

HARVEST RENAISSANCE

Chef Vincent Barcelona on eating clean and trimming the fat

By ANDREA KENNEDY

It's a beautiful thing when you find your niche, your respite for self and soul. A shared puzzle piece in Westchester's pursuit of happiness fits snugly against the Hastings waterfront where Harvest-on-Hudson's Napa-meets-Tuscany retreat brings an unusual calm to the New York dining scene – even for Westchester. It's slowed down, spread out, a proper unwind from the caffeinated, iPhone-driven workweek. The riverwide views of the Palisades. The sunset-drenched garden. The wine. The sfizi. The “play hard” après “work hard.” The rejuvenation.

“That’s what Harvest is all about. It’s a lifestyle,” says executive chef Vincent Barcelona. “It’s driven by the garden and a healthy, balanced living. It’s eating clean.”

With his modern Italian menu featuring indulgences like a sunnyside egg with brown butter, truffle and guanciale – “the best bacon and eggs you’ll ever have,” quips the chef – it’s no wonder that to Barcelona, eating clean doesn’t mean counting calories (an ethos that’s the scourge of happy eaters everywhere, not to mention Italians.) Meals, rather, are fresh and balanced, pruned like a bonsai to perfection without excesses of caloric fluff.

“It’s really easy to mask things with bells and whistles or sauces and things like that,” he says, “but you have to be sure the dish is absolutely perfect if it’s almost naked.”

Food critic Arthur Schwartz said it well when he called Harvest’s dishes “unaffected,” a term Barcelona calls one of his highest compliments.

Considering Harvest’s extensive menu of consummate local favorites, Barcelona shines just as bright, if not brighter, with his kaleidoscope of specials driven by Hudson Valley farms, Montauk line-caught seafood and, fittingly, Harvest’s own harvest. Produce gets plucked from Harvest’s patio garden – it doesn’t get fresher than that – where folks can sip a Chianti and dabble in sfizi (exquisite small plates for you latecomers) among lush greens of lovage and lemon verbena, eggplant and cucuzza, fennel and sorrel, heirloom tomatoes, bush basil, rosemary and more.

Get ready for this: Farm-to-fork specials will star in his brand new offerings launching this fall.



“We’re calling it the Harvest Renaissance,” he says. “We’re doing a complete menu upgrade.”

Cue the collective gasp heard ‘round the Hudson. You read it right. Harvest is retooling, and Chef says “nothing is sacred.” Not even the world’s best bacon and eggs.

“It doesn’t mean that our great dishes aren’t going to realize themselves back on the menu again,” Barcelona says, “but I need to think what’s best for a busy restaurant.”

For a self-proclaimed perfectionist, serving upwards of 800 covers a night isn’t the sustainable or balanced approach he’s after.

“I’d rather trim it down a little bit and focus on specials that are really interesting, something off the grid you don’t see everywhere.”

So the Harvest Renaissance isn’t just a move to trim the fat, so to speak; it also opens the door to new favorites like Barcelona did when he took over at Harvest back in 2004. He’s also executive chef at Half Moon in Dobbs Ferry and two Montauk spots with the Fort Pond Bay Company. Nearly 10 years later and still of regional renown, he very well could ride the wave of popularity, yet he’d rather reinvent to dodge status as an “old warhorse.”

“We don’t want to be complacent,” he says. “We want to be the best restaurant in the area and not rest on our laurels.”

Still, it’s the reputation that will keep patrons coming and surely hook more, especially considering that homemade ingredients will stay central to menu offerings.

“We have our homemade meats,” he says gesturing to the wine cellar, where a glance up the wall of award-winning reds shows rows of pancetta and capicola hung from the ceiling to cure. (A veritable happy place in itself.) “We make all our homemade gelatos and sorbets, our fresh pastas. We have the beautiful arugula rigatoni on the menu today with arugula picked from the garden. We do a purée of arugula and mix it right in with the dough.”

Chef may use the garden lavender for crème brûlée or lemon thyme on sashimi with a spritz of lemon and dash of coarse sea salt. So while the menu may change, expect less of a departure and more of a rededication to the Harvest mentality of striking powerful flavor profiles using the best ingredients in the region.

“Let the fish be fresh, let the vegetables be fresh,” Barcelona says. “Make sure you enhance it with a little acidity so your palate doesn’t get tired or add a neutral so it doesn’t get over-stimulated.”

His philosophy rings true to the farm-driven tradition he’s heightened with expert discipline – the type of skills seasoned by his first-generation Italian roots, upbringing in the restaurant business, training in France and rising through the ranks with Manhattan’s top chefs, including Mr. “Top Chef” himself, Tom Colicchio, while they were in their 20s. And thanks to his own balanced lifestyle, including trading city life for some land in northern Jersey and unwinding on his guitar or BMW motorcycle, Barcelona doesn’t feel much older than his days in the concrete jungle that were the ’80s in New York.

“I’m 48 years old, but mentally I’m much younger,” he says. “If I don’t CrossFit or play guitar or jump on my bike or go see music, it washes off into other parts of my personality. It’s good for everyone when Chef is happy. Everyone is happy.”

Happiness is what it’s about, after all – what makes us whole. And if your happiness is a riverfront view of the Palisades, a chillaxed California vibe or sfizi and wine, then new menu or not, Harvest will still be your home.

Just get those baked stuffed dates and short rib pappardelle while you still can.

Harvest-on-Hudson is at 1 River St., Hastings-on-Hudson. For more, call (914) 478-2800 or visit harvesthudson.com. ■