

GARDEN OF EDIBLE DELIGHTS

BY ANDREA KENNEDY

Centuries of artists have depicted the elm tree in historic and pastoral painting as a symbol of nature's humble nobility. Chef Brian Lewis is an artist in his own right and as the award-winning name behind Elm in New Canaan, he knows a thing or two about elevating earthen bounty to extraordinary heights.

Each plate pays homage to its ingredients in technique, beauty and pure flavor. The chef's modern American cuisine presents expertly executed designer bites packed in a presentation of edgy artistry that begs to be photographed. Sexy plates and sumptuous tastes earned Elm the title of one of Esquire's Best New Restaurants in America 2012 and an "excellent" rating from The New York Times. With more than two-dozen disciplined years of chef's whites under Lewis' still-youthful belt, his culinary instinct simply inspires what works.

"It's staying current while keeping tradition as the fabric of your cooking," Lewis says. "Modern American cuisine for me is less about shocking techniques for the sake of shocking."

More striking than shocking, dishes stun nonetheless with progressive preparations using molds, gels, high-fires and foams. In his version of crunchy yellowfin, a trio of meaty Maine tuna pieces served tataki-style rests on a runway of sunchoke puree topped with flame-roasted sesame seeds and red quinoa. Aged shoyu enhances the brown butter soy caramel that surrounds.

"It's about great harmony on the plate," he says. "It's not just about the protein, even though that's what gets top billing. The real inspiration for me is working with more of the supporting actors and actresses, so to speak."

In one particular produce feat, peeled salsify gets a second skin of black trumpet mushroom powder, served with a jam of red wine, cinnamon and star anise. Fine diners can also find menu playfulness in the foie gras pb&j, a sphere of knee-weakening foie gras filled with spiced date jam and plated with marcona almond brittle, marcona almond milk and lingonberry jam alongside brioche toast points. The Creamsicle deconstructs a childhood favorite with lemon poppy seed cake, vanilla bean ice cream and dreamy orange cream that lounge over a thick sweep of punchy orange paste.

"Most importantly, it's got to be delicious," Lewis says. "Presentation, the rest of it doesn't matter if it's not absolutely delicious. It should always taste like the best of whatever it is."

Elm, which celebrated its first anniversary last month, is as craftsman as it is cutting-edge, as warmly inviting as it is white tablecloth. That is to say, the service tops any white tablecloth restaurant, while actual tabletops feature wood grain and woven mats that match its modern minimalist, timber-chic interior. Its bar, banquette, booths and chef's tasting table seat clientele from locals to city dwellers to visitors from Scottsdale.

"I hold so dear to me the fact that people have so many choices — so many choices in the county, the state, the country, the world — and they come here," he says. "I can't tell you how much I appreciate it."

Lewis is a local boy from Somers who found his culi-

nary calling at age 14 within the walls of a local eatery, Mona Trattoria.

"I looked inside this kitchen and it was just this macabre dance of renegades, these cooks that were just silently performing this art form," he says. "I found a calling. I found a home, a team."

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— CHEF BRIAN LEWIS

Since those days, his team has included classmates at The Culinary Institute of America (the admitted anti-academic graduated with honors, thank you very much) and master chefs coast to coast, including Jean-Louis Palladin and Marco Pierre White.

"A very high sense of discipline and really great technique was a commonality in between everybody," he says.

Those best practices translate through Lewis' expansive, immaculate open kitchen, where now his own team is tasked with creating Elm's intricate dishes with characteristically unwavering quality and seasonal innovation.

"The best part, and one of the most motivating things for me, is my team," he says, calling out Elm sous chef Devin Broo. "That's what pushes me every day. ... I can create a dish but I can't, without every single person, create a great song."

Lewis' stand-alone skill carries a tune of its own, though, which caught the attention of Richard Gere for the celeb's Bedford Post Inn.

"I had no idea Richard was behind it when I applied for the gig," Lewis says. "... I wanted to make sure the vision was all hospitality, food, wine; and it was more than that."

The top spot at Gere's eateries, The Barn and The Farmhouse, hailed Lewis home from a dozen years in California and another seven in Manhattan. He can't



Elm chef Brian Lewis. Inset, Flying Pigs Farm's Porchetta with soft millstone egg, Anson Mills grits and stone fruit mostarda. Photographs by Jane Beiles.

seem to stay away from the city, though, what with the "Today" show and Martha Stewart calling him for segments.

Between dinner service (and TV appearances), this Wilton resident and fan of foraging can be found picking product from local farms, chewing the fat with other area chefs, keeping his curves at CrossFit or running through Waveny Park where he and his wife were wed. And talk about romantic, he even awakens in wee morning hours to cook his beloved breakfast.

Back at Elm, look for Lewis in the kitchen, possibly with kumquat-colored socks peeking below his pants, one of the multihued set gifted from the nearby Ralph Lauren shop. ("Real men wear colored socks," he declares.) Lay folk can tap his culinary intel and winsome wit at frequent Elm events like cooking classes or community dinners where original plates highlight wares of local vendors. At last month's whole hog dinner featuring Ryan Fibiger of Saugatuck Craft Butchery in Westport, the menu led with animal cookies.

"They're not cookies," Lewis grins. Naturally. ■