



THE THOUGHTFUL CHEF



In Princeton, Scott Anderson leads the charge
for fine dining sourced from the locals

BY DIANA CERCONE □ PHOTOGRAPHY BY GLENN RACE

Until last fall, I knew Scott Anderson by reputation only. At Princeton's elements (with a lowercase "e"), he is the gifted 38-year-old chef determined to establish his restaurant as one worthy of world-class status—while staying grounded in the neighborhood of local farmers and producers.

So I called for an interview. From our first long chat and through the coming months of visits, often spent among his kitchen crew and the farmers he works with, I found Anderson warm and humorous, with a passion for food and everything local, down to the pottery he uses in his restaurant's dining room.

On the day of my first visit to elements, the late-fall sun was still showering warmth. This was fortuitous, Anderson noted, because the fair weather would make touring the restaurant's herb and vegetable garden that much more enjoyable. It's important for him and his crew to understand the life cycle of plants, he says, to know their seasonal flavor changes and when they're at their

peak. The garden is their outdoor classroom, and also provides garnishes for the restaurant's dishes and drinks. Another such classroom is nearby Pettoranello Gardens, where he and his crew take occasional short breaks from the pressures of the kitchen to forage for wild mushrooms. It's also a chance for him to enjoy one of his cigars of the day. (A daily ritual that usually includes two, sometimes three.)

"New Jersey has everything it needs to produce great food," Anderson says, "including underground water, great soil and committed farmers. There's nothing we can't grow or raise that California has. OK, not artichokes," he adds with a smile. "But there's no reason Princeton can't have a world-class restaurant."

To Anderson, that means he and his crew work constantly on the craft of cooking, where every step is hands-on, from fermenting farro for soy sauce and cashews for cheese to distilling beets for vinegar and dry-curing pork loin for lomo. And it means working with local





Anderson prioritizes sourcing his ingredients from local farmers, including Laura del Campo of Stonybrook Meadows and David Zaback of Z Food Farm.

farmers in selecting the vegetables and herbs to grow or the breed of pigs to raise. (Among others, Anderson works closely with David Zaback of Z Food Farm in Lawrence Township for his organic herbs and vegetables, and Laura del Campo of Stonybrook Meadows in Hopewell for her eggs, pork and rabbit.) His goal is always the same: to make the best food possible.

“I’m concerned about the environment, about how our food is grown and raised—every single aspect of the food community,” Anderson says. “The point is not to show off, but to show what we’re capable of—what good food should and can taste like.”

He also understands that the food movement is a work in progress. “Do I think our average guest cares that it was a good piece of pork because of how it was raised, what it was fed?” he asks, shaking his head, indicating probably not. “But with time and education, I hope so. I want to get the message out.”

Anderson says his love of cooking began when he was four and used to help his mother in the kitchen. His father worked for IBM, and his family moved frequently. Born in Caldwell, New Jersey, Anderson spent his middle school years in Japan, fearlessly sampling the country’s cuisine, and most of his high school years in Boca Raton, Florida, busing tables and shucking oysters. He came back to New Jersey to attend Rutgers University, where he majored in sociology and psychology. But all along the way he worked in restaurants, creating his own dishes and developing his self-taught culinary skills. In 1996, he began working for the Momo brothers, eventually working in all their Terra Momo Group restaurants, including Nova Terra, which he helped open.

In 2000, Anderson left the Momos to work at the Ryland Inn with Craig Shelton, one of the first chefs in the Northeast to have a restaurant garden [see related story, page 40]. “I wanted to do more

handcrafted food,” Anderson says, “and [I wanted] an opportunity to work on the farm.”

By the time the Ryland closed in 2007, Anderson was ready for his own restaurant and, in the fall of 2008, opened elements. Several staff members who worked with him at the Ryland followed, including Mike Ryan, his sous chef; Fabio Arce, garde-manger; and Luis Gamboa, head dishwasher.

It’s not unusual for Anderson to be invited to serve as a guest chef at some of the country’s most prestigious restaurants, nor to use the local products near that restaurant. But when he was invited by Christopher Kostow of The Restaurant at Meadowood Napa Valley (one of only two California restaurants to earn Michelin’s highest rating of three stars; the other is The French Laundry) as a guest chef for one of Kostow’s Twelve Days of Christmas dinners last December, Anderson couldn’t resist flexing some local pride. He and Ryan brought along organic winter vegetables from Z Food Farm to feature on their menu.

