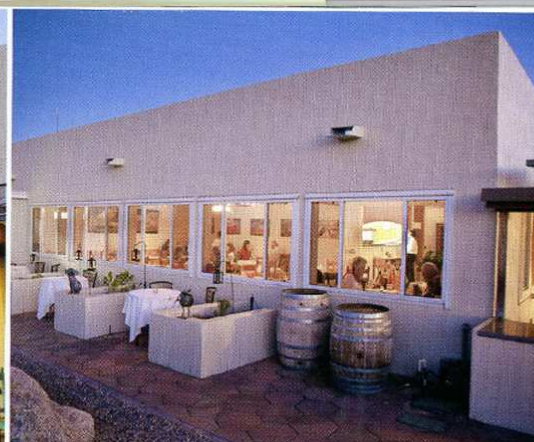
A TRIP TO CAPE COD

If you had asked Matthew Tropeano 10 years ago where he would be living and working today, it is a pretty sure thing it would not have been on Cape Cod, Hyannis, Mass., at Pain D'Avignon, a boulangerie/cafe known for the breads and croissants it sells locally and to surrounding restaurants. A decade ago, the 25-year-old Tropeano had just been appointed executive chef at La Grenouille, the last of New York's eponymous French restaurants. Clients ranged from well-known city socialites and corporate CEOs to tourists celebrating anniversaries and birthdays.

Tropeano grew up in an Italian family in Randolph, Mass. As a teenager, he worked in his cousin's Ristorante Primavera, starting as a busboy and working his way up the line. He trained in the culinary program at Newbury College, Brookline, Mass., and moved to Dallas to take a position as a saucier at Nana, then one of the city's most popular restaurants.

Matthew Tropeano has made Pain D'Avignon a destination restaurant in Cape Cod with such offerings as this roasted free-range chicken, center, and assorted pastries from the cafe, top right.





In 2003, he moved to New York to take a line cook position at La Grenouille. He was soon promoted to sous chef, and within a year, to executive chef. “Ian Scollay, the executive chef, went back to France,” says Tropeano. “And a few days later, owner Charles Masson called me into the upstairs dining room and said, ‘I am appointing you executive chef.’

“My first instinct was that I felt I was going to throw up,” Tropeano says. “But they knew what I knew. I had learned to put aside ego and all the stuff that chefs sometimes bring from the time I was working at my cousin’s restaurant. I had a great team, and I was lucky to have Charles as a mentor. He took me under his wing, bringing me to France, and was patient.

“I had to grow as a chef there, and it took me a couple of years to get it. The food stayed consistent, but it didn’t peak until 2009, which, by chance, was the year *The New York Times* decided to review the restaurant again.”

Sam Sifton, the *Times* reviewer, gave it three stars, ending his review with, “This is the bastion now. It is worth the expense to put on our best and experience it. It is part of why you are here.”

In 2011, Tropeano left to open La Silhouette. “It was time to move on,” he says. “I had an urge to do the kind of food I wanted to do, and this opportunity came up.” La Silhouette received rave reviews for its food, but had location and management issues and closed after a few years.

Tropeano had offers from other restaurants and resorts, but it also gave him and his wife an opportunity to decide what they wanted as a family. “We were living in New Jersey. I would drop my daughter off at school at 9 a.m., get to Manhattan, and not be home until 1 a.m.,” he says. “It’s not like you can run to the restaurant and run home at 6 p.m. and have dinner with the kids.

“And then, suddenly, the opportunity came up with Pain D’Avignon, in the middle of the Cape, with good ownership, good management and a good reputation.”

Tropeano is expanding the menu of the 65-seat restaurant. Although Cape Cod is known as a seasonal vacation spot, the

restaurant is busy year-round. And, under Tropeano, it is the Cape’s only real destination restaurant.

“It’s been a good move,” he says. “About the only obstacle I have is getting people to understand how I approach the job. Some tend to be a little laid-back, and I didn’t come here to take it easy. I came here to make a mark.”

COMMUNITY SERVICE

The *Phoenix New Times* called it “the end of an era” when chef Greg LaPrad left the city’s Quiescence Restaurant & Wine Bar, rated by Zagat as one of the top three restaurants in the state. He left to open Overland Trout (cowboy slang for bacon) in sparsely populated Sonoita, Ariz., just 30 miles from the Mexican border.

The Connecticut-born Johnson & Wales University graduate ended up in Arizona by chance. He had just returned from an internship in Italy in 2004, and his uncle, who had a summer home in the state, suggested he call the chef at the well-known Michael’s at the Citadel, Scottsdale. LaPrad got the position, and started as a prep cook. In 2005, he went to Quiescence, beginning on the line, and within six months, was executive chef. In 2008, he became chef/owner.

But LaPrad had always wanted to open a restaurant in a rural area. “Instead of just serving a segment of the population, I wanted to be able to serve a community with a purpose,” he says. “What bought me here was the whole thing with the local food and my interest in developing the Arizona wine-growing industry, which is centered here. For a number of years, I was driving back and forth to pick up wines, as there are no distributors, and I became familiar with the area. My wife and I fell in love with this region,

At Overland Trout, Greg LaPrad offers elegant dining with an emphasis on farm-to-table: top left, winter squash and pumpkin soup with ground pepitas and crispy sage and pork dumplings; bottom left, oysters “Teddy Blue” with hard-boiled egg, celery mignonette, hot sauce and fresh herbs; and right, Sonoita “Grasslands” martini.

