

Homemade Heroes

BY LEIGH KUNKEL

Made-in-house specialties not only enhance menus, they also take the guest experience beyond the restaurant's four walls.



GUESTS' OBSESSION WITH THE GIRL & THE GOAT'S GREEN BEANS LED CHEF STEPHANIE IZARD TO START A SAUCE LINE.

"MY PHILOSOPHY IS that you come to a restaurant in order to see what that chef is capable of doing." Brian Bruns, chef and co-owner of Flat & Point, a new restaurant in Chicago, takes that statement seriously. It's hard to find a dish on the menu in which the majority—if not all—of the components weren't made in-house. And Bruns is far from alone in this approach.

As the competition stiffens amid market saturation, it's no longer enough for operators to serve good food. To truly stand out, restaurants must shine. In-house specialties, from house-made ramen broth to freshly churned ice cream, are one way to do that.

At Flat & Point, the whole menu is intertwined, with many in-house items depending on each other in some way. "We want all items we bring into the restaurant, be it meat or vegetable, to serve many purposes," Bruns says. To that end, the chef and his team make the bread, ricotta cheese, pasta, charcuterie items, and all the sauces on premises.

In addition to showcasing creativity, Bruns says, cooking this way has both environmental and economic benefits. "We use every bit of something before it goes into the compost," Bruns says. "Sometimes products don't even make it to the compost because after being used multiple times, they end up on a dish."

Seasonality and local foods often play into house specialties, as the ingredients not only taste better but are also less costly to transport and produce fewer emissions. At the Ritz-Carlton Resort in Lake Oconee, Georgia, chef Edgar Carrera changes items like apple butter or spiced nuts based on what's available.

"We have a strong focus on sourcing and collaborating with regional farmers and food artisans to provide the most authentic experience when possible," Carrera says.

Nick Strawhecker, chef and owner of Forno in Omaha, Nebraska, has a similar approach when it comes to his *tigelle*, a traditional Italian street food that's similar to an English muffin stuffed with meats, cheeses, and spreads.

"Locality and seasonality are very important to us," Strawhecker says. "For the *tigelle* we do a lot of jams, pickles, and ferments, which have the additional environmental benefit of extending the life of a food from one season to the next." Recently the *tigelle* dish has featured jams made from tomatoes and eggplant. The two vegetables flourish in Nebraska during the mid- to late summer, allowing Forno to preserve and serve the jams into the fall and winter.

It's not only food menus that are jumping on the in-house bandwagon. At Stratus Rooftop Lounge in Philadelphia, bar manager Mirek Struniaski makes as many cocktail components as possible, including peanut butter-washed bourbon, house-made tiki bitters, and a cinnamon whiskey that's concocted with allspice, cloves, and honey from local beehives.

As part of Kimpton Hotels, Stratus Rooftop Lounge uses house-made items as a means to both elevate the guest experience and spotlight locally sourced goods. The specialties also help build loyalty by providing a memorable guest experience. "Guests love knowing that they are getting the freshest and sustainably sourced products for their hard-earned money," Struniaski says. "They love the surprise of asking for a fireball shot and being delivered a hand-crafted, and arguably better, product."

Carrera also uses his in-house specialties to enhance the guest experience beyond the Ritz-Carlton premises. Guests may find a hand-labeled jar of spiced nuts in their rooms or a jar of fresh preserves, ready to take home, by their dinner plate in the restaurant.

"We strive to achieve an emotional engagement through the different experiences and elements that tie our unique location and resort together," Carrera says, "something that will let our guest remember their experience here."

Some restaurants have gone even further by bringing their best-loved specialties into the consumer market. Today, reservations at Stephanie Izard's pair of concepts are among the most coveted in Chicago. But when she opened her first spot, *Girl & the Goat*, in 2010, she never would have guessed that one of the most popular dishes at the meat-heavy restaurant would be the green beans.

