

Agricola harnesses farm-to-table concept



Among dessert offerings is a huckleberry ice cream sandwich made with graham cracker cake. (Ed Hille/Staff Photographer)

CRAIG LABAN, INQUIRER RESTAURANT CRITIC

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Agricola in Princeton is hardly the first restaurant to take the "farm-to-table" movement to the next level by attempting to supply its kitchen largely with an affiliated farm. The Rockefeller's Blue Hill at Stone Barns in Westchester County, N.Y., pioneered that concept on the East Coast. Locally, Jose Garces' Bucks County farm supplies a significant amount of produce for his restaurants, and the Glasbern Inn in Foglesville, Lehigh County, and the Sheppard Mansion in Hanover, York County, have been raising their own

vegetables and meat for years. And Philly has some of the most devoted and skilled farm-market chefs around.

The context here, though, is tradition-bound Princeton. Nowhere were the old ways more steeped into the woodwork than at 11 Witherspoon St., where the lace-trimmed windows of the now-closed Lahiere's hosted professorial fine-dining and Tiger sweetheart wooings for 91 years.

That Agricola should present a successor concept so, well, trendy, certainly adds a few extra watts of scrutiny to its spotlight. But Princeton dining has come a long way in the last decade. Agricola seems to have embraced its prime-time status, placing chef Josh Thomsen's sparkling kitchen on peep-show display right up against the sidewalk windows.

The restaurant is largely fueled by owner Jim Nawn's 112-acre Great Road Farm in Skillman, which he bought in 2007 with the intention of growing tomatoes and lettuce to supply some of the 37 Panera Bread franchises he once owned in North Jersey. I'm skeptical as to whether that could have lent local soul to the strip mall empire of bread bowl Soup. But Nawn's journey from fast food to farm food became more genuine when he decided to cash in his locations, selling them back to the corporation. It was a better way to seed his dream, at once far smaller, but altogether more ambitious.

Inside, Agricola is completely transformed. The moody bilevel interior, stripped down to studs, opened up and refurbished with exposed brick and plaster, distressed zinc on the handsome bar, and riveted metal sheet accents for a light industrial look, did its best to channel some inner Brooklyn. There's even a wall of pickle jars and a "Thank a Farmer Wall" dangling signs touting their latest field stars (icicle radishes! Toscano kale!) for the finishing clichés.

Jersey-born Thomsen, a vet of icons in the West such as the French Laundry, Aspen's Little Nell, and Tao in Vegas, clearly knows his way around the stinging nettles and other produce bounty.

They come tempura-crisped here in a handsome veggie tableau, posed with fried squash blossoms and other mandolined lovelies over orange and green swipes of pureed roast peppers and mint. A cool froth of sweet-pea soup blooms with a vivid orange bull's-eye of foamed carrot yogurt. A stew of roasted mushrooms from Princeton's Shibumi Farm, tossed into a

risotto-like mound of farro grains with baby turnips, harissa powder and a kale chip, is almost good enough to make me go vegetarian.

Even in my favorite dish here, a plump rabbit for two broken down into a juicy bacon-wrapped tenderloin, confit-tender thyme-scented legs, and a delicately creamy pad of breaded, milk-soaked rabbit liver, there was a treasure trove of garden treats. Sweet peas, morels, and pearl onions lavished in the rich gravy at the bottom of the dish, with a side crock of creamy-sweet Castle Valley Mill polenta from Doylestown to sop it up.

Add an ambitious bar program with dozens of great whiskeys, craft cocktails, and an intriguing list of high-quality American wines, and Agricola can potentially become a complete destination-dining package. The prices are upscale, from \$17 to \$29 for mains, but are fair for the quality.

Finding enough staff, though, to smoothly service the deceptively rambling 200-seat space has proved a challenge. From the hostesses, who first tried to seat us in the stuffy cellar (despite reserving weeks ahead) to the waitstaff, which took 20 minutes just to greet us with water, busy nights were ruled by slow confusion rather than composure. Our second-visit waiter flamboyantly faked his way through misinformation on everything from the plancha to the pinot noir. The manager, surprisingly, didn't know the modestly sized wine list much better.

