

NORTH POWERS UP

Gracious and tenacious, a catalyst for culinary domination

BY ANDREA KENNEDY

Inspired and kinetic, Eric Gabrynowicz and Stephen Mancini of Restaurant North have struck that trifecta of talent, influence and endless potential that poises them to become a national culinary powerhouse.

"I don't know if I'd say that," Eric says with a faint blush.

He and COO-slash-wine director Stephen are young, savvy, charming and, yes, even humble. Yet, like their restaurant's modest Armonk façade, the duo has little to be modest about. Since opening in 2010, they've been blanketed with "best of" accolades and earned the Slow Food Snail of Approval as well as the respect of patrons and famed restaurateurs alike. Not just local, either. Last fall, Eater NY ranked North one of the best New York-area restaurants outside of the city – second only to North's "great friends and colleagues" at Blue Hill at Stone Barns – and last month they cooked at the James Beard House in Manhattan.

"It's probably the giddiest I have been in the last five years next to the birth of my child," Eric says of the invitation.

Eric, who made the James Beard Foundation short list for Rising Star chefs in 2011, innovates a new menu for every lunch and dinner seating. He, like Stephen, a grad of Scarsdale High School, also seems to have the word "genius" follow him in conversation. Together they concoct not only marvels from the kitchen and bar but also an unrivaled environment of hospitality – one that lasts long after guests depart.

It's morning. I'm sitting at home eating my apple crumb muffin from Restaurant North, the pair's charming parting gift to each dinner guest. My thoughts volley between a meal there the night before – the Bo Bo Poultry fried chicken with pork gravy and Sriracha honey, the hazelnut encrusted poached egg over steamed mussels, the squash focaccia I slathered in air-light pumpkin butter – and the equally exquisite pastry in my palm. I fall in love with North just a little bit more.

"If we can do that by giving graciously with this great muffin," Stephen says, "where you are eating it with your coffee in the morning and remembering your meal – it's just that much of an opportunity to think highly of the restaurant and



Stephen Mancini and Chef Eric Gabrynowicz. Inset, Montauk diver scallops with winter squash, pistachio and granola. Photographs by Bob Rozycki.

want to come back."

Talk about taking the after-dinner mint to the next level. The marketing genius – there's that word again – is just one manifestation of their hospitality-strong career upbringing under Danny Meyer. Eric and Stephen have been buds since cutting their teeth at his Union Square Café. Now, infusing the "Danny Meyerville" philosophy with oodles of their own personality keeps North, well, North of the competition.

Stephen's never forgotten the moment he was turned away from a restaurant for not wearing a jacket – to celebrate his high school graduation, no less.

"The thought process (behind North) was to give great food and great service to the public without needing a jacket or a tie involved," he says.

So the restaurant is entirely white tablecloth and entirely like a neighborhood hangout. Eric will roll up his sleeves to wash dishes and Stephen to bus tables. The drink special is posted in chalk behind the bar. Yet on the wine list – a leather-tied tablet in the old-school sense – you'll find Stephen's world-class selections like Domaine de la Romanée-Conti, Domaine Huet, Bartolo Mascarello, Miani, Araujo Estate and Matthiasson. And each cover is James Beard caliber.

that comes from creating a new menu twice daily.

"It's a constant evolution of the thought process of food," he says. "Writing your menu twice a day is easy when you have great product walking through the door."

Relationships with farmers like Mike Meiller of Josef Meiller Slaughterhouse and Farm are several years deep and nurtured with in-person pickups. Eric regularly heads to the farm in Pine Plains to pick up half a steer and a more than 200-pound pig.

"I literally throw them in the back of my Honda CRV every other week, which means I have no shocks left in my car," Eric says.

Add "nice" to their list of accolades. At the holidays, they chose to give Thanksgiving gifts rather than Christmas ones, showing gratitude to buddy chefs with gifts of house-made truffle butter.

Finding fault with North is a tall order, though if you were pressed the only answer may be that their constantly changing menu makes reordering your favorite dish a practical impossibility.

Well, except the cookie.

"If you want to turn an adult into a 5-year-old child, a fresh baked cookie is probably the way to go," Eric says.

True story, though this cookie is no child's play. Served in a plate-sized piping hot skillet, packed with "really good butter," Brooklyn's Mast Brothers' chocolate and heaped with Jane's local vanilla ice cream, each sublime bite simply made my eyelids drop.

When I awakened from my cookie dream, I noticed a well-loved copy of Steinbeck's "Of Mice and Men" had landed on our table. Tucked inside was the bill.

So charming, North. So charming.

Visit Restaurant North at 386 Main St. in Armonk. For more, visit restaurantnorth.com or call (914) 273-8686. ■