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FARM TO TABLE

CELEBRATING THE FATTORIA AT TRATTORIA STELLA

BY NANCY KRCEK ALLEN
PHOTOGRAPHS BY GARY L. HOWE

In the last half of the 18th century, Chinese classical poet, gourmet and food writer Yuan Mei wrote that a successful cook must be aware of the inherent natural qualities of ingredients. He went on to declare, "For an excellent banquet, sixty per cent of the credit goes to the chef, and forty per cent to the buyer of ingredients."

Unfortunately, Yuan Mei forgot about his local farmers.

Executive chef Myles Anton and partners Amanda and Paul Danielson haven't. In their Traverse City restaurant, Trattoria Stella, this team of Michigan natives celebrates, encourages and supports Northern Michigan growers. The *fattoria* (Italian for "farm") is the fourth partner at this trattoria.

"I would say [at Stella] it's more like fifty-fifty farmer-chef," says Anton, "or even sixty-forty, in favor of the farmers. I don't use a lot of ingredients—I try to highlight the flavor that's there and let the food shine for itself. For instance, when I use trout from Bellaire, I don't crust it. I just dust it in flour before sautéing. For our beet salad I toss Golden Rule Farm beets with olive oil and salt and roast them."

As you enter Trattoria Stella, a chalkboard crammed with the names of over fifty local food and wine purveyors hangs on the wall. Each menu lists the farms and wineries that contributed to its dishes.

After three centuries, the farmers are finally getting credit.

In July, Trattoria Stella will celebrate its fifth anniversary. "We started our first summer with four farmers—Werp, Halpin, Edmondson and Buchan—and it has turned into around forty or fifty farmers," says Anton. "Every year it grew and grew. If someone shows up now with strawberries, I say, 'I've had a relationship with the Urkas for three years for strawberries. (My) farmers are counting on me to take their food. They rely on me to feed their families.'"

"Urka's strawberries are very irregular—not cookie cutter—but every one tastes great," says Anton. "When you bite into them, there is juice that runs down the sides of your mouth. My cooks will say, 'We've got to do something with those berries—they're getting soft.' I laugh and tell them that they're juicy, and that's what makes them so good. There is sweet, tart and juicy all wrapped up in one. Last year I noticed one of my pantry cooks making minced strawberries for a dessert—I said, 'they've got to know it's a strawberry, don't manhandle it... just slice it in half!'"

Anton started his kitchen career at twelve as dishwasher in a metro Detroit restaurant and worked his way up to line cook. After graduation he went to college for pre-med. When that didn't work out, Anton decided on culinary school at Oakland Community College. Although he has worked many places—even opening the



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Italian restaurant D’Amato’s in Ann Arbor—it wasn’t until he opened a small restaurant near Acadia National Park in Maine that he began to seriously incorporate local foods into his menus.

“I knew I was coming to Stella and that local was what Paul and Amanda had in mind,” says Anton. “In Maine there are lots of small farms. People would show up on my doorstep with things and I would buy them. I developed specials and would try to plan with the farmers—I’d ask, ‘How many weeks?’ and ‘What’s your quantity?’ I learned how to think on the fly and develop recipes when food showed up. So when I got here, we were all on the same page.”

Owner Amanda Danielson adds, “Sometimes we can’t get enough product for our volume. We change the menu every day, twice a day, so we can take things in smaller amounts, and we might run it just one night. So we have built flexibility into our menu. It’s a balancing act. It’s more work, but it’s worth it. It would be strange now if we did it any other way.”

Shifting from the common restaurant model of purchasing from only one or two big commercial suppliers, to the multitude of small ones that Trattoria Stella now has, was a learning curve for Anton. “By our third year, I was spending three hours a day coordinating food orders,” he says. “Big companies like Sysco and Gordon are one-

stop shopping—they can save you a lot of time. But I learned how to organize. Now it takes just one to two hours. Cherry Capital Foods makes it easier, too. They’re a new wholesaler, organizing local food for chefs. They’re great backup.”

Anton says he remembers once calling Sally Shetler (of Shetler Family Dairy in Kalkaska) for cream. “At that point, I think that they were at maximum output,” says Anton. “Sally said, ‘Oh, I’ve heard about you, and we’d really like to help you out.’ I said, ‘I’d love to get heavy cream from you.’ She said, ‘How many quarts would you need a week?’ I said, ‘Anywhere from 75 to 125 quarts.’ I could hear her jaw drop. ‘Well,’ she said, ‘can we start with 12 to 24?’”

