

Evenfall Restaurant: Local. Magical.

One late afternoon in November, I sat with restaurant owner Spiro Pappadopolous and chef Scott Pelletier in the large, high-ceilinged dining room of Evenfall Restaurant in Haverhill. Outside, commuter traffic began the crawl to nearby Route 495, and car headlights started switching on to compensate for the dying daylight. In that hour before opening, a stillness hung over the room as tables were being set and the room straightened for a dinner service that would soon be underway.

Just the Saturday before, I had visited Evenfall as a dinner guest in a party of four, had sat in the same large room, off the same major thoroughfare, but the experience felt completely different. On that Saturday evening, the dining room hummed with dozens of conversations, a bustlingly efficient waitstaff, and the sounds of silverware on china. It glowed with candles and ambient light from dozens of paper lanterns hanging amid the rafters. Beautiful plates of food passed, then finally landed on our table. Magical.

It is exactly this daily magical transformation from quiet room to hopping enterprise that keeps Spiro, a restaurant and hospitality person to the core, jazzed about opening for business every day.

“It’s creative work,” he explained as we talked. “There’s a new situation in here daily, a new set of people. Every day is different and I like that. I couldn’t do anything else.”

He means it. Spiro has been part of the restaurant life since he was a young person working in Pasta Villagio, his family’s Andover restaurant. Even younger, he added, he had manned the family farm stand, selling the produce from his father’s huge garden. A stint in New York to gather experience in that city’s food scene followed a degree in Environmental Science in college, but within a few years he knew he wanted to return to his home turf. He knew, too, that the degree in Environmental Science could now prove a handy complement to his restaurant resume. Spiro took what he knew about seasonal produce, sustainability, and food service, and poured it all into opening a restaurant that would showcase local, seasonal food in the Merrimack Valley.

The city of Haverhill may not seem like a natural location for a restaurant like Evenfall, with its emphasis on freshly grown produce. Haverhill, like Lawrence and Lowell, the other large cities of the region, is known as a textile mill town and “Shoe City of the World.” Sited along the Merrimack River, these cities shipped fabrics, shoes, hats, and tanned hides all over the country in the 1800s. Industry once ruled here.

But travel beyond the borders of these cities, and rural farmland dominates. The Merrimack Valley boasts over 65 working farms, farm stands, orchards, nurseries, dairies, turkey and livestock farms, and even a vineyard or two. The management at Evenfall has the pick of local, seasonal ingredients nearby, and they wouldn’t have it any other way. As Spiro explains in his blog on the restaurant [website](#), they buy their food as locally as possible because there is “a vast array of gorgeous organic produce right here in the Merrimack Valley; why not buy as much as

we can...and not truck cases of tomatoes etcetera from California...When you eat these dishes, you are directly benefiting your community, the environment, and your health.”

This business model clearly delights Executive Chef Scott Pelletier as well. Another local, originally from New Hampshire’s seacoast, Scott returned to the region after a classic culinary education at California Culinary Academy and years of work experience between California and Portland, Oregon. He landed back in Boston in 1999 at the White Star Tavern, but was lured away by Evenfall’s restaurant concept, a much shorter commute from his home in Methuen, and the assurance from Spiro of nearly 100 percent free rein in menu development.

Talking to the two men together, it was easy to see why Spiro felt so comfortable passing on so much autonomy. He and Scott have similar backgrounds and are on the same page philosophically.

Like Spiro, Scott grew up around food: he spent summers on his grandparents’ 20-acre Stratham, New Hampshire farm surrounded by berries, fruit trees, chickens, and steer; he too had childhood farm stand experience, selling vegetables and the farm’s fresh eggs. His grandparents influenced his taste for New England ingredients, he said, so much so that he hopes to pass along the same passions to his young son. Scott’s eyes lit up when he spoke of how much he valued his working relationships with Farmer Dave of Brox Farm in Dracut, and with his fish and meat suppliers. He likes, he said, knowing where his ingredients come from, and he wants his customers to know, and care, too.

Because of these relationships, Scott added, “When we say on the menu we use Brox farm produce, you’ll know it is coming from a local farm that uses good practices, because I know they use good practices.”

Exposing customers to these kinds of good products and unusual preparations is important to both men. They are acutely aware that a lecturing tone or a heavy hand with the education could intimidate, so they purposely worked to create a comfortable, casual atmosphere full of approachable staff to speak knowledgeably about a menu that may contain some less familiar items. Their joint hope is that a customer who comes in and tastes a first-rate steak and potatoes will develop trust in the kitchen, ultimately going on from that place of trust to experiment with such items as smoky pumpkin-lobster nage or a roasted Brox farm apple and brie buckwheat crepe on their next visit.

Spiro put it this way: “I hope people find our food interesting yet honest. I would like customers to know we use the best ingredients possible so they can have an experience here they won’t have anywhere else, but the food also has to be delicious and accessible so people will return.”

Scott nodded as Spiro spoke, then added, “We make everything from scratch. The focaccia, the ketchup, our ice creams, sorbets, cookies – everything. We use quality ingredients and try to keep them as local and as sustainable as possible. But really we serve good, approachable food that everyone can enjoy.”

Staff started trickling into the dining room, and I noticed it was getting dark outside. Dusk. The brief time between daylight and nighttime, those brief moments for a restaurant between being closed and opening. It seemed a good time to wrap our talk about a restaurant that had been named for that very time of day. Although I had been the one asking questions and taking notes, Spiro had a couple of last questions for me. “What did your table order for dinner?” he asked. I told him. He jotted a few notes of his own, then looked up from them. “And did you all like what you ordered?”

I could answer truthfully. We did, very much. The four of us had wonderful meals, and everything – duck confit, steak, salmon, wahoo – was delicious. The plates were beautifully, and bountifully, presented, I added. I took quite a bit of my salmon home for lunch the next day.

“But it was my first course, the soup, that most excited me,” I told them.

“The broccoli soup!” Scott exclaimed.

Broccoli soup. Something I will whip up at home in order to have a quick hot soup on a cold night. A head of broccoli, some chicken stock, an onion, cream, a blender and – voila! – soup! But chockfull as it was with Maine rock shrimp and other tasty components, Evenfall’s soup was head and shoulders above my humble home version.

“It was one of the best things I’ve eaten out. Ever.” I said. “I don’t know that I would have thought of pairing those shrimp with broccoli soup. But it worked. Tell me how you came up with the idea for that soup.”

Scott leaned forward at the table. “I saw the broccoli at Brox, and I was inspired by it. The sweet little freshwater shrimp are in season now, and I wanted to use them. We fried those up.

“For the cream I used a Shy Brothers cheese, Cloumage, another Merrimack Valley product. It’s more like cream than cheese, like mascarpone. After I added the Cloumage, I tasted the soup and I thought it needed a little something. That’s when I thought of the guanciale. I added some. You liked it?”

I liked it.

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