
EATER AT LARGE

BY KIM BAYER

HARVEST DINNER AT THE HENRY FORD

Best of Past and Present Blend at Eagle Tavern

Picture the scene: It's a warm autumn evening as you enter the wrought-iron gates of historic Greenfield Village, a rosy glow filtering from behind the trees. A sense of magical possibility and peaceful calm pervades the wide-open green space as you enter the Eagle Tavern.

Portraying the year 1851, women in period dress welcome you to come in. Candlelight on the tables is the only illumination in the room. It's lovely and crowded inside and smells like dinner cooking and dry leaves and woodstoves. About 200 people are gathered in joyful anticipation, seated family-style at wooden trestle tables of eight people each. A string band plays in the corner, creating a noise level somewhere between cacophonous and deafening. It's clear this is a night of celebration for Eagle Tavern's Fall Harvest Slow Food dinner.

Before dinner can start, the farmer from Greenfield Village's Firestone Farm tells a story about a 2,500-pound, 9-foot-long pig named Big Bill. Big Bill, the heaviest pig ever recorded, was a predecessor of the heritage breed Poland China pig that was raised on the farm to be the centerpiece of this year's Slow Food Harvest Dinner. Bred to grow quickly, with a thick layer of useful fat, the Poland China is a pig that is not generally available to us any more. But if taste were the sole deciding factor, it would be. Prepared as an appetizer course by Chef Nick Seccia in three different ways, each taste provides a glimpse into a past of rich flavors and traditions.

Something special is going on here. For the past several years the Henry Ford has been slowly changing its approach to the food it serves. Recognizing that they had been providing historical accuracy in teach-



ing about the past in everything except the food they served, Director of Food and Catering Susan Schmidt and Executive Chef Nick Seccia decided they could do better.

Where most restaurants rely solely on the convenience of pre-packaged food shipments from a big distributor, Schmidt and Seccia have established different priorities. Their efforts to build relationships with local farmers and vendors is an approach that is quickly becoming the hallmark of chefs and establishments who prioritize how food tastes as well as how it affects the world in which we live.

Three years ago, when they started working with local farmers, their goal was to put only local tomatoes on their tables. This year they reached their goal of having all their summer produce come from local farms. Chef Seccia allows that it takes more effort in the short run to coordinate with several local farmers rather than one corporate supplier, but it also provides more satisfaction, better taste and greater sustainability for Michigan's

economy.

"Like all true chefs, I want to be immersed in working with real food," he says. "Going out to a farm and walking the fields provides an education that you don't get in cooking school. And it's great that sometimes we might be a reason that a farm could stay in business. We're helping to grow the local food community. It's gratifying watching people change from growing only a cash crop, like corn or soybeans, to going back to handpicked vegetables."

In true Slow Food fashion, each dish of the evening's meal is passed around family-style. Each course exclaimed over, discussed and appreciated by the diners. There is a creamy wild rice and mushroom bisque with rice that has been grown and harvested in the traditional Native American way. The chestnuts in the chicken's stuffing have been grown by a local organization working to bring back these magnificent trees. The beef is grass-fed and deeply flavorful. And the sugar pumpkin purée is so sweet it's a dessert by itself.

None of these foods or these ways of enjoying them are new. What is different is seeing them in a new light of appreciation. These wonderful traditional foods and the old ways of knowing their provenance with relationships built one by one demonstrate the possibilities for a renewed local and sustainable way of life. We're making an ongoing commitment to celebrating the rich flavors we love as the flavors of our specific place in the world and finding connection in the traditions of our own food community.

On the tables at Eagle Tavern, still home to pioneers in Michigan, everything old is new again. And it's delicious. □

*Eagle Tavern
The Henry Ford
20900 Oakwood Boulevard
Dearborn, MI
313-92-6001 (hours vary so be sure to call ahead)*

MICHIGAN PANZELLA

Nick Seccia, Executive Chef, The Henry Ford

This salad makes a nice addition to a holiday table or as an alternative to standard stuffing with turkey or a true salt cured country smoked ham. Apples, cabbage, and bacon can be found locally well into December and Michigan chestnuts also make a great addition sprinkled on top just before serving. Toast the bread and prepare all the ingredients before service, just before serving cook the salad and serve immediately.

Panzanella

Serves six

Locally baked good crusted bread 1 - 2# loaf
Farmhouse slab bacon diced fine ½ cup
Locally raised cabbage sliced thin 1 head
Dried Cherries 1 cup
Michigan McIntosh apples diced medium with the skin on 2 cups
Salt and pepper as needed
Pure olive oil as needed
Honey Parsley vinaigrette ½ cup (recipe follows)
Chestnuts roasted for twelve and peeled

Cut the bread into large cubes, drizzle lightly with oil and season with salt and pepper bake in a 350F until very crisp. Render bacon over medium heat until crisp add the cabbage and apples season with salt and pepper, sauté until the cabbage is tender, add the cherries and vinaigrette and cook to warm through add the toasted bread coat with the vinaigrette. Serve warm.

Chop the roasted chestnuts and garnish the salad.

Honey Parsley Vinaigrette

Makes 3 cups

Apple cider vinegar ¾ cup
Granulated sugar ¼ cup
Honey ¼ cup
Parsley chopped fine ¼ cup
Salt and pepper as needed
Dijon mustard ¼ cup
Pure olive oil 1.5 cups

Combine all of the ingredients except oil, salt and pepper. Puree in the blender while slowly adding oil until all combined season with salt and pepper.



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Thanks to all who participated in our first Michigan Thanksgiving program and to those attending the "Nurturing Yourself, Nurturing Children" event at Uptown Hills School in support of the Karen Joy Theater in Oxford.



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Photograph: Carole Topalian

Courtesy of the Michigan Apple Committee



APPLE CHERRY RAISIN CRISP

Makes 6 to 8 servings

TOPPING

1 cup quick or old-fashioned oats, uncooked
1/2 cup slivered almonds
1/3 cup firmly packed light brown sugar
1/4 cup butter or margarine, melted
1/4 teaspoon ground cinnamon

CRISP

2 cans (21 ounces EACH) MICHIGAN APPLE PIE FILLING
3/4 cup dried tart cherries
1/2 cup dried raisins
1/2 teaspoon almond extract

Preheat oven to 375°F.

For Topping, combine all ingredients; set aside.

For Crisp, combine all ingredients. Lightly sprayed 8 or 9-inch square baking pan. Spoon mixture into prepared pan. Sprinkle evenly with Topping. Bake in preheated oven 30 to 35 minutes or until filling is hot and bubbly at edge and Topping is golden. Serve warm.

Calories per serving (based on 8 servings) 380, Total Fat 10g, Cholesterol 15mg, Carbohydrates 73g, Sodium 73mg, Fiber 7g