

New cookbook highlights dishes from Maine restaurants, chefs



PHOTO COURTESY OF RUSSELL FRENCH

Poached pear salad made at Mache Bistro in Bar Harbor is featured in the book, "Fresh From Maine: Recipes and Stories From the State's Best Chefs."

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The variety and quality of the Maine dining scene is no longer a secret the natives can keep. Attention from [The New York Times](#), [Gourmet magazine](#) and the [Washington Post](#) has shined a [national spotlight](#) on what Mainers have known for a long time: there are some truly excellent restaurants in the 207.

Photographer Russell French and author Michael Sanders know this as well. The former is a Maine-based artist renowned for his images of food and those who make food. The latter is a 20-year resident of Maine, a food writer and a founding member of Slow Food Portland, an organization devoted to promoting the eating of locally grown foods. Together, they've produced a new cookbook, "Fresh From Maine: Recipes and Stories From the State's Best Chefs," out on Sept. 1 through Maine-based publisher Table Arts Media.

Sanders, who has written extensively about the cuisine and culture of Southwest France, knew it was time to write a book such as this after the media buzz of the past few years regarding Portland's large and eclectic restaurant scene.

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“I think I had to go out into other places before I could see what absolute richness surrounds me right here in Maine,” said Sanders. “I’ve spent a lot of time in the French countryside, and it’s kind of amazing to think that it’s probably easier to find a very good meal in Maine than it is there.”

Sanders and French spent months traveling up and down the Maine coast, sampling restaurants to be included in the book, which features 20 spots from Kittery to Mount Desert Island. They range from the all-local farm-to-table restaurant Cinque Terre in Portland, featuring chef Lee Skawinski, to Bar Harbor’s own Mache Bistro, a tiny, delightful place owned by the husband and wife team of Kyle and Marie Yarborough.

They had one big question in mind: just what is it that makes Maine’s food scene so vibrant? They found several answers.

“You cannot have good restaurants without good infrastructure, with good farmers and fishermen, raisers of pigs and poultry and meat,” said Sanders. “I don’t think Mainers realize that MOFGA is one of the most respected organic organizations in the country” Sanders said referring to the Maine Organic Farmers and Gardiners Association, which [puts on the Common Ground Fair in Unity each year](#). “People come here to learn from what MOFGA did, and how they managed to get it going from the ground up. The framework was here already.”

With that framework in place, it just took time for those chefs to arrive in the state.

“I think a lot of younger chefs who cooked in San Francisco and Chicago and Las Vegas, with little to no background in running a restaurant, were able to come to Maine and be able to afford to open a restaurant,” he said. “The real estate market wasn’t prohibitive. Even just five years ago it was relatively underdeveloped. It became an incubator of sorts.”

As anyone familiar with the restaurant industry knows, however, opening a restaurant is certainly not an “if you build it, they will come” situation. There needs to be a clientele interested in eating at places that don’t just serve up the fried clams, lobster and blueberry pie synonymous with so many roadside family establishments. Fortunately, there was that clientele, who were waiting for an alternative to traditional Maine fare.

“I think people here really appreciate good food, and will spend money on a nice meal,” said Sanders. “Not everyone is going to do that every week, but enough will and enough people are willing to try different places that it supports the newer local restaurants.”

The restaurants featured in “Fresh From Maine” are not places where you’ll spend \$100 for a gastronomically experimental meal, featuring ingredients flown in from halfway across the world. Instead, they’re places that focus on food that’s fresh, local, organic and of the absolute highest quality — all the while remaining simple in approach.

“What they all have in common are the incredible simplicity of ingredients,” said Sanders. “Rob Evans [of Hugo’s Restaurant in Portland] isn’t spending 36 hours producing sauces. He’s looking for the essential thing in the recipe. There’s not a lot of lobster in the book, but there is mackerel and cod and bluefish, and local mushrooms and cheese and chicken, and maybe seven or eight ingredients in a lot of the recipes. It’s as local as it can be. That’s really the essence of it.”

The book boasts more than 50 recipes, ranging from the luscious Stout and Chili Braised Short Ribs over Parmesan Polenta from the Harraseeket Inn in Freeport, to the elegant Cod

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with Sauteed Kale, Bacon and Triple Citrus Beurre Blanc found at the Red Sky Restaurant in Southwest Harbor. It's also got a wealth of fun, informative background information on the chefs who create those dishes, and the concepts behind their restaurants.

French's pictures illustrate the chefs in their natural environment: cooking, laughing, creating. It paints a picture of the combination of laid-back charm and high-end food that is the hallmark of Maine dining. And, it sets stomachs to growling, as when you look at, say, the picture of the Handmade Rustic Gnocchi with Winter Sauce found at Town Hill Bistro on MDI, or the Pumpkin Caramel Flan from El Camino Cantina in Brunswick.

Though "Fresh From Maine" has barely hit shelves, Sanders is looking forward to a sequel of sorts.

"I definitely didn't get to anywhere near enough of the state I wanted to," he said. "I know there's so much more to find. I can't wait to get north and explore."

"Fresh From Maine: Recipes and Stories From the State's Best Chefs" is available at your local bookstore and on Amazon.com For more information, visit tableartsmedia.com.