

WELCOME HOME

The Bouissous spread amour of family and fine fare

BY ANDREA KENNEDY

Chefs Bernard and Sarah Bouissou work from home. Well, practically. They work mere steps from their home of nearly 15 years, which sits on the same wooded property as their Ridgefield restaurants, Bernard's and Sarah's Wine Bar.

Stacked one on top of the other, the duo offer French-inspired complements, with Sarah's upstairs bar and bistro as the casual yin to the elegant yang of Bernard's white-tableclothed downstairs dining room. For years – 13 for Bernard's and five for Sarah's – both have flourished with a winning formula of fine wines and exquisite dining fused with an ever-present family feel.

"Our mission was always to have it feel like you are coming to our home," Sarah says. "People all the time say to us, 'When I come here, it feels like I come home.' I always get so excited when they say that."

Their four girls – ranging in age from 3 to 8 when Bernard's opened – grew up among the dining rooms and started hosting at the ripe age of 9. Now, striking black-and-white portraits of the ladies all grown up add to the intimate living room appeal of the cozy 1875 inn-turned-eatery.

Trained in French traditions – Bernard near his home in the south of France and Sarah in Vichy – the couple, married 23 years, found amour during their tenure at Le Cirque. His illustrious career also includes Tavern on the Green, and hers, Rakel's under chef Thomas Keller.

But a Francophiles-only establishment this is not, nor one concerned with catering to modish trends. Rather, it's the finest in contemporary French cuisine with menus packed with whatever's seasonal, local or pleasing to the chefs.

During chilly months, guests can look forward to Bernard's gourmet spin on winter and root vegetables, including squash, chestnuts, game (venison, pheasant and wild boar) and citrus to die for. In February, expect a special Valentine's Day menu, plus seasonal favorites like razor clams and luxuriant shad roe.

"People get so excited about that, be-



Sarah and Bernard Bouissou

cause no one's doing it anymore," Sarah says of the delicacy. Sustaining bygone culinary craftsmanship, Bernard also purveys his own pâté, smokes his own fish and cures his own charcuterie.

"We just got half a pig, about 200 pounds," Bernard says, his French accent as rich as his cassoulet. "I've had another one drying for a year now."

Bernard keeps menus farm-to-table and local as possible, sourcing fowl and grass-fed meats from Vermont or around Ridgefield and vegetables from Bedford – and even the Bouissous' own backyard. The sunny spot visible from Sarah's patio holds 24 raised beds yielding salad, asparagus, sugar snap peas, snow peas, broccoli, cauliflower, eggplant, potatoes and more. Bernard, who waters and picks vegetables every morning, says he harvested more than 200 pounds of tomatoes last year. (There's

enough garden fresh goods for Bouissou family dinners, too.)

Sarah – who seems to operate a mile a minute between the restaurants, her high-end catering business and family matters – keeps the wine bar especially revved with a multitude of community-centric events that also expose her acute marketing sensibility.

"I get bored easily," she says with a laugh.

Sarah hosts author luncheons and frequent wine dinners that feature business owners from artisans to landscape architects. An open forum invites questions for the experts (including Sarah) during the convivial evenings, with the next featuring the 109 Cheese & Wine shop Feb. 17. Cooking classes (next in session Feb. 26) put Bernard in the spotlight, with guests watching and learning game-changing tips from the

master himself as he prepares a four-course meal. Pupils enjoy the finished product in the dining room.

The wine bar also hosts The Jazz Master's Series that draws devotees on the last Sunday of every month (The Virginia Mayhew Quartet plays next), while regional musicians perform Wednesdays through Sundays. Every three months, Sarah also rotates paintings – for view and for sale – by local artists. Chinese-inspired works by couple Gayle Gleckler and Tony Woolner will run starting with an artist's reception Feb. 10 to coincide with Chinese New Year.

"We're in this wonderful community," Sarah says. "Let's share our great people."

Esteemed Ridgefield gems in their own right, the Bouissous' litany of recognitions include the Star Diamond Award, DiRona Distinguished Restaurants Award and four stars from The New York Times. They've consistently earned an "Extraordinary" rating from Zagat's and Wine Spectator's Best of Award of Excellence every year since 2001. On March 11, they'll prepare dinner at The James Beard Foundation in Manhattan, where they fortuitously first found love some 25 years ago.

Sitting beside her husband, Sarah says, "I remember when we talked about our dream place we wanted to have. This is it."

This is the inaugural installment of WAG's regional restaurant-focused feature. ■

Bernard's and Sarah's Wine Bar
(French), 20 West Lane, Ridgefield,
(203) 438-8282, bernardsridgefield.com

For other fine dining destinations in Ridgefield, visit:

Stonehenge (Continental),

35 Stonehenge Road

Toscana (Italian),

43 Danbury Road

Thali (Indian),

296 Ethan Allen Highway

Southwest Café (New Mexican),

109 Danbury Road