

OUTSTANDING IN THE FIELD

Bringing Farm-to-Table Back to the Farm

BY SARAH ZOBEL | PHOTOGRAPHY BY NATALIE STULTZ





On the heels of the successful farm-to-table movement, Outstanding in the Field’s “restaurant without walls” brings the table to the farm. With a seemingly infinite dining table that it sets up in vineyards, farms, orchards, ranches and other outdoor venues around the country, Outstanding in the Field pairs with local chefs at each location to offer multi-course dinners that take *locavore* to a new level.

Vermont has been a five-time stop on Outstanding in the Field’s annual tour, a route that takes its California-based crew of 10 to the Northwest and through the Midwest to New England, before heading down the Atlantic Coast and back to California via the country’s southern tier.

Last August, Shelburne Orchards was the site of an OITF dinner for some 150 area residents and visitors from as far away as Texas and the West Coast. Some went because they were vacationing locally; others are tour groupies who attend multiple dinners each year; and still others went expressly to sample food prepared by Eric Warnstedt, chef and owner of Hen of the Wood in Waterbury and Burlington and that evening’s designated culinary artisan.

Diners purchase advance tickets for the events, which usually sell out—according to Director Leah Scafe, sometimes within minutes—and menus are set based on what’s local and in season, in a reflection of the organization’s mission to “reconnect diners to the land and the origins of their food, and to honor the local farmers and food artisans who cultivate it.” The first dinner was organized in 1999 by chef and land artist Jim Denevan near his home in Santa Cruz, California. After a few years of hosting dinners locally, in 2003, Denevan—who by then had an established team helping him with logistics—staged OITF dinners in upstate New York and Southern California. The concept took off, and sometime in midsummer 2013 the 500th dinner was held, with the 67,000th guest sitting down to dine.

The events themselves are reminiscent of a casual summer wedding reception, with many guests sporting straw hats, Madras shorts, or sundresses. There’s a cocktail hour—at Shelburne Orchards, guests enjoyed Prohibition Pig Ale and a Blue Gin Flip made with Caledonia Spirits’ Barr Hill gin that was concocted and served by Hen of the Wood co-owner Will McNeil. They nibbled on bluefish crostini, clam fritters with sweet corn and honey, and a multicolor beet tartare that had been dusted with hazelnuts and was served on gleaming silver spoons. Scafe welcomed the diners, gave them a little history of OITF and saluted Vermont, of which she said, “I’m always so amazed by the farming community and the culture that exists around these farms.” She pointed out that guests would be walking right past the makeshift kitchen on their way to the table, and told them to feel free to stop and ask questions, or to “hop up during the meal and go talk to the chefs.”

Shelburne Orchards owner Nick Cowles was visibly pleased to have been invited to host, and led guests on a tour of the orchard and distillery on their way to the 150-foot dining table, which had been set with white tablecloths, silverware and wine glasses earlier in the day.

“It was like elves were out there,” said the orchard’s special events coordinator, Megan Humphrey. “Everything was orchestrated in such a way that we didn’t even know the setup was happening.” Outstanding in the Field guests are invited to BYOP—that’s P for *plate*—which creates a colorful table that’s never the same twice. For those who forget, a random selection of plates is provided for borrowing.

By the time guests reached the table, Warnstedt and his team were ready with the first course: crispy pig’s head with wholegrain mustard aioli, red cipollini and arugula, with glasses of Essex-based Citizen Cider to wash it down. Dishes at OITF dinners are served family style to encourage conversation, with nine servings per platter, and the second course—heirloom tomatoes with Sage Farm feta, red wine vinegar, crispy ham and torn bread—continued the pork theme.

Warnstedt said the menu selection was done fairly last minute because he had to determine what was available locally and in large enough cuts to feed 150. With Vermont Heritage Farm in Chelsea able to provide porchetta, Warnstedt chose that as the main course, and served it with Nicola



potatoes, house kraut with smoked guanciale (cured meat from pork jowls) and stewed apples. Hen of the Wood's own Proprietary White and Pinot Noir were poured as accompaniment.

Dessert was an apple upside-down cake (made with Shelburne Orchards' own) topped with maple vanilla whipped cream and served with Eden Ice Cider.

"It was really amazing," said Burlingtonian Sarah Dietschi of the meal, as she struggled to choose a favorite component (the sauerkraut, maybe, or the salad, or the pork).

"There's a lot of organization involved but we try to keep it simple yet also make it special," said Warnstedt, who has been the man in the kitchen for the last four OITF Vermont dinners. "High-quality ingredients that need little manipulation is what makes those dinners special yet a bit easier—you want to create dishes that aren't too involved."

Guests go for the food, but for some it's also a chance to get to know the region. Elaine Shannon of Brookline, Massachusetts, went with two friends because they'd heard about Warnstedt but hadn't been able to get a reservation at Hen of the Wood during the time they were in northern Vermont. Beth Doughty, of Charlotte, North Carolina, and her friend Katie Hall, of Concord, North Carolina, heard about OITF and decided to make one the centerpiece of a "girls' trip." They'd elected to stay in Burlington and, in addition to attending the dinner, spent three days exploring the area.

"We'll seek them out now," said Doughty of other OITF dinners, adding that their first "absolutely met and exceeded our every expectation."

Scafe said Denevan and crew faced some challenges early on as the concept was evolving, but that the current national passion for local, organic food has continued to drive numbers up, with both new and returning guests showing up.

"We have many regulars that we recognize at the table," says Scafe, and indeed, people were heard reintroducing themselves to dining companions they'd met at other OITF events. For Carlo and Jennifer Gabrielli of Manhattan, this was their fifth dinner—they'd been to another in the Burlington area, along with one in New York City and two on Long Island.

Even for returnees there's a guaranteed element of novelty, because the chef, the menu and the locale change each time. With 90-plus dinners to schedule each year, there's a lot of detail work; Scafe says the team sits down over the winter with a calendar and a map and plots the coming season. While some chefs—like Warnstedt—are regulars, about 30% each year are first-timers; they're chosen based on research and recommendations by other chefs, guests and farmers. And like Warnstedt, they're no slouches: 80 of the 300 who have taken part are James Beard Award nominees or winners.

Outstanding in the Field has taken its "peripatetic farm dinner" to all corners of the nation—they're calling this year's the "50 States Tour" because when it ends, they'll have set at least one table in every state. They've also traveled to eight other countries, including Canada, Spain, Wales and Brazil. The team spends part of each winter conducting a smaller tour, which this year took them to Florida and Hawaii.

"We try to create an interesting and diverse schedule for our guests to enjoy," said Scafe. Although the majority of dinners are located in rural settings, urban sites have included the rooftop of the National Museum of American History in Washington, D.C.; La Plaza Cultural in Lower Manhattan; the oldest working farms in Queens, New York, and Brookline, Massachusetts; and Wattles Farm in Los Angeles.

At the end of the Shelburne Orchards evening, as the hot August sun faded behind the Adirondacks and the air cooled, Eric Warnstedt and his team of chefs stepped out of the kitchen and were greeted with an extended round of applause from 150 very satisfied diners. The Outstanding in the Field crew would soon pack up and move on to set up a dinner in Maine, but for everyone in the orchard, including owner Cowles, this was a table worth lingering over.

"It was a night I'll always remember," said Cowles later. "It was a beautiful evening, the food was delicious, and everyone had a great time. It felt so unexpected in a place that's so familiar to me—it made it really dreamlike." 🍂

For information about the 2014 tour, including dates and ticket purchases, visit OutstandingInTheField.com.



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