"Guests were constantly asking for the sauce to use at home to turn up the flavor for their own veggie dishes," Izard says. "That's when I decided to start bottling it." The resulting lineup, under the name, *This Little Goat*, includes sauces and spice blends that are available in select-area supermarkets.

At the Alabama-based chain Full Moon BBQ, co-owner David Maluff experienced a similar demand from guests. "The popularity of the Full Moon products that were being served in our stores is what inspired us to take our bread-and-butter items like barbecue sauce and chow-chow and move them to the consumer market," Maluff says.

Traditionally, the world of consumer-packaged goods (CPGs) has largely been dominated by limited-service operators like Full Moon rather than full-service independents or small hospitality groups. Venerated chefs like Izard entering the arena could signal a shift.

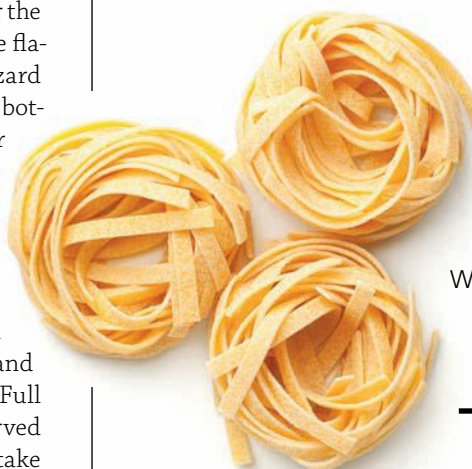
For her part, Izard views the commercial line as another way of connecting with her guests, even after they leave the restaurant. "We're always trying to improve consumer experiences in their home kitchens," she says. ■

Trends

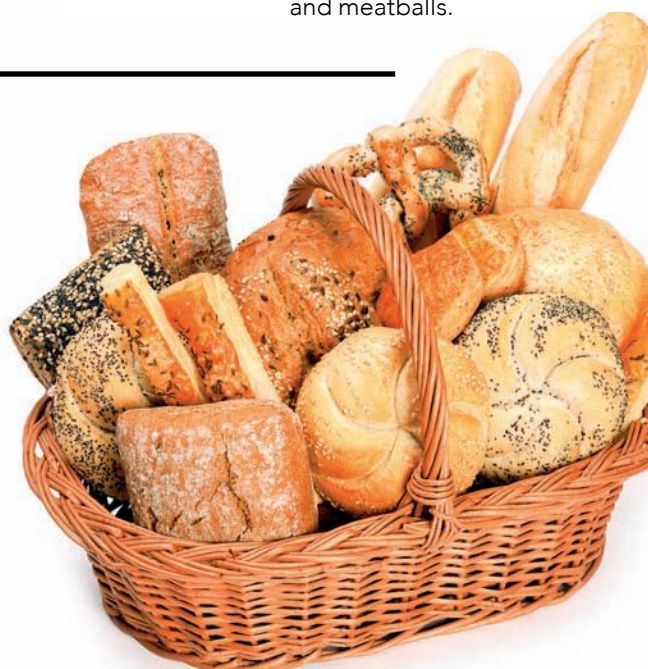
LAY IT ON THICK Forget the tabletop ketchup and dressings of yore; condiments and sauces are now enjoying special attention from culinary masters. At Tre Rivali in Milwaukee, chef Heather Terhune makes and sells her hot fudge and salted caramel sauces. On the savory side, all-star chef Rick Bayless' line of Mexican sauces and **SALSAS** is not to be missed.



TWIRL AND SLURP Many restaurants that excel in pasta-making are now selling their coveted, house-made noodles to go. At Tortello in Chicago, guests can linger over **FRESH-MADE PASTA** at the restaurant or take it home to cook themselves. Urbana, in Washington, D.C., also offers guests carry-out options for their fresh pasta, sauces, and meatballs.



