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New England's Food Revolution



OFF DUTY

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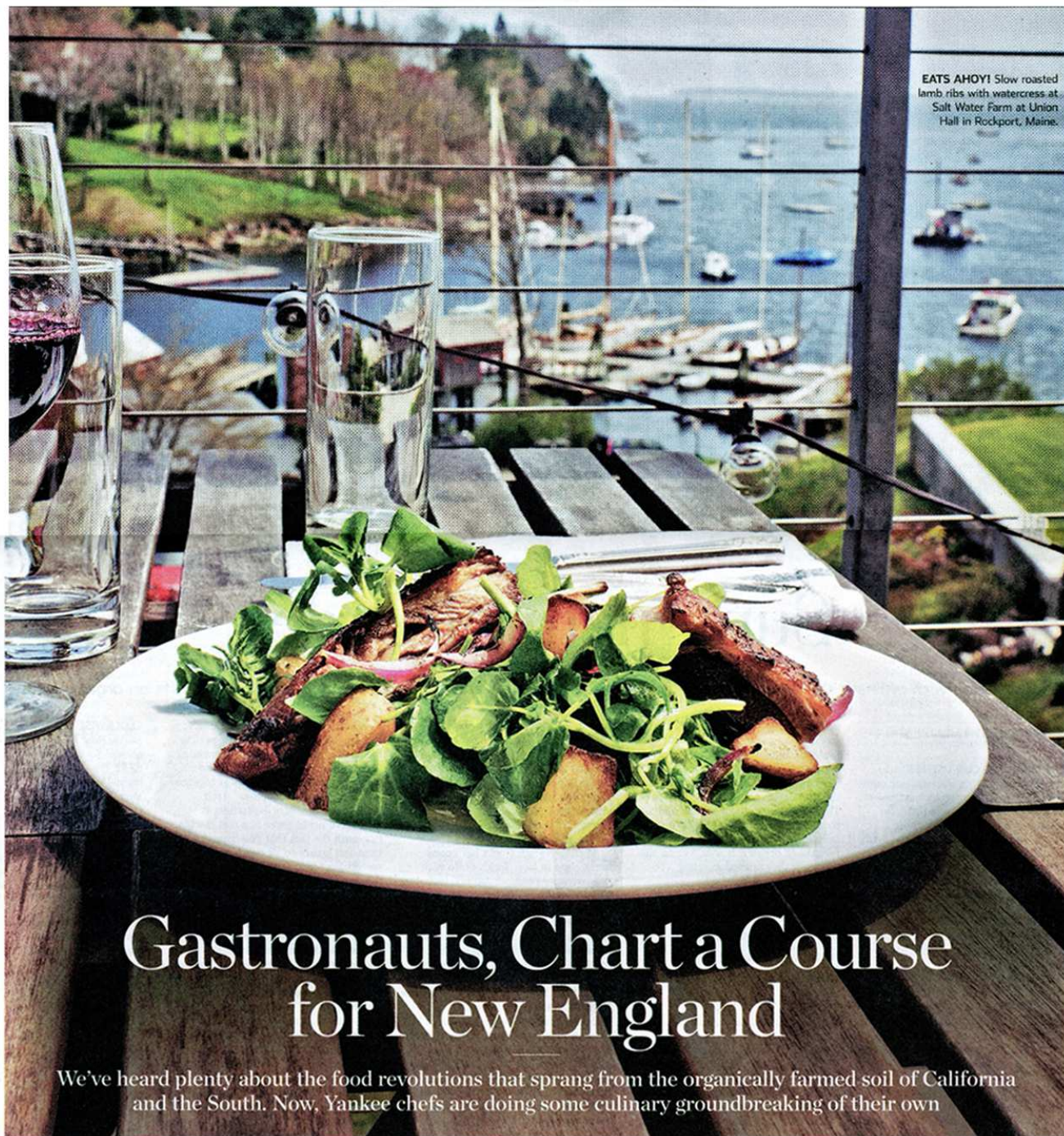
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# OFF DUTY



EATS AHOY! Slow roasted lamb ribs with watercress at Salt Water Farm at Union Hall in Rockport, Maine.

