

UNDER THE TOQUE

Farmerie cooks up a Public forum for international flavors

BY PAUL FRUMKIN

Brad Farmerie originally had planned to pursue a career in mechanical engineering. But in the mid-1990s he was drawn to cooking and the exploding London culinary scene, where he worked with a number of top chefs, including New Zealand-born Peter Gordon. Farmerie was deeply influenced by Gordon, he says, characterizing his mentor's cooking as being "more about light, clean flavors than fussy presentation."

"He traveled extensively around the world and brought back Asian and Middle Eastern ingredients that few other chefs were working with," Farmerie says. "It was a great eye opener."

While in London Farmerie began discussing the opening of his own restaurant with his brother, Adam, a principal at the cutting-edge design and architectural firm AvroKo. Together with AvroKo, Farmerie opened Public on Elizabeth Street in the NoLita section of Manhattan in 2003 to critical and general acclaim. The Zagat guide called the restaurant "superhip," while The New York Times said that the menu "swings for the fences with each and every dish."

You started your career with the intention of getting a degree in mechanical engineering at Penn State. What changed your direction?

I know everyone says this, but my mother was really an amazing cook. She had a garden for as long as I can remember. She baked bread every day. I ate well when I was growing up. When I went to Penn State, I needed money so I started cooking. I fell in love with it and everything about it — the food, the lifestyle, even the hours. I liked the fast pace. I was doing very well in my engineering courses, but it just wasn't clicking. So I thought I'd take courses at Le Cordon Bleu in London.

Why London?

My brother lived in London. I thought I'd be there six months maximum. Then I started meeting chefs who were doing incredible things. It was a great time to be in London. It was in the mid '90s, and the city was going through a huge culinary revolution.

What happened there?

My first job at the Sugar Club with chef Peter Gordon was the most influential. It was still new and fresh and different. He had just put out a book. Peter was like bookends on my career in London. I first worked with him and then decided that I needed to learn formal French. I worked at Chez

Nico and also Le Manoir aux Quat'Saisons with Raymond Blanc. They were amazingly valuable experiences, but it was not the food I wanted to be doing. Five or six people putting together one plate doesn't ring true for me.

So then you returned to work with Gordon?

Yes. In 2000 I helped him open The Providores. His food was so fresh. His style was fusion. I was at The Providores for over two years. Then I came back to the states to open Public.

What spurred that?

I had been discussing opening Public with AvroKo, a cutting-edge design and architecture company. My brother Adam is one of the principals. They decided they wanted to do a project for themselves, and I was ready. It was a perfect time for both of us. I was ready to come back and open my own place.



Brad Farmerie, executive chef of Public in Manhattan, describes his cooking style as eclectic global fusion that draws from his extensive international travels and takes advantage of ingredients not often used by other chefs.

What was that experience like?

We were lucky. Everybody had such great strengths in their own departments. They didn't question the food, and I didn't question the architecture. There also were other partners handling financial aspects and the operations side. We have a lot of trust in each other. How was the opening? It was crazy when we first opened. But it's a nice stress to have. I kept thinking, "How will we turn the tables?" It took about three months to get our step. Fortunately, it's just as busy today.

How would you describe your food?

It's eclectic — global, fusion. I know that fusion has a negative connotation, but it describes [the cooking of] people who are well-traveled, like Gordon. I also try to use ingredients that others aren't using. We've never had chicken on the menu, never had beef on the menu. For a brief time we

had salmon. I like using New Zealand venison or marinated white anchovies or wild boar or pork bellies. I'm not here to educate people, just to give them something different. There are only so many steaks you want to have.

Do you travel a lot?

I travel every year. This year I've been to Mexico, Tahiti, China, Japan, Hong Kong, and Australia and New Zealand. I'm always looking for ingredients. I went to Tahiti to talk with growers about vanilla.

What are some of the more unusual ingredients you use?

Avocado oil from New Zealand, pomegranate molasses from Lebanon. We preserve our own lemons. We use fennel pollen. We offer a lot of Asian ingredients, like Chinese black vinegar. We use four different types of miso and a lot of different seaweeds. For protein we use kangaroo, grilled rare and served on coriander falafel with green-pepper relish.

BIOGRAPHY

Title: executive chef, Public, New York

Birth date: March 12, 1973

Hometown: Pittsburgh

Education: Penn State, University Park, Pa.; Le Cordon Bleu, London

Career highlight: "Opening my own restaurant in New York, a city I had never worked or lived in before. It was like going in blindfolded."

What is one dish that represents your style of cooking?

Snail and oxtail ravioli. You braise the oxtail for two and a half hours in Asian spices and pick the meat off in the size of snails. Then you make a mix of oxtail and cooked snail meat and form it into large raviolis. We serve them with pickled shiitake mushrooms and smoked paprika oil. The dish uses Asian influences, but it's not your basic Asian fusion. It draws from a lot of different travels — smoked paprika and snails is Spanish. The textural similarity of oxtail and snails is Asian. The pickled shiitake foils the richness of ravioli.

What is your favorite part of the job?

It's not the hours anymore, I can tell you that. If anything, it's getting satisfaction from giving people a really great night out and turning them on to some new things.

In what direction do you see American cuisine moving?

There's a lot of experimental, chemical, weird food right now. I'm not sure that will continue. It's only the top people who can pull that off. It's not necessarily what I like to cook or eat. I think it will go back to very real food, slightly rustic food ... great ingredients without a lot of manipulation.

If you hadn't become a chef, what do you think you would be doing now?

I might be a photographer. It's what I do on my travels. I love it. But that's just a shot in the dark. I'd like to say rock and roll star too, but that's not in the stars. ■

CHEF'S TIPS

- Experiment with a squeeze of lime before adding salt to heighten flavors.
- Taste everything you make. Even if you do it a million times, there is a subtle difference every time. And you get to learn your own palate.

pfrumkin@nrrn.com