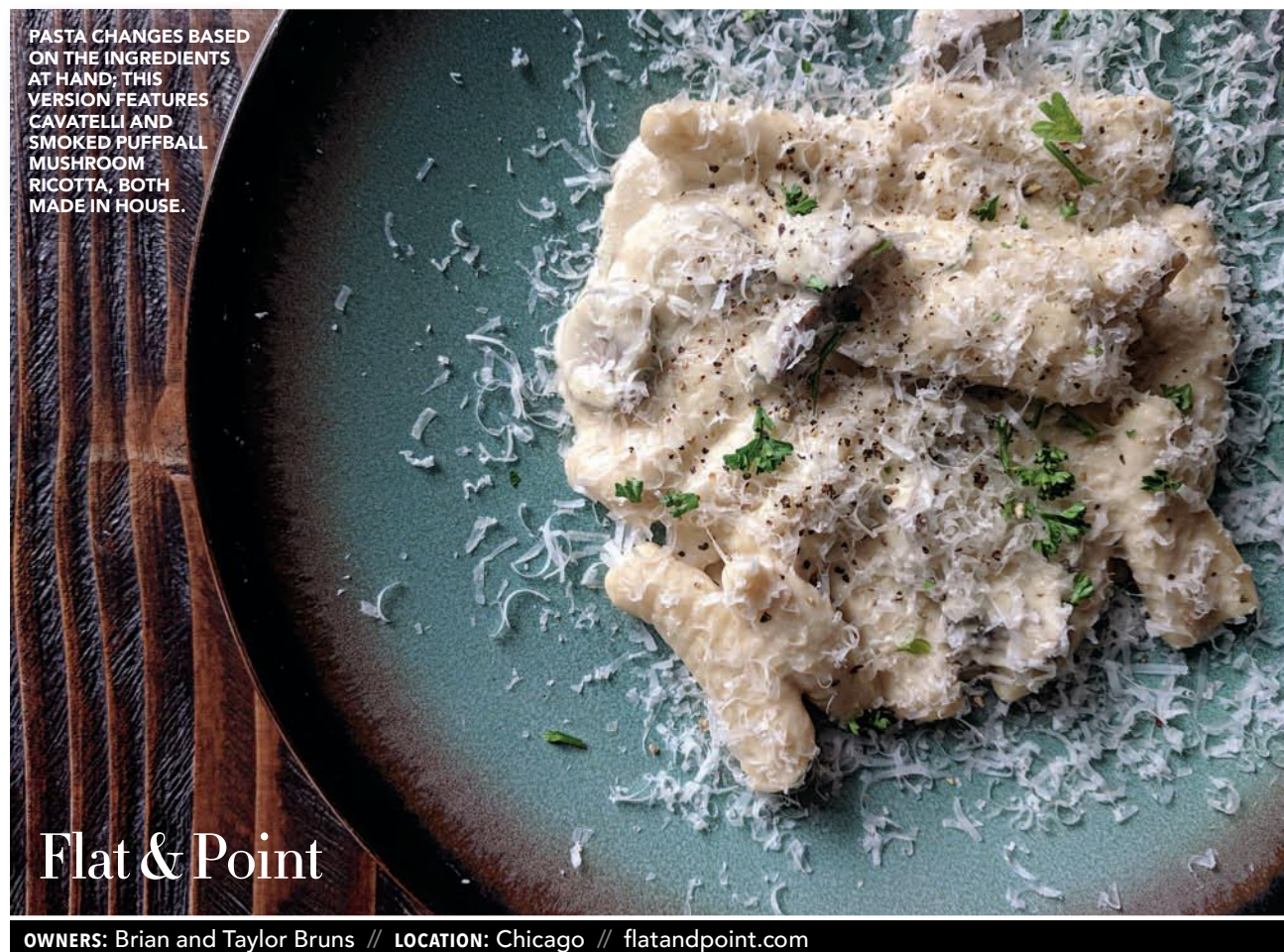
RISE TO THE OCCASION Few things are more beloved by American diners than a good **BREAD BASKET**. The tradition is a fun way to show off a variety of made-in-house offerings. The bread basket at Aureole in New York City is rightfully famous, piled high with the likes of sourdough baguettes, challah, and herbed focaccia.



