

# NYC chefs vitalize Vermont dining scene

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(Photo: Candace Page, Burlington Free Press)

SOUTH LONDONDERRY, VT. — At 28, Chloe Genovart ran the dining room at Per Se, possibly New York's best restaurant. Her husband, Wesley, 31, was the founding chef at Degustation, one of the city's hottest eateries.

Their workdays began before noon and ended after midnight. And Chloe was pregnant. The long hours and high pressure of New York's fine dining world had begun to lose their appeal.

So, in 2010, the Genovarts bought a restaurant in rural Vermont, trading a city of more than 8 million for a town of fewer than 2,000 people.

"We wanted a simple life, a quieter life, one where we worked really hard and had freedom to do what we wanted professionally, but also could spend quality time with our family," Chloe Genovart said recently.

In making their move, the young couple joined a small cadre of chefs and maitre d's who have brought their training and experience at New York City's best-known restaurants to the Green Mountains.

They include Northfield Falls native Adam Longworth, chef-owner of the Common Man in Warren and a veteran of Alfred Portale's Gotham Bar and Grill. Michael Kloeti opened Michael's on the Hill in Waterbury after cooking at top-rated Lespinasse. Sudbury native Jed Davis, a principal in Burlington's Farmhouse group of restaurants, and Michael Clauss, late of the Bluebird Tavern, polished their skills working for Daniel Boulud, whose restaurants consistently make fine dining "best of" lists.

Like the Genovarts, they came, or came back, to Vermont to raise children or in search of a better balance between life in the kitchen and outside it. For the chefs, Vermont seemed to offer greater freedom in the kitchen to cook according to their personal styles.

For Vermonters, their arrival has meant exciting new places to eat, from fine-dining restaurants to nouveau taverns where house-made rabbit terrine shares the menu with burgers.

For the chefs and their partners, the move can bring unexpected, often stressful, adjustments to local diners' tastes or the seasonal nature of the restaurant business in some parts of Vermont.

"A lot of people will struggle when they come here," Kloeti said. "What you cook may be right in New York City, but maybe it doesn't fit here. When the client says you are wrong, you are wrong."

## The canapé 'crash-and-burn'

Jed Davis laughed when he was asked whether his New York City experience led to any missteps when he and his partners opened the Farmhouse Tap and Grill in 2010.

"I had a grand vision of a three-tiered tower of canapés," he said. "It's a classic Daniel menu item."

Davis spent five years in New York City, first as kitchen manager and food purchaser at Daniel Boulud's eponymous Daniel, before working the front-of-the-house at Union Square Café and again at Daniel.

"It was crash and burn," he said of the canapé tower, a pricey collection of small bites of chicken pate on toast, roasted garlic with blue cheese and the like.

"Guests were confused about what it was. We couldn't convey the value of it and we couldn't execute it in the kitchen," he said. "The canapés went away real quick."

"Vermont diners are very different from New York City," he added.

That doesn't mean they are unsophisticated or undemanding, he and other chefs said. It does mean that a diner sitting down at a restaurant on a rural dirt road, or a side street in Burlington, arrives with different expectations than a customer on New York's Upper East Side.

Michael Clauss may have been executive chef of Daniel Boulud's catering company, but he knows at Bluebird Tavern, "burgers drive the ship," he said.

The first months of the Genovarts' restaurant, SoLo Farm and Table, were difficult for the couple, who had sunk their savings into the former Three Clock Inn in the tiny village of South Londonderry.

Wesley Genovart spent his youth on the Spanish island of Majorca and cooked in the kitchens of Michelin-starred restaurants in Madrid and San Sebastian. In New York, his Spanish-influenced cooking won praise from The New York Times.

He came to Vermont to continue cooking what he loves to eat: complex dishes that, for example, transform every part of the pig from its belly to its ears into memorable meals.

But in those early months, "Customers would ask, 'Why don't you have eggplant Parmesan?' and 'How about a taco night?'" Chloe Genovart recalled. "We didn't uproot ourselves to do that kind of restaurant."

Her husband served up cod in salsa verde with clams, a traditional Basque dish made with day boat cod from Chatham, Mass.

The cod was a flop. "Up here, people think cod is cheap, not special at all," Chloe Genovart said. "Even though it is special and as local as possible."

New York reputations follow chefs to Vermont. That raises customers' expectations.

Clauss not only had Daniel Boulud in his background, but spent his early months in Vermont vying to represent the United States in the Bocuse d'Or culinary competition in France. Press coverage ensured that Vermont diners knew it.

"It was a lot of pressure to make sure everybody leaves happy, whether they are eating foie gras or a double cheeseburger," Clauss said. "When customers know you have worked at Daniel, they expect what you put on the plate to be perfect."

What they learned in New York kitchens, the chefs agreed, was a spare-no-expense pursuit of perfection, whether in ingredients, preparation, presentation or dining room service.

