



## Everything Old is New Again

*by Leslie Mitchner// photography by Andrew Wilkinson*

Any farmer can tell you that sometimes you need to leave the land lying fallow before you plant again. In the long half block of 11 Witherspoon Street, pedestrians walked past the shuttered space where Lahiere's had been rooted for over 90 years and wondered what crop would follow. Even after Princetonians learned that a new restaurant was coming, the suspense built while we waited for something to sprout. For months we had tantalizing hints, even if no one was quite sure how to pronounce the new place's name (Ag-RI-ko-la, Latin for "farmer"). We waited through a stormy fall, a cold winter, and into spring for the land to bear fruit.

### WHO WORKS THE LAND

On Agricola's website, the venture's partners are described as "a farmer, a risk taker, and a tasty food maker." The farmer is Steve Tomlinson, who manages the 112-acre property on the Great Road in Skillman. There, in carefully designed plots, over 120 vegetable varieties are being harvested for the restaurant's menu. Tomlinson's personal commitment to sustainability and respect for the environment, along with the rest of his credentials, made him the perfect choice to oversee this key ingredient of an ambitious enterprise. A graduate of Pratt Institute, he worked with the artists Christo and Jeanne-Claude on the Gates Project in Central Park. Then, after completing a course on Permaculture Design, he moved on to organic farming. As he puts it, the experience showed him that "a strong idea can bring a community together." Agricola calls itself a "community eatery" and he is one key to its success—farm to table within four miles.

The risk taker and owner is Jim Nawn, the managing member and founder of Fenwick Hospitality Group, the parent company for the restaurant. His path to what he is doing now is also unusual. He has an MBA from Boston College, was with a major pharmaceutical company for many years while living abroad, then moved into the hospitality business that started Panera Bread bakery-café, after which he plunged into a culinary arts program, and finally took the leap of faith in buying the farm on the Great Road where he lives with his family. A hands-on proprietor, he is very much involved with charting the restaurant's course.

The tasty food maker is Josh Thomsen but as a partner in the business he is clearly more than that. A New Jersey native, he was named a "Rising Star Chef" by StarChefs and has not only worked with Thomas Keller at the French Laundry in Napa Valley, one of the best restaurants in the country, but also served as Chef de Cuisine at Tao, which was the highest grossing restaurant in the United States. He seems relaxed, enthusiastic, and at home in his new role as Executive Chef at Agricola. Although he uses what the farm can supply as much as possible, he explains that he is not a rigid adherent to locavore philosophy. If the best ingredients (particularly meat and fish) are raised elsewhere, that is what the restaurant will serve. In other words, farm to table has been around for a long time now but the phrase does not exclusively define what is being done here. He calls Agricola's cuisine "rustic American" and insists that the only way the restaurant will serve the community and thrive is by "being different."

Lahiere's was noteworthy for its superb wine cellar. Those famed bottles did not come with the property. The General Manager, Ryan Thackaberry, who moved to Princeton from San Francisco, has been building a new wine cellar. Like Thomsen, who says he was "into food" from a tender young age, Thackaberry, was raised in the business. His bio says that he grew up in his family's restaurant in Newport, Rhode Island and that he was bussing tables as soon as he was old enough to work. Like all the others on the team, he fairly beams when showing people around the place.

#### THE SPACE

The design of the Great Road Farm is beautiful, but the fresh design of the restaurant is spectacular. It would have been easy to take the rustic theme and to produce a Disneyfied homey barnyard decor—that would have been kitsch. Aptly named Seed Design, the firm that Jim Nawn hired, along with Mucca (which did much of the branding) was far more sophisticated than that. This is rustic with a hip industrial twist. Very little of the old re