## Gastronauts, Chart a Course for New England

We've heard plenty about the food revolutions that sprang from the organically farmed soil of California and the South. Now, Yankee chefs are doing some culinary groundbreaking of their own

BY SARAH KARNASIEWICZ

A FEW WEEKS back, on a blustery spring afternoon in Portland, Maine, I saw the future of New England food in a little cake of cornmeal and oats. Griddled until golden but still tender at the center, it arrived nestled up against crescents of delicate squash, in a pool of sage-scented melted goat cheese that evoked the world's most rarified Welsh rarebit. A touse of tiny arugula stems and sunshiny tatsoi blossoms topped it

all off. The dish was simultaneously surprising and comforting. It tasted of place and possibility. And like everything else on the menu at Vinland, chef David Levi's fledgling experiment in Down East cuisine, not one morsel of it had started life more than a few dozen miles from my mouth.

I know, I know. Local, seasonal, so what? Almost 45 years have passed since Alice Waters canonized baby greens and the buzzwords have receded into white noise. It's one thing to go ultra-local if, like San Francisco chef Daniel Patterson, your playground is the Bay Area, or, like Charleston's Sean

Brock, your pet adventures in heirloom agriculture enjoy 230 days of South Carolina sunshine per annum. But to stumble upon chefs doing it quietly, with maximum deliciousness and minimal dogma, in the heart of Yankee New England—a region where, to paraphrase Mark Twain, the only meteorological certainty is uncertainty, and whose stereotypically stodgy foodways have never been able to compete with the citrus-scented, blissed-out bounty of California or the ham-and-biscuits prodigality of the South? Well, that should be enough

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to make even the most jaded eaters perk up.

For years rumbblings have been heard—from Arrows in Ogunquit, Maine; Hen of the Wood in Waterbury, Vt.; Community Table in Washington, Conn.—even if, in true Yankee fashion, the movement never announced itself. But now, a real renaissance is afoot, led by a fresh generation of chefs intent on creating a new New England food. Their mission, indebted as much to Fiviken, the northern Swedish temple of New Nordic cuisine, as to native daughter Fannie Farmer: to reclaim what was once a vibrant regional cuisine, one that ranges beyond lobster rolls and Thanksgiving side dishes, and is due every bit the attention lavished on the West Coast and South.

"People think New England food is all Fenway franks and fried clams, but there's a way bigger story to tell," said Matt Jennings. During his 11-year tenure at Farmstead in Providence, R.I.—and still, as he

**'Cod, clams, corn—all the old ingredients are the things I love most. The excitement for me is in the interpretation.'**

turns his attention to a new restaurant opening in Boston this fall—the three-time James Beard Award nominee has emerged as one of the region's most charismatic culinary ambassadors.

"Sean [Brock] and I actually have this argument about who used corn best—Southerners like to go on about their grits and cornbread," Mr. Jennings said with a laugh. "But the Indians taught us everything first. Seriously, culturally and from an ingredient standpoint, New England offers as many opportunities as anywhere in the country."

Mr. Jennings makes the argument on every plate. Playful, but put together with an intense respect for technique, the dishes that emerge from his kitchen—whether a pungent salsa verde spiked with Massachusetts spruce tips (the tender buds harvested from the ends of the branches) or a Yankified spin on Chinese scallion pancakes topped with peekytoe crab—lay to rest the image of the stoic Yankee cook who, to quote the mid-century classic "Good Maine Food," rejects the "namby-pamby" and



"fussy" in favor of the "sound and sturdy."

They're also proof that even the humblest elements of the New England pantry can find new life in the right hands. One of Mr. Jennings's favorite suppliers is a former CIA cyber security expert who grows strains of black, red, white and yellow corn, dries them and grinds them to the chef's specifications. Another—a coppersmith with a sideline in beekeeping—creates just two perfect batches of honey a year: a mahogany-colored fall version that's as malty as a porter, and a pale, delicate spring one. "Cod, clams, corn—all the old ingredients are actually the things I love most," Mr. Jennings said. "The excitement for me is in the interpretation."

