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Fall 2011 • Number 19



State Bird

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EDIBLE TRAVELS

BY ANDREA E. MCHUGH

PHOTOS BY ANGEL TUCKER & ORLA MURPHY-LASCOLA

PURE PORCINE PLEASURE AT HOGTOBER FEST

A Providence Chef Goes Whole Hog on Nantucket



Just as the autumn sun paints its brilliant hues across New England's tree-tops, a gentle rhythm returns to kitchens across Nantucket. It's a familiar calm for chefs Matt Jennings and Michael LaScola, longtime friends who rose through the culinary ranks on the "Little Grey Lady of the Sea."

Before he became the lauded chef/owner of Providence's Farmstead and La Laiterie, a three-time Boston Cochon 555 champion, renowned cheesemonger and James Beard Foundation Award nominee, Jennings worked his way up from dishwasher to sous-chef on Nantucket, eventually landing at 21 Federal, one of the island's lauded eateries.

Just a short walk from the restaurant, another young sous-chef, LaScola, was also winning the respect of hardened kitchen pros at the legendary American Seasons. "We would do a couple of events together out there [each year]—that was when we were 20, 21—and our friendship just kind of started there," says Jennings.

Though settled in Providence, Jennings concedes he looks for any excuse to visit his old stomping grounds. LaScola and his wife, Orla Murphy-LaScola, bought American Seasons in 2004, and Jennings and his old friend began talking about orchestrating events together like they had so many years ago. "[We settled on] the common theme, which was swine," says Jennings, "but we wanted to take it to a new level."

Opposite: Matt Jennings feeds the pigs. (Photo by Angel Tucker.)
Above: Michael LaScola (left) and Matt Jennings at the pig butchery workshop. (Photos by Orla Murphy-LaScola).

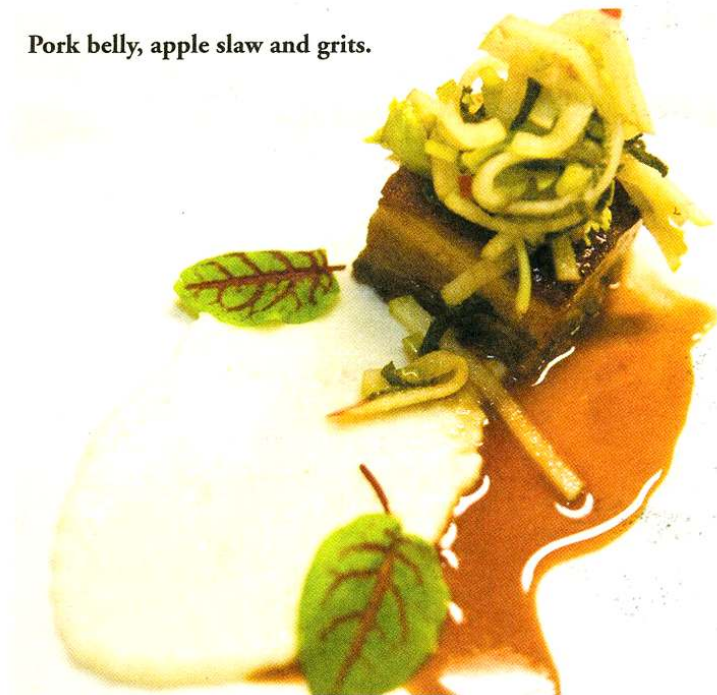
The conversations turned more serious when Jennings and LaScola formally organized their first collaborative weekend of pure porcine pleasure in 2009. HOGtoberfest, as it was christened, included "This Little Piggy," a nose-to-tail demonstration on how to maximize the use of the entire pig; a pork tasting paired with beers from Nantucket's Cisco Brewers; a decadent showcase by American Seasons' Pastry Chef Natasha Misanko (with recipes featuring the unusual combination of chocolate and pork like Chocolate Bacon Bark and other pork-inspired sweet treats); and an "Ode to Pig Dinner," an all-things-swine multi-course dining experience.

Though ambitious, LaScola describes the inaugural event as a low-key gathering of mostly island locals equipped with open minds and curious palates. More than just an overwhelming success and pork connoisseur's hog heaven, the weekend served as a platform for Jennings and LaScola to educate consumers about where their food comes from and also how an animal's diet can affect its flavor.