Parsley was another big deal for him, says Anton. “The amount of flat leaf parsley that I go through is ridiculous. Last year was the first year that I was able to get it all locally. It’s like night and day from the parsley that gets shipped in from California. Another great example is celery. Jen from Center Road Farm came in with a box of celery. I cleaned it and took a bite. I went, ‘Wow! That’s celery.’”

Top, from left: Chef Myles Anton writes up the day’s menu; blackboard at Stella’s front entrance; Shetler Family Dairy delivery; Dick Zenner and grandson Dylan deliver tomatoes.

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Celery is usually mundane—this was bright and it was crisp. I called her and told her to bring as much as she had. I ran it as a vegetable with a little butter and salt and pepper and it blew people's minds."

Amanda Danielson gets pretty excited about tomatoes now, too. "Craig from Golden Rule Farm will come in with heirloom tomatoes. It's like you're opening a present," she says. "You don't know what you're going to get. Craig tells us about each tomato. They're all different shapes and sizes. It's really extraordinary. Using commercial suppliers, you lose that experience of the farmer coming to the back door."

Anton says he and his staff know the farmers, and delight in the face-to-face contact: "Gay Zenner asked my sous chef, Brian, 'What are you doing with our tomatoes today?' and Brian said, 'I'm gonna smoke 'em.' She said, 'You're gonna do **what** to my tomatoes?' He said, 'We make a smoked tomato sauce from them and this is what it tastes like.' She exclaimed, "Oh, that's so good!"

Like home cooks, restaurateurs sometimes find local food slightly more costly or scarce. "Using local food is more expensive up front, but in the long run it ends up being less expensive," says Amanda, "because it's better if it doesn't have to travel far. And we consider ourselves as part of a larger system. It isn't just about our bottom line—it's as much about our commitment to our community."

The partners at Trattoria Stella are as serious about wine as they are about food. Amanda Danielson runs the wine and beverage program and handles the weekly training that is mandatory for service and bar staff. She is working toward her Master Sommelier certificate, currently held by only 167 sommeliers worldwide. In the height of summer season, Stella's wine list carries about 275 wines, mostly from Italy, France, Spain, Northern Michigan, Oregon, Washington and California.

"We've always had a focus on local wine," says Danielson. "I have a great working relationship with local winemakers. The philosophy we have is that we never sell local wine **just** because it's local. I taste and evaluate and only sell what, in my opinion, are world-class wines. So it isn't 'Oh, you can have any of these wonderful wines from around the world—or you can try the local.' When we started, there



were so few. It's still building, but every year the local wines just get better and better."

She continues: "We're coming off an excellent vintage—2007 for red wines and 2008 for white wines. I'm going to take advantage of that, and I'm going to create the single best local wine experience that you can find. My goal is to have a full page of local wines."

During Cherry Festival week, Danielson intends to unveil a local tasting program. "There isn't a staff like ours around that can intimately take people through these wines and give them what will be the best local wine experience," she says. "I want to add a local label tasting. I also want to put together a 'peninsular' tasting that will allow our wines [from the Leelanau and Old Mission Peninsulas] to be showcased alongside several other peninsular wines—each one unique, all comparable in price and all high quality. Italy is a peninsula and the left bank of Bordeaux is a peninsula, the Iberian Peninsula and our two peninsulas. So someone could belly up to the bar and experience the best of the best of both [of our] peninsulas."

"I've fallen in with supporting local everything now," says Anton. "This has changed my personal shopping habits and where I eat. It's really spilled over into the rest of my life, too. The more I do this, the better I feel—I feel like I'm contributing to our city and our area. When the farmers, their ingredients, and our cooking meet, and someone comes in and enjoys the food, all of us are a success. We're doing our job." *eGT*

Chef-educator Nancy Krcek Allen is a graduate of the California Culinary Academy in San Francisco. She has worked in restaurants, catered, taught and cooked privately for over 20 years. She owned the Traverse City restaurant/cooking school City Kitchen. Currently, she writes about food for newspapers and magazines and teaches cooking classes for NMC Extended Education and at Chateau Chantal in Traverse City.

Traverse City photographer Gary L. Howe freelances for local and national publications, and has produced audio pieces for WNMC's Radio Anyway.



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