Mr. Levi agrees. Though the parameters he's set for himself at Vinland are stringent—the menu is larded with wild foods like goose tongue and Japanese knothead but contains no citrus, olive oil or other ingredients Maine producers can't provide—he manages to avoid being overly cerebral. Sure, Vinland's buckwheat cookies nod to the traditional Acadian foodways of northern Maine. But, sandwiched together with a maple mascarpone cream filling, they also recall a more immediately familiar regional treasure: the whoopie pie.

Indeed, it seems the most successful practitioners of the new New England cuisine are slavish neither to trends nor tradition, but blend the imaginative approach of the artist with the work-hard, work-smart attitude of the yeoman. For Mike Wiley, co-chef and co-owner of Hugo's and Eventide Oyster Co. in the Old Port of Portland, Maine, that means gathering black locust blossoms to serve with crudo in June, sea beans in late summer, and then



"putting your nose to the grindstone, preserving the hell out of the bounty of summer and resigning yourself to falling in love with celery and parsnips for a while." When the result is an icy celery gimlet—braising, vegetal and about as fine a pairing for a plate of Pennaquid oysters as you're liable to get—that doesn't seem much like privation. And perhaps that's the point.

Of course, it helps if you have some control over the ingredient supply chain. In 2009, after cutting her teeth in New York kitchens and as "Top Chef" Tom Colicchio's assistant, Annemarie Ahearn retreated to Salt Water Farm, her parents' stunning 17-acre former sheep farm overlooking Penobscot Bay in Lincolnville, Maine. Her vision: founding a Yankee equivalent of Darina Allen's Ballymaloe Cookery School and Farm, the farm-to-table education center that 46 years ago almost single-handedly rescued Irish eaters from a fate of bland potatoes and gray beef.

The timing couldn't have been better. Ms. Ahearn's venture was such a hit, in fact, that last year she expanded its offerings, opening Salt Water Farm at Union Hall, a sunny, wood-hewn cafe in nearby Rockport with eye popping views of the harbor and a laidback-chic, Brooklyn-meets-Mayberry feel. At the end of lunch service one recent afternoon, head chef Sam Richman stood bent over a delivery of watercress, freshly foraged from the Damariscotta River. Hours later the frilly stems were arrayed on dinner plates next to a luscious cut of local lamb. "It's pretty simple," said Ms. Ahearn. "We want to honor the way Mainers have cooked for a long time. But we also want to make food everyone wants to eat now."

It's not always an easy balance. The iconic dishes of old New England—the molasses puddings, the milky chowders, the roots and the roasts—have long been the gastronomic equivalent of a pair of galoshes: plain and appealing in a certain way, but about as far from sexy as it gets. Yet Will Gilson, 13th-generation Yankee and chef-owner of Puritan & Company in Cambridge, Mass., believes that, if approached thoughtfully, such earnestness is something to embrace. Whether it's a highball made with the bitter digestif Cardamaro and Moxie soda from Maine, or a fresh littleneck-clam chowder enlivened with green garlic, that generosity of imagination shines through in everything he makes. "Finnan haddie, boiled dinner—these are real things," Mr. Gilson insisted. "It's food I was raised with. It's food that still makes people happy. And, I think, it's food that can still be great."



## Scallion Pancakes With Maine Peekytoe Crab

Long considered a lobsterman's "trash catch," peekytoe or rock crab has become a favorite among New England chefs.