Kloeti, of Michael's on the Hill, learned the fundamentals of his profession at home in Switzerland, but "New York fine-tuned me, turned me into a racehorse," he said.

He recalled his days cooking with Gray Kunz at Lespinasse, where there were 35 people in the kitchen and "every dish had 15 components on the plate" with a series of chefs contributing vegetables, sauces and garnishes to each dish.

"What they were most concerned with was perfection," agreed The Common Man's Longworth, of his baptism by fire in the restaurants of the Mandarin Oriental hotel in London.

Clauss recalled his time as the sous-chef in charge of the fish station at Daniel. "We didn't put anything on the plate if it wasn't perfect. There was no room for error," he said. A vegetable of the wrong dimension or a garnish slightly out of place was cause for rejection.

"There is no substitute for exposure," Davis said of his time in New York. "To understand how great a restaurant can be you have to live it and breathe it, places where no expense is spared, where the who's who of the world comes to eat, where there is a brigade of chefs that were the best at their jobs."

He laughed as he recalled an old photograph of himself and Boulud holding \$10,000 worth of truffles in their arms.

"All the truffles that have ever entered Vermont do not total \$10,000," he said.

A meal at Daniel or Per Se, with wine, can run \$1,000 for two.

Vermonters tend to blanche at \$40 entrees, so "perfection" has to be redefined when a New York-trained chef relocates to the Green Mountains.

Diners at his Farmhouse and Guild and Company steakhouse aren't looking for New York elegance, Davis said, or silverware that is changed with every course.

But standards learned in great restaurants remain, he said, whether it is butchering meat in-house to control quality or assigning numbers to each position at a dining table, so orders can be served to the right person without having to interrupt guests to ask who has the salmon and who the steak.

Clauss recalled the Daniel kitchen with 17 to 22 cooks on the line, another 15 in the prep kitchen —nearly 40 people to serve about 200 people a night.

"Here we do 160 to 170 covers a night with four people in the kitchen," Clauss said of Bluebird Tavern. (Clauss moved from Bluebird to Amuse in Essex this month.)

Necessarily, that means simpler preparations and, to match customers' wallets, less expensive ingredients.

"I'm comfortable knowing I can't put food from Daniel on a plate here for \$35," he said. A terrine made with beef cheeks in New York, he might prepare here with less expensive lamb neck, he said. An entrée made of rabbit or Scottish grouse in New York might turn up here made with chicken.

The transition from big city to small town is easier for some chefs than for others.

Kloeti, at Michael's on the Hill, said he learned a valuable business lesson by cooking at the Three Clock Inn (later bought by the Genovarts) before opening his own restaurant.

"When there were no tourists, there was no business there," he said of South Londonderry.

"In Vermont you have April, May and November that will decide if your restaurant will make it," he said, referring to the three months when the tourist trade is at its lowest ebb.

So Kloeti purchased a restaurant in Waterbury, just south of Stowe and not far from Interstate 89. That put him within easy reach not just of Stowe, with its affluent out-of-state visitors, but Burlington and the Montpelier area.

"Local people are our bread and butter," he said.

At the Common Man in Warren, Longworth and his longtime partner and co-owner Lorien Wroten are struggling with this issue.

"On a Friday and Saturday in the winter, we'll do 200 dinners. As soon as April comes, we're down to 25 dinners on a Saturday and during the week we'll do eight dinners," he said.

"We do a lot of cool, innovative stuff and it's very labor intensive," he said. Some of his plates will have six, seven or eight garnishes. His steak sauce begins as 20 gallons of beef stock that must be cooked down to two gallons.

"These are all big-city techniques," he said. "The second we start slowing down and that stuff becomes waste, you are killing yourself."

In South Londonderry, the Genovarts struggled with this arithmetic, too. After a bumpy start, they say they have found their niche.

"It was a struggle for us to find a balance, to put out food that inspires and excites us and that people here want to eat," Chloe Genovart said.

Her husband added, "In the first months we couldn't take all the criticism to heart or we would have thought —we're doomed, what have we done?"

He decided, he said, "I'd rather fail doing what I want to do." The restaurant stuck to its complex, Spanish-inflected menu and prices that can mount to \$100 per diner.

Fall and winter proved the new restaurant's salvation. New York and New Jersey skiers from Stratton Mountain and Bromley discovered SoLo. They embraced the sophisticated food and understood its higher price, the Genovarts said. The reservation book filled up.

"Now we have our own clientele," Wesley Genovart said. "It was better for everybody to lose some of the old customers."

Today, the Genovarts live in an apartment over their restaurant. They cultivate vegetables for the kitchen in big raised beds behind the old farmhouse. Chloe's parents help care for 2-year-old Rafael. They close the restaurant in April and November.

"We are really happy, genuinely happy," Chloe Genovart said. "There's a sense of accomplishment we feel almost daily ...we can spend our days with our son, work in the garden, take a couple runs on our snowboard in the winter. I think our life is amazing."