The food wasn't perfect, either. The tiny coins of carpaccio offered too much seared crust in a dish whose rare-meat lusciousness is the point. The kale salad was overdressed in sweet pumpkin-seed vinaigrette. The octopus was superbly tender, but the plate as a whole was dry. The flat-iron steak with garlic gremolata was excellent, but the starter salad and dry brownie sundae for dessert that accompanied it for the \$43 fixed-price meal were a bore. The house-churned gelati were decent, but they won't shorten the line at the nearby Bent Spoon.

For the most part, though, Thomsen's kitchen, co-helmed by his longtime chef de cuisine sidekick, Manlee Siu, produced the best reasons to book a table. Among the highlights was an elegant goat cheese terrine, layered with sheer slices of shaved potato. The pork chop was memorably tender, over braised red cabbage and a caramelized Fuji apple.

Beautifully seared Cape May scallops arrived over mounds of quinoa pilaf crowned with sweet and tangy golden-raisin-caper relish. A richly steeped short rib, tender from four days of cooking, gains extra depth from the crunch of baby turnips and crispy parsnip ribbons.

For dessert, a cheese plate from Valley Shepherd Creamery with local honeycomb and pear-pepper chutney is always a good idea – even better with a glass of Pedro Ximenez sherry or Bual Madeira.

But pastry chef Sarah Hecksteden produces several worthwhile finales to consider. The black-plum cobbler brought a cast-iron crock of biscuit-topped orchard goodness. Vivid huckleberry ice cream (my favorite flavor here) is served as a sandwich, stylishly wrapped between two slender graham cracker cakes.

Most surprising, though, was the gluten-free cake made from teff, an Oregon-grown version of the ancient Ethiopian grain baked into an earthy pound cake. Rustic and reminiscent of sweet brown bread, it soaked in the sweetness of strawberry-rhubarb compote and a golden scoop of honey ice cream crowned with a curious little green daisy wheel of sugar-crisped leaves – a cleverly candied, dehydrated strawberry stem.

True to the spirit of the farm, nothing is wasted. True to the spirit great cooking, nothing was left on this plate.

VERY GOOD

AGRICOLA

11 Witherspoon St., Princeton,

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A fine-dining Princeton anachronism has been replaced by the hottest new thing, as a farm-to-table open kitchen (with an actual farm connection) steps into the prime Tiger void left by 91-year-old Lahiere's. French Laundry vet Josh Thomsen succeeds with beautiful dishes that pay simple tribute to the ingredients, and the space is handsome despite its clichés, from the pickle wall to the "Thank a Farmer" tribute to daily greens. Maintaining strong service for such a high-volume dining room, though, remains its biggest challenge.

MENU HIGHLIGHTS Pea-and-carrot soup, crispy stinging nettles, goat cheese-potato terrine, kale salad, pork chop, halibut, scallops, mushroom stew, rabbit for two (special), flat-iron steak, short rib, huckleberry ice cream sandwich, teff cake.

DRINKS A substantial, well-rounded program. The 80-label wine cellar focuses on American bottles, with a high-tech preservation system to allow some high-end glass selections (Paraduxx, Nickel & Nickel) with half-glass options to temper high markups, but also some fair values (Adelsheim pinot; Finca Museum Crianza tempranillo) that pair well with the food. There is a substantial whiskey selection, excellent cocktails (try the Jersey Lightning), and a small but craft-centric list of beers.

WEEKEND NOISE The main dining areas are an uncomfortably noisy 93 decibels; the back "family room" is in the reasonable mid-80s. (Ideal is 75 decibels or less.)

IF YOU GO Dinner Monday through Saturday, 5:30-10 p.m.; Sunday until 9 p.m. Brunch Saturday and Sunday, 10:30 a.m.-2:30 p.m.

Entrees, \$17-\$29.

All major cards.

Wheelchair accessible.

Street parking only.