LIFESTYLES out of town

and we decided to open a restaurant that could serve as an anchor for the area.”

LaPrad is one of the first farm-to-table advocates in the state. “We were behind the times,” he says, “and the food movement in Phoenix has more or less still been limited to upper-end restaurants. I wanted to bring it to a larger community, but at the same time, maintain integrity to sourcing product. It has not been easy. Here, we can go an hour to pick up produce or seafood.”

There have been other challenges, as well. LaPrad’s menu must reflect a price point that is realistic for the area, and staffing is difficult in such a rural community.

Unlike Quiescence, Overland Trout is a family enterprise, with LaPrad’s wife in the front of the house. “It is something we have learned is really important in a small town,” he says. “We need the personal connection if the community is going to support us. You can’t have a faceless operation.

“But it is weird how quickly you adjust to a different pace of life. You really get used to it. Even driving into Tucson, the nearest city, is an adjustment these days.”

THE RIGHT MATCH

Justin Paterson, chef/co-owner of Hazelnut Kitchen in Trumansburg, N.Y., with wife Lisa Jonckheere, grew up in the northern New York city of Oswego, known for its annual snowfall amount. “Growing up,” he says, “all I ever wanted to do was move to the city.”

His first stop was Orlando, Fla., where he worked for the Walt Disney Company in its more-upscale food establishments, including Disney’s Grand Floridian Resort & Spa. When he decided to pursue a culinary career, Paterson went to Le Cordon Bleu College of Culinary Arts in Orlando. Then, he and Jonckheere moved to Chicago to open the now closed Province.

They decided they wanted to own their own place, away from the city. “We knew we wanted to be in the Northeast,” Paterson says, “so we took a trip, starting in Burlington, Vt., and on down to the Hudson Valley, then northwest toward Ithaca. We saw almost 20 restaurants, which were possibilities, but one thing and another just didn’t work.

“Our last stop was here in Trumansburg, and this was exactly what we had envisioned. The owners had just had their second child, and running the place was too much for them. They shared our food philosophy. It was the right match.”

Paterson is asked frequently why he made the move. “Farm to table is no longer a cliché. It is now part of running a good restaurant,” he says. “In Chicago, there is a strong local movement, and people are getting product from nearby farms, but you are still removed from it. Here, the farms are literally a walk away. We are on a first-name basis with our farmers, and they even come to the restaurant. It is a deeper relationship.”



Justin Paterson brings diners to Hazelnut Kitchen with dishes such as his shrimp and grits, top right.



A QUIETER, GENTLER LIFE

For David Wurth, chef/owner of CrossRoads Food Shop in the Hudson River Valley village of Hillsdale, N.Y., it was also the connection to the food he was serving that ultimately determined his move from New York. He came to this once-sleepy but now growing village that is, in great part, centered on his restaurant.

Growing up in Rochester, N.Y., Wurth cooked at home with his mother and worked summers in Martha's Vineyard, where his family vacationed. He has a degree in film from New York University, but soon after receiving it, realized that the kitchen was more compatible. He decided to write a letter to Craig Claiborne, then *The New York Times* dining critic, to ask for advice, particularly as to whether he should attend a culinary institution.

"Claiborne wrote me back," says Wurth. "It was a handwritten note, basically apologizing for not being helpful and saying that the only school he knew about was the one he had attended in Switzerland. At the same time, *Gourmet* came out with an article about the resurgence of Philadelphia as a restaurant scene, and I decided to go there."

Wurth attended a technical school in Philadelphia, and his first job was at the tiny chef-owned Echo. Next, to do a baking stage, he went to the White Dog Cafe, which, under the direction of Judy Wicks, was among the first farm-to-table establishments in the nation. While he was there, he saw an advertisement for a cook at Peter Hoffman's newly opened restaurant, Savoy. He was hired as sous chef, and worked his way up to chef de cuisine, where he remained for 10 years.

Hoffman is known as a regular at the Union Square Greenmarket, with his specially constructed tricycle to carry food from market to the restaurant just a few blocks away. "Savoy was doing a lot of work with Hudson Valley farmers," says Wurth. "They would often come to the city to deliver produce and meats, and I was having regular conversations with them on the phone. Sometimes I would visit the farms on my days off."

"But by 2000, I realized I had had my fill of urban life. I was intrigued by the idea of a professional life closer to where I had been buying the food. It seemed like an easy leap to go north and have a quieter and gentler life that was not urban-based, and still be able to work with the food that I had come to really be inspired by."

Wurth worked in several area restaurants, at one point returning to the city, before opening CrossRoads two years ago. Despite ongoing problems finding cooks and other staff, which seems to be endemic to rural areas, things are going well.

"There is a much more supportive audience for our craft up here," he says. "It is not trendy or competitive. No one is turning his or her head to see who walked in. It's actually a nicer environment in which to dine and cook. It's all about, 'Let's go out and have a nice evening,' as opposed to being a social statement."

Chefs today have a choice. They find they can pursue satisfying, more-rounded lives in rural areas. What were formerly culinary wastelands, offering pizza or Saturday night roast beef specials, today can and do support restaurants serving quality, innovative foods, much of it sourced locally. ■

At CrossRoads Food Shop in the Hudson Valley village of Hillsdale, David Wurth enjoys a supportive customer base and a good environment in which to cook.

JAN GREENBERG, AUTHOR OF HUDSON VALLEY HARVEST (COUNTRYMAN PRESS, 2003), IS BASED IN RHINEBECK, N.Y.