


FIELD REPORT

Table to Farm



David La Spina for The New York Times

Jonathan Justus and Camille Eklof preparing for service.

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It's one thing to visit the farm where your salad was grown. It's another to stand on the killing floor where that evening's braised pork originated. But to interview the Missouri chef Jonathan Justus means starting at the beginning of the dish.

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Lars Klove for The New York Times. Food Stylist: Jill Santopietro.

So after spending the morning with his butter maker and chicken and egg suppliers, we skipped to the main course and visited Paradise Locker Meats, a small-production slaughterhouse and meat-processing plant that works with Heritage Foods U.S.A. to supply top restaurants with meat from heirloom breeds.

As we parked in the muddy lot, visions of [Upton Sinclair](#) and immigration abuses flitted through my formerly [vegetarian](#) mind. But Paradise was spotless and calm, save for the man with a band saw bisecting a cow. The only other hints of the previous day's slaughter — conducted, however oxymoronicly, according to humane guidelines — were a cart brimming with pigs' heads and boxes marked for Chez Panisse, Lupa, Bar Boulud and Fatted Calf. A few of those boxes would have a much shorter trip to the plate that day.

“What’s being served at Momofuku and Spotted Pig is what I’m serving,” he said of Justus Drugstore: A Restaurant, located 11 miles away in Smithville. “I’m just here at the source.”

Paradise had five employees in 2003, including the owner, Mario Fantasma, his wife and his son. Today they employ 25, with plans to expand to meet demand. The plant, it turns out, has created more than jobs in the community. “One of the reasons we decided we could do a restaurant is because of what Mario’s doing here,” said Justus, an intense, articulate man who mentions his O.C.D. personality and

low self-esteem in fast-paced rotation, making him seem much younger than his 43 years. When his mother and sister approached him about opening a restaurant in the family drugstore — “the *anti-plan*,” as he saw it — the first thing that he looked at was agri-infrastructure. Fortunately, in the decades since he last lived back home, between stints as a bike messenger and butcher in San Francisco and a cook in the South of France, the farm had moved closer to the table. Now he could realize his goal to connect the region’s tables to its farms. “This is a big piece of the puzzle,” he said of Paradise. “It allows me to do a nose-to-tail menu.”

Fantasma beamed as Justus launched into a lecture on the genius of Paradise’s four-rib-bone country cut, which he serves both braised and smoked in one dish, topped with bacon-powder-flecked apple chantilly and tag-teamed with a corn flan, bacon-studded cabbage and apple sticks.

“This guy kills me,” Fantasma said, elbowing Justus. “He scares me.”

When he opened the restaurant two years ago, Justus probably scared many of his 5,000 neighbors, and not just because he’s a Democrat. Missouri is more about barbecue than ginger-brined pork with apple foam. Living out their 15-year dream of opening a restaurant, he and his wife, Camille Eklof, transformed his family’s 1950s drugstore into a bit of the big city, albeit on “a microbudget.” The old soda fountain became the bar, where a local botanist and an environmental scientist were set to work concocting bitters, vermouth and infused liquors.

Locals can now drop by for a Manhattan made with date-infused bourbon and a bar snack of turkey fries (a k a testicles) with a morel-cream sauce. Instead of making the 20-minute drive to Kansas City for rib tips, they now stick around for Akaushi brisket from Paradise braised in homemade root-beer. (Justus uses the G.P.S. on his [iPhone](#) to forage for sassafras and other native plants.) Or maybe freshwater striper bass rendered baroque with egg-white gratin, persimmon paint, maple-sherry-ginger foam and caramel-mint dust.

Justus said the food is his version of Midwestern country cooking, “created in a vacuum.” Pride, and economic necessity, dictate that many things be made from scratch, like charcuterie, bacon and ham; bread is baked by Eklof, who waits on tables and works as the general manager; fish and meat are butchered in-house. Justus is always bargaining with purveyors for “off cuts” of meat. “All our cuts are off cuts,” he said with a laugh.

They live by their food politics, but Justus and Eklof don’t proselytize at the table. They let the menu do the talking: on the cover, a quote from [Thomas Keller](#) stating that good food takes time lets diners know they won’t make the 8 o’clock movie; the back lists 25 local purveyors, intended to open people’s eyes to the links a restaurant can have to its area — links that Justus wants to weave into an infrastructure for farmers, breeders, aquaculturists and food artisans that could eventually slow development as farmers reclaim land to meet demand from revolutionary restaurants like his.

While it took the couple a while to come around to coming home, Smithville seems to suit their goals. Justus recalled Eklof’s urging him to consider it: “She said: ‘Look, we can live in San Francisco forever, and we’re never going to change anyone’s mind because we’re going to be in our insular community. If we ever want to make any change, we’ve got to be the monkey wrench from the inside.’ ”

From the outside, the change is evident. Mark Ladner, the executive chef at Del Posto in New York, dined at Justus Drugstore last summer as part of Heritage Foods’ pork tour of the area. He was impressed with the “funky, positive” feel, both on the menu and in the dining room. “It felt like they were doing something important,” he said.

The satisfaction of building a community around food has been rewarding spiritually, if not yet financially. “This restaurant is completely and totally built on philosophy,” Justus said. “Cause it sure as [expletive] isn’t about money. It can’t be.” They live off of Eklof’s tips and are saving to be able to provide health insurance for

their 16 employees — part of their plan to redefine what a restaurant can be.

“I hope what we’re doing is a forefront of a trend,” he said, looking out of the window they built onto Main Street. “I feel like, if we can do this here — really! — why can’t this be done anywhere?”

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