**ACTIVE TIME:** 1½ hours  
**TOTAL TIME:** 5 hours (includes marinating) **SERVES:** 4

For the crab:

- 1 cup extra-virgin olive oil
- ½ cup rice wine vinegar
- ½ cup red wine vinegar
- 2 large garlic cloves, thinly sliced
- ½ teaspoon kosher salt
- ½ teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
- ½ cup thinly sliced chives
- ¼ cup chopped fresh tarragon
- 1 pound fresh peekytoe or lump crab meat

For the sauce:

- 4 tablespoons soy sauce
- 2 tablespoons natural peanut butter
- 1 tablespoon maple syrup
- 2 teaspoons rice wine vinegar
- 1 garlic clove, thinly sliced
- 1 tablespoon ginger, peeled and minced
- 2 teaspoons sesame oil
- 1 teaspoon Chinese hot sauce
- ½ teaspoon freshly ground black pepper

For the pancakes:

- 1 cup boiling water
- 2 cups all-purpose flour, plus more for work surface
- 3 tablespoons toasted sesame oil
- 2 cups thinly sliced scallion greens
- ¼ cup grapeseed oil
- Togarashi, for garnish
- 8 baby radishes, trimmed

1. Prepare crab: In a large, non-reactive bowl, combine olive oil, vinegars, garlic, salt, pepper, chives and tarragon, then toss in crab. Cover and place in refrigerator to marinate, stirring once every hour, 4 hours.
2. Meanwhile, make sauce: In a small bowl, whisk soy sauce, peanut butter, maple syrup, vinegar, garlic, ginger, sesame oil, hot sauce and pepper until combined. Set aside.
3. About 30 minutes before crab is finished marinating, make pancake dough: In a large bowl, slowly drizzle ¼ cup boiling water over flour, constantly stirring with a fork. If dough doesn't come to-

gether, drizzle in more water, one tablespoon at a time, until dough just comes together. Transfer dough to a floured work surface and knead briefly to form a smooth ball. Return dough to bowl, cover and let rest 30 minutes at room temperature.

4. Divide rested dough into four sections, and form each into a ball. On a lightly floured surface, use a rolling pin to roll one ball into a 7-inch disk. Sprinkle a few drops of sesame oil over the disk and, using your fingers or a pastry brush, spread it around until top of dough is lightly coated. Roll up disk into a cylinder, then twist into a tight spiral. Flatten spiral gently with your hand, then re-roll into a 7-inch disk. Lightly coat with another layer of sesame oil, sprinkle with ½ cup scallions and again roll up into a cylinder. Twist roll into a spiral, flatten gently and re-roll into a 7-inch disk. Set aside and repeat with remaining dough.

5. Heat grapeseed oil in an 8-inch cast-iron pan over medium-high heat until shimmering. Slide one pancake into hot oil. Cook until golden brown, about 2 minutes per side. Transfer to a paper towel-lined plate, season with salt and cut into 4 wedges. Repeat with remaining pancakes.

6. To serve: Spoon 3 teaspoons sauce onto a large plate. Arrange sliced pancake on top with a spoonful of marinated crab. Garnish with a sprinkling of togarashi and 2 radishes. Repeat with remaining pancakes, crab and garnishes. —Adapted from Matt Jennings of Farmstead Providence, R.I.

## Green Garlic Chowder With Littleneck Clams

The gentle sweetness of young garlic gives chowder a fresh, springtime update.

**TOTAL TIME:** 1 hour **SERVES:** 4-6

- 3 (6½-ounce) cans minced clams
- 12 ounces bottled clam juice, plus ½ cup more if needed
- 3 bacon slices, minced
- 1 onion, diced
- 2 tablespoons all-purpose flour
- 1 bay leaf
- ½ teaspoon chopped thyme leaves
- 1 pound Yukon Gold potatoes, peeled and sliced
- 1 cup sliced green garlic
- 12 littleneck clams
- 3 cups half and half
- 6 tablespoons dry Sherry
- Salt and freshly ground black pepper
- Sriracha sauce
- Oyster crackers, for serving

1. Drain juice from canned clams into a medium bowl. Add enough bottled juice so total liquid equals 3 cups. Set juice and clams aside.
2. In a soup pot over medium heat, cook bacon slowly until crisp but not charred, about 8 minutes. Add onion and cook, stirring occasionally, until translucent, about 6 minutes. Decrease heat to low, then add flour and cook, stirring with a

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