The chefs' bromance bloomed and plans for the next HOGtoberfest were soon under way. In early 2010, Jennings reached out to Krista Van Dale of John Hunt Farm in Little Compton to raise a trio of Berkshire-Tamworth pigs from infancy to market day.

"It was her first year even raising animals," says Jennings, but it was an ideal partnership. "Krista wanted to make a foray into animal husbandry and I was really interested in the process. She was so new, and into it, that she was willing to let me into that bubble. I was able to

Pork belly, apple slaw and grits.



Bacon and eggs: soft-cooked egg, blood sausage, housemade guanciale.



work with her a lot on what the pigs were eating, what they were doing outside, seeing to it they were allowed to forage and that sort of stuff.”

They were fed, and some would say spoiled, on local foodstuffs including leftover beer mash from Newport Storm Brewery and cheese scraps from Narragansett Creamery. “So they were eating like I do—cheese and beer,” he laughs.

Berkshire-Tamworths, explains Jennings, made the ideal crossbreed for the HOGtoberfest events. Berkshires—“the couch potato of the pig family,” as Jennings describes—develop a healthy fat cap and, in his experience, beautiful marbling in the muscle. “But the Tams are foragers and natural grazers; they tend to be more closely related to wild boars. They’re a little bit more ruminant and crazy, so it was two great breeds mixed. You get the best of both worlds,” he explains.

Everything from the pigs’ diet to their lifestyle, explains Jennings, ultimately translates on the dish, quite literally from field to fork. “Pigs are one of those animals whose meat really takes on the flavors of those things they’re directly in contact with,” he says. Noshing on wild roots, flowers, thistles, onions and other crops while rummaging through their Little Compton pasture was all to the pigs’—and diners’—benefit.

On a glorious October weekend, a curious group of about 20 porkivores gathered in the American Seasons kitchen to watch the two chefs display knife skills at their best. Throughout the whole hog butchering demonstration, the two offered an edifying lesson on the benefits of using every part of the animal. “That’s what it’s all about, you know? It’s probably the most important thing,” says Jennings. “It can all be used—literally—all of it.”

To do so, he explains, is to the benefit of the pig, which he acknowledges made the ultimate sacrifice; the farmer, who is sending whole animals to the butcher to be used, not just the prime cuts; the consumer, who will pay substantially less for uncommonly sold parts (which Jennings says typically pack more flavor); and for the butcher, who prefers to sell as much of an animal as possible.

Jennings cites the rising demand for pork belly among consumers as a prime example. “I’m all about the naughty bits and the little pieces that people don’t normally think about using.” LaScola agrees, adding,

“Using every bit of an animal that gave its life up for you—the pig is key for that. Most people don’t know where the bacon or chops come from. There’s literally no face to it, and there’s no connection,” he says. LaScola stresses the humane raising of the pigs, the respect and work behind the entire process as part of the birth-to-butcher cycle.

As Jennings and LaScola prepare for this year’s HOGtoberfest, (October 15–16) on Nantucket, where this time around LaScola is overseeing raising the pigs on Nantucket’s Faraway Farms, the two are anxiously planning a culinary experience for people who, as LaScola explains, want to get “over-porkified.”

Despite their fanatical love of pork, there was some hesitation on behalf of both chefs last year on whether to serve a course of roasted pig heads. “We weren’t really sure. After all, it is Nantucket,” La Scola says with a sly grin. Jennings adds, “Michael and I had this moment when we were talking about it ... we were standing outside by his walk-in just sort of looking at each other, and we said, ‘Yeah! Let’s *do it!* ... Let’s do it!’”

The entire kitchen staff gathered eagerly to peer into the elegantly appointed dining room for the verdict. “People loved it, and I think that’s the kind of customer that HOGtoberfest is all about,” says Jennings. “Somebody who is willing to give it a shot, who is interested in trying new things, and who has a love for pork.” *eR*

Andrea E. McHugh is a freelance writer who has written for the *Hartford Courant*, *Baltimore Magazine*, *Daily Candy*, *Design Sponge*, *Providence Monthly* and more. She resides in Newport.

This year’s HOGtober Fest will be held on October 15–16 at American Seasons on Nantucket. Reservations are strongly suggested.

American Seasons

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