**SUSTAINABLE DENVER**

CHEF JOHN BROENING, DUO RESTAURANT

*By David Scott*

In the recent mad dash toward sustainability, some chefs have mined the attention for publicity, even if little of their menu is organic, regional or seasonal. They may use the odd local squash, but only if Sysco, the monolithic food distributor, happens to stock it at the moment. Not so John Broening, Executive Chef of Duo Restaurant, the North Denver stalwart. He sources ingredients directly from Colorado farms and farmers' markets. This suits owners Stephanie Bonin and Keith Arnold just fine. "When we were hiring a chef," Mrs. Bonin says, "we needed to see a real connection to sustainable and regional food." In Mr. Broening they found a kindred spirit—a man who elevates sustainable cooking to an artform.

    In addition to garnering accolades from *Bon Appetit* ("...first rate farm-to-table spot with a killer grilled pork chop"), *Westword* ("...a touch of French genius") and *5280* ("...constantly surprises and comforts"), Chef Broening is also a writer. A very good writer, whose work appears regularly in *The Denver Post*. His language is erudite but soulful, with a great respect for history and process, as in this post from his blog, [papayapate.blogspot.com](http://papayapate.blogspot.com/): "What food trendspotters call comfort food is mostly winter food: a backward-looking cuisine, one that looks back to our childhood, back to grandma, and atavistically back to the cooking of our close-to-the-land ancestors with their visceral dislike of unadorned...meats and vegetables."

    He brings to mind other rare artists who write fluently about their own art: Francois Truffaut writing about film in *Les Cahiers du Cinema*, Glenn Gould holding forth on the *Goldberg Variations*. Papayapate is full of acute cultural references, from Ornette Coleman to The Clash, from Nabokov to Saul Bellow.

    Paul Bertolli, another chef-writer, influenced Mr. Broening early on. "Incredible chef, incredible writer," he says, "who almost single-handedly changed the paradigm of the chef's cookbook." Before Bertolli's seminal *Cooking By Hand*, he says, most cookbooks were too precious, too focused on exotic, expensive ingredients. "Bertolli, you know, takes a few ingredients—tomatoes, vinegar, meat," and creates simple, powerful flavors. Though "some of his recipes have a long list of ingredients and are extraordinarily labor intensive...he exhaustively examines the few ingredients that he focuses on." This ethos informs Broening's own approach at Duo, where country cooking shares table space with more rarefied preparations.

    When referred to as an artist, the great filmmaker John Ford (The Searchers, Stagecoach) famously demurred, preferring to be called a "craftsman." An apt term for someone who assembled over 140 films. John Broening applies this same workmanlike approach on the line at Duo, cranking out tickets night after night, year after year. "I think about cooking as a craft, or a service," rather than as an art, he says, on a busy day of prep. He methodically breaks down a side of swordfish as he talks, first removing the skin, then slicing steaks with the grace of a master sushi chef.

    "Being a chef started out as a straight-up working class job," he says. He got his start as a young waiter in Philadelphia, interested in little more than finding gainful employment, and eventually gravitated to the back of the house. Despite the rise of Food Network and celebrity chefs, he says, "it's still a blue-collar profession. Most people are never gonna get rich at this." Three feet away, a burly technician works on a stove in Duo's open kitchen. This is ear-splitting work that involves a hammer and a blowtorch. Mr. Broening takes it in stride, now working a mountain of fresh chopped garlic, now checking on the short ribs braising behind him. This while talking to a reporter and keeping his staff on track. "*Mas grande plastico*," he directs a cook prepping duck liver mousse. "Did you weigh it? *Dos libras*? Okay. Get a whisk."

     He describes his favorite chefs in glowing terms, from slow-foodies like Alice Waters to local luminaries like Patrick DuPays, of Z Cuisine. But he has a special place in his heart for Duo's pastry chef, Yasmin Lozada-Hissom, who this year was named one of the top five pastry chefs in the country by Gayot.com. "Yasmin is a wonderful all-around cook...a more talented cook than I am," he says, not at all mock-humbly. "I'd rather eat her own food than mine any time." Which may help explain why, this past September, he married her after a four-year courtship. They continue to cook shoulder-to-shoulder in the kitchen and collaborate in other ways: her photographs lend visual heft to his papayapate blog. Apropos for a restaurant called Duo, so named in honor of the love and partnership of another married couple who share space here, owners Stephanie Bonin and Keith Arnold.

    While some chefs are famous for their less-than-epicurean eating habits (Momofuku's David Chang favors Chinese take-out and pizza delivery), the couple dine out often, and always side by side. During a recent dinner at Z Cuisine, it would have been clear to an onlooker where their real interests lie: rather than sit facing the dining room to see and be seen, the couple were canted toward the kitchen, from which rounds of small plates and complimentary *amuse bouches* flowed forth. This style of eating suits them. It lends itself to sampling and appraising, talking and sharing.

    Given a choice, Mr. Broening would do away with entrees altogether. "That's not how I eat when I go out," he says. "I don't like a meat, a starch, and a vegetable." Though he does make allowances for popular tastes at Duo. The fall menu features a very entreelike pan-roasted quail ($25) with cranberry chutney and butternut squash mash; and the aforementioned short ribs ($19), braised in tomato and red wine and served with white cheddar grits. But the menu also offers small plates for the modern grazer, like bacon-wrapped dates ($7), stuffed with goat cheese and topped with toasted almonds; or the Sunny Side ($6): an organic egg with grilled rustico bread, coppa and drizzled porcini oil.

    Where does the chef place Denver in the American culinary firmament? "Denver's a third-tier restaurant town," he says definitively, ranking it behind clear stars like New York, Chicago, San Francisco, but also behind a host of smaller cities. If Denver is to move closer to the first tier, Mr. Broening says, much of the onus is on the consumer. Like their big-city counterparts, Denver diners need to wean themselves from the huge portions and other excesses of the steakhouse. Too, "there has to be a long-term relationship between chefs and farmers. You know, the chef educates the farmer as much as the farmer educates the chef."

    In his article "The Face of the New American Farmer," for the magazine *Edible Front Range,* he talks about the importance of cultivating relationships with local farms, a philosophy that is starting to catch fire within the culinary establishment. Duo sources cheese locally from Haystack Mountain, bread from Udi's, and produce from Abbondanza Organic Farms, among others. And reused vegetable oil from the fryer powers Mrs. Bonin and Mr. Arnold's Passat diesel. Broening writes, "if we focus on the small gains in the Front Range—an influx of younger organic farmers...a farmers’ market in Boulder that some consider the city’s most vital institution, and more chefs and home cooks searching out local products—there’s a lot to be optimistic about."