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Chicken *Divine*

Who knew Portland's restaurants would be squawking over bragging rights to the best bird?

BY CLAIRE Z. CRAMER

From our second-floor window booth at the East Ender on Middle Street, we've got a nice view of *Nova Star's* bow and a slice of the harbor. We've come for chicken, and we discover we've also lucked into "Wine-down" Wednesday. A platter arrives, heaped with half a mahogany-skinned chicken set on a smear of sweet-sour mustard barbecue sauce. Hush puppies stand adjacent with a ramekin of maple sour cream for dipping. There's tangle of sautéed spinach—the fresh farm kind with actual stems—garnished with paper-thin slices of seared prosciutto.

This feast, simply "smoked hen" on the menu, is enough for two to share; it's \$20, and tonight our half-price bottle of French white burgundy is \$18.

How is it that so many local restaurants

are working so hard to make a star out of chicken just now? Owner Meg Schroeter is proud to reveal her secret. "Last weekend, the chef and sous-chef drove up to Rumford and brought back 30 from Roaring Lion Farm." The hens spend a day soaking in a brine of spices, bay leaves, and honey before a "low and slow" spell in the restaurant's



smoker. They're finished on the grill.

This chicken is meaty and juicy, tasting of each step it's undergone in East Ender's kitchen. The hush puppies—crusted, cakelike, and golden with yellow cornmeal—may have just knocked Salvage BBQ's out of first place.

When you start asking around about chicken sourcing, you get a lot of different answers but absolutely no indifference. Chefs are as serious about chicken as anything they serve. And diners care. No more dried-out boneless breast fillet orphaned at the bottom of the menu.

At Timber on upper Exchange Street, whole golden chickens revolve slowly in a fridge-sized rotisserie oven. It's a tempting sight through the window on the door.

"I don't think I ever ordered chicken in

HUNGRY EYE

Chicken's always been in style on Fore Street's wood-fired rotisserie; below, the hen and hush puppies at the East Ender. Previous page: A rotisserie bird at Timber, along with a close-up at East Ender's bar.



a restaurant before I started working here,” says bartender Michael Wescott. “But this rotisserie oven is outrageous.”

Timber sources two-and-a-half-pound Patuxent Farm chickens (a brand of natural bird distributed to—but not from—Maine) which are offered as half or whole birds with a choice of dipping sauces including bear-naise, lemon garlic, Thai peanut, and bacon/blue cheese.

“These chickens come in *fresh*. We brine them with salt, a little sugar, fresh herbs, chicken stock, and a bit of bourbon,” says Timber’s chef Casey Christensen. “We rotisserie them slowly, at about 275 degrees.” A half-chicken (\$18) comes out on a platter garnished with spears of fresh rosemary and thyme and a whole lemon that’s been halved and charred on the grill, adding depth to the lemon flavor. The chicken’s been brined so subtly it’s indiscernible—except for the juicy effect it’s had on the meat. You may forget that Timber is a steakhouse as you eat this chicken with your fingers.

“We make our fried buffalo croquettes from rotisserie chicken, pulled off the bones

and minced with onions and blue cheese,” says Christensen. Drizzled in spicy buffalo sauce and served with celery sticks and blue cheese dip, these crumb-crusted treats are just the thing at happy hour for \$5 with a glass of \$4 local brew.

At Lolita, “We spatchcock game hens or poussins by removing the backbone and pressing them flat before grilling,” says chef Guy Hernandez. And what a grill—it’s cuisine as theater, wood-fired with adjustable racks visible to curious diners. “Just before serving the whole bird [\$24], we cut it in two so it’s easy to share.” His birds are supplied by “Provisions International—they find us New-York-state poussins and Cavendish Farm quail from Vermont”—and other quality farm birds around the Northeast as available.

“We use organic Bell & Evans chickens,” says Paige Gould, who owns Central Provisions with her husband, Chris. Their dazzling Chicken Bo Ssam (\$21) electrifies with green papaya and Thai condiments.