Bringing Down the House

BY LEIGH KUNKEL

Fresh ideas from three indies to help build your roster of made-in-house ingredients.



“HOUSE-MADE” IS LESS OF A TREND than a mandate at Chicago newcomer Flat & Point, the first restaurant from husband-and-wife team Brian and Taylor Bruns. Brian, the chef, is formerly of the Michelin-starred Spiaggia and Tru and takes his in-house specialties—which run the gamut from ricotta to pasta to house-smoked meat—very seriously. “If I buy bread, cheese, or charcuterie and charge you for it, you are

basically eating at a grocery store where I have nicely plated things,” he says.

The dish that perhaps best exemplifies Flat & Point’s perspective is the ever-changing Brian Pasta. The dish serves as a vessel to highlight made-in-house items. If a menu item yields extra that might normally be thrown away, those ingredients can find new life in the Brian Pasta.

Its flexible nature also means that

when something amazing shows up at the market in the morning, it can be easily incorporated into that night’s iteration of the dish. It’s vital that the stars of the menu be made in house and one of a kind.

“I want you to be able to look at all the products we serve and not get them anywhere else,” Bruns says. “I also want you to be able to enjoy and understand the food but not be able to re-create it at home.”



HAMILTON COUNTY TOURISM

TAKING ITS CUES FROM SWISS DESIGN, EGGSHELL BISTRO SERVES ECLECTIC DISHES, MANY OF WHICH FEATURE CUISINE MASH-UPS.

Eggshell Bistro

OWNER: Larry Hanes
LOCATION: Carmel, Indiana
eggshellbistro.com

EVEN IF YOU DON'T KNOW MUCH about Swiss design principles, it's not hard to recognize that there's something special going on at Eggshell Bistro in Carmel, Indiana.

That's because chef and owner Larry Hanes had a successful career in art and design before entering the culinary world. "I see an immense correlation between the essence of Swiss design and the culinary arts," Hanes says. "Both foundational trainings should involve rhythm, repetition, balance, contrast, color, as well as symmetri-

cal and asymmetrical composition."

So how does this play out in the food? Imagine a borderless menu that draws inspiration from cuisines across the world. If Hanes can make an element of the dish on-site, he will. For example, Eggshell's labneh-za'atar dish features pickled fig chutney, labneh cheese, and za'atar spice blend served alongside a sourdough crumpet—all of which are made in house.

By making ingredients in house, Hanes often discovers new, unrelated things he can use in later dishes. He even has a motto to sum up the idea: "I will always relish the idea of creating a custom relish," he says.

Forno



VISIT OMAHA

WITH THE EXCEPTION OF SPECIALTY ITALIAN IMPORTS, FORNO PRIDES ITSELF ON MAKING SAUCES, JAMS, AND OTHER ITEMS IN-HOUSE.

OWNER: Nick Strawhecker
LOCATION: Omaha, Nebraska
fornoomaha.com

THE DINING SCENE IN OMAHA, Nebraska, has exploded over the last few years, with options ranging far beyond the steak and potatoes that the area is known for. One of those new options is Forno, a casual Italian spot helmed by chef Nick Strawhecker.

"Wood-fired hyper-seasonality is really the cornerstone of what we do at the restaurant and always has been," Strawhecker says. "It's what our guests expect and how I like to cook." Most of the dishes at Forno, which means oven in Italian, come straight out of the huge, Ferrari-red oven that is the centerpiece of the restaurant's open kitchen.

Almost every dish on the menu features at least one house-made specialty, from the crispy, doughy tigelle and tangy eggplant jam to the perfectly blistered pizza crusts. Even the brunch menu gets in on the action, with granola that the Forno team makes from scratch. If it didn't come straight from Italy (because who could improve on mozzarella di bufala?), there's a very good chance it came right out of Strawhecker's kitchen. ■