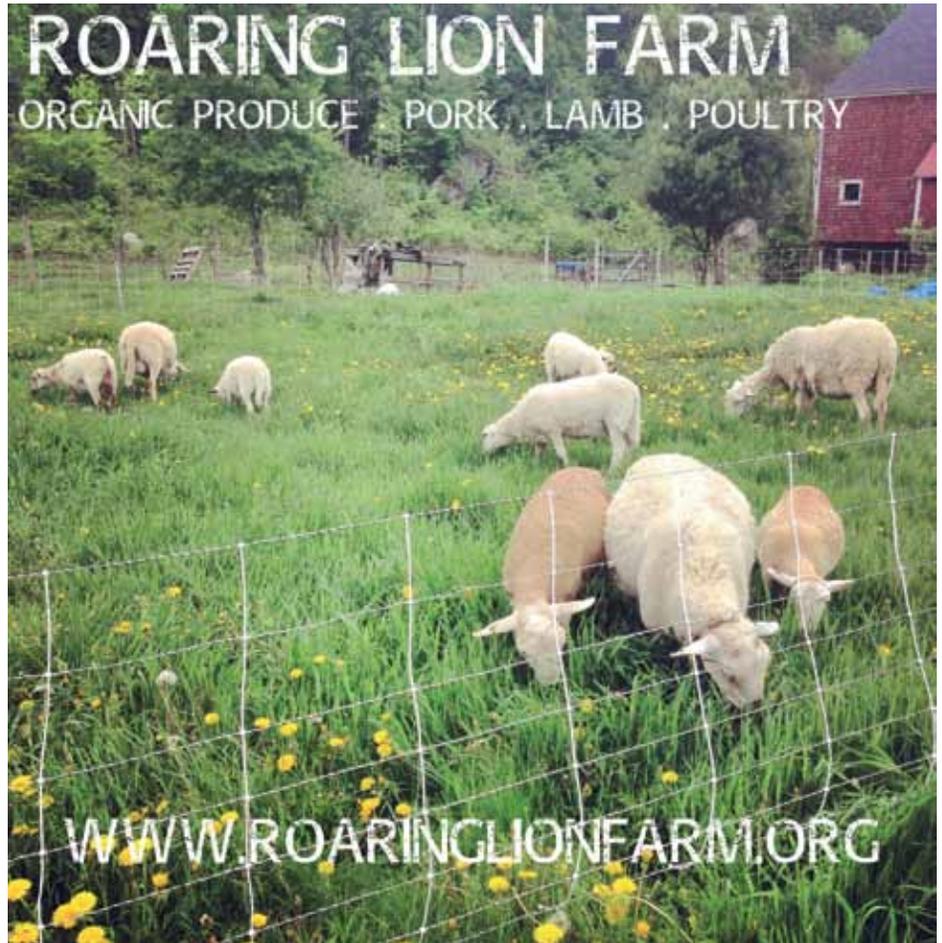


"I EAT my own all-natural chickens every day," says Ryan Wilson at Common Wealth Farm in Whitefield. "I like raising them, processing them, cutting them up, selling them, and eating them. I do this 7 days a week, 12 hours a day. Chicken farming's not for everyone, but I don't want to do anything else."

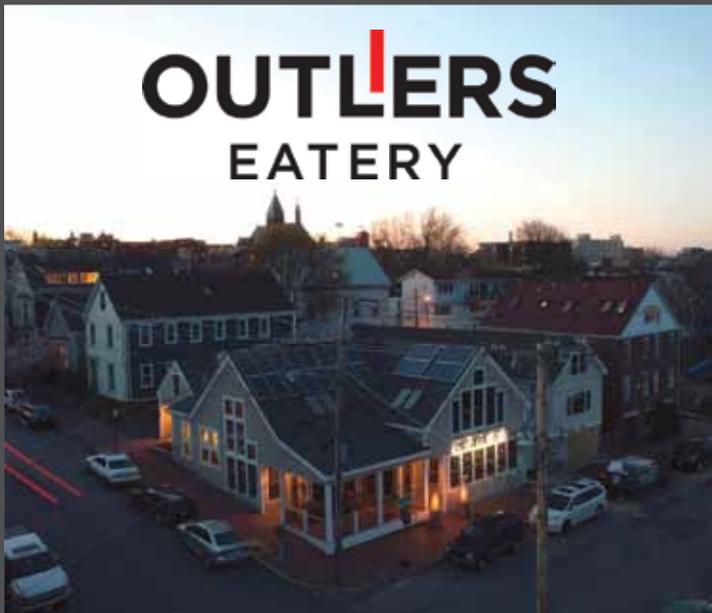
Wilson, 26, and his girlfriend and business partner, Gina Simmons, are raising and processing about 20,000 birds a year. Right now, they're setting up a collaboration with Maine-ly Poultry of Warren. "John Barnstein's been my mentor for the past three years. Maine-ly will do the raising, and we'll [transition to] a federally inspected slaughterhouse in Gardiner where we can handle higher volume."

Wilson and Simmons raise Cornish Cross chickens, which Wilson explains yield a higher weight in meat for the commitment of time and feed required. Their wholesale customers extend "from Kittery to Bar Harbor." Common Wealth's restaurant clients include Fore Street, Hugo's, Duckfat, Out-

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HUNGRY EYE

Chicken Divine (continued from page 59)

liers, and the Small Axe food truck. If you buy the excellent chicken at the Rosemont Markets, you're a Common Wealth consumer, too.

"OUR CHICKENS are from Serendipity Acres farm in Yarmouth," says David Levi, the chef/owner of Vinland, Portland's most exactly local restaurant. "We run our crispy-skin chicken dish. We occasionally do special chicken hearts, and we'll be doing something with livers."

Serendipity Acres also supplies the Blue Spoon on Munjoy Hill, where they serve a terrific chicken roasted under a brick (\$26), a method that's long been the cafe's calling card. Only the sides and pan sauces vary with whim and the seasons.

"We're so lucky—we have such loyal customers—people who'll pay a little more for quality," says Jules Fecteau, owner for the past seven years of the chicken farming enterprise within her mother's Serendipity Acres in Yarmouth.

Serendipity is "MOFGA-certified organic and open pasture—not just moveable cages. They have huts, but they can come and go as they like. We do our own processing, which is good, because from the moment they get here as chicks, we have complete quality control." Serendipity supplies chicken to restaurants including Fore Street, Back Bay Grill, Local Sprouts, The Well at Jordan Farm in Cape Elizabeth, and Earth in Kennebunkport.

Fecteau also brings fresh and frozen birds—whole and parts, including livers—to the Saturday farmers' market in Deering Oaks. She and Maine-ly Poultry set up at the western edge of the market, closest to Deering Avenue. They're not alone as meat purveyors. There's more local poultry, and more meat—and eggs—than ever at Portland's Saturday and Wednesday markets. Local chicken costs more, but it tastes like chicken, and this is a bigger deal than you might think. And yes, you'll pay \$5 for a dozen eggs, but what eggs!

I roast Serendipity chicken thighs I purchase in Deering Oaks; they are memorably delicious and flavorful. Fresh livers, quickly pan-fried and then finished with a flash of wine and fresh herbs, are a revelation. Jules Fecteau is doing something rather magical up in Yarmouth. ■

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