Nor is it unusual for Anderson to host his own guest-chef dinners. “In the past,” he says, “there was so much of a competitive feeling among chefs. It’s changing now. I didn’t open my restaurant to compete. I opened to cook and do my art. Restaurants should be for the betterment of the community and to support our local farms.” His chef collaborative dinners, he says, allow for the free exchange of ideas among the chefs.

Anderson enjoys crediting crew members when they create a dish or make an ingredient. He supports and inspires them and touts their successes. And in March, when Anderson was named a semifinalist for the James Beard Best Chef Mid-Atlantic award, he called his crew and staff together and told them that the nomination belonged to them all. “There is no ‘I’ here,” he told them. “It’s a ‘we.’ I’d be a fool



not to recognize this. I'm the coach, the conductor, but it's the team that makes it so special here."

For Valentine's Day dinner, elements is packed with reservations starting at 5 p.m. with the last at 9:45. As usual, Anderson is manning "the pass," the work area where each dish is checked and finalized before passing to the servers. It's the main communication center between the front of the house and the kitchen. It's also Anderson's personal workstation and he prepares it carefully, first laying a large cutting board down, then adding his favorite handmade Japanese knife and personal-size mandolin (this he'll use for tonight's truffles). Within easy reach are his mug of coffee and quart container of ice water. Before the night's end, he'll drink numerous cups of each.

Behind Anderson are the cooking stations for fish, meat, vegetables, breads and pastries, each with its own chef. To his right are two more stations: Ryan's and Arce's.

Anderson surveys the area to see that his crew is in position. Checking a pot here, stirring another there, he tastes along his way, adding salt or pepper as needed, calling out "Is everyone's pepper mill filled, guys?" and "Let's get the mussels out of the smoker." Like the calm before a storm, the silence is palpable and it's as if I'm watching a silent movie. Then the first order comes in, with the server handing it to Ryan, who calls it out. After that the action is nonstop, with servers rapidly handing in orders or picking them up, saying, "Behind, Chef" or "Corner" to prevent colliding, and all the while Ryan calling "Order," "Fire" or "Pickup" to the cooking crew.

For a short time the fish orders outnumber the others and Anderson tells Michael Schultz, the chef in charge of the fish station, "Don't worry about the soups and pastas [for the two fish dishes], I'll get them plated." For orders with special requests related to allergies, such as shellfish, Anderson calls out, "Double-check no mussels, right? Not even in juices."

"Food, to me, is no different a medium than clay would be to a sculptor or paint to an artist. Cooking is another art form."

We're halfway into the evening and still no flinging of pots or yelling in anger. This is not Anderson's style. Instead he corrects in an instructive tone, such as to fish cook Melissa Monaghan, working at the fish station on some halibut. "Slice it. If need be, use one of my slicing knives; don't shred it." She slices and shows it to him. "That's good," he says.

On an earlier visit, riding in Ryan's car to Stonybrook Meadows, I ask Anderson about his philosophy of food, specifically how it relates to his restaurant. There's no one answer to that, he says. "Food, to me, is represented on many levels. It's no different a medium than clay would be to a sculptor or paint to an artist. Cooking is another art form." He views cooking for his guests at elements, he says, "as an extension of my home, where guests can come and relax, enjoy good food. It represents the breaking of bread, whether on a first date, with family, or over a business deal."

Food is also about relationships, commitment and trust, he says. As an example he points to working with Laura del Campo in finding the pig breed with the right flavor, marbling and texture. It meant trying different breeds before deciding on Berkshires. Other examples include working with his crew and staff, including Stephen Distler, founder and director of the Bank of Princeton and Anderson's partner in elements, as well as Zaback.

Over the months I spent with Anderson, his Hollywood leading man stubble morphed into a Lincolnesque beard. Still, it can't hide



his boyish good looks. Or the blush that appears on his face when I ask why he never goes into the dining room to talk with guests. “I’m painfully shy,” he says. “That’s why I built an open kitchen. In my own area I’m fine. Take me out there and I’m a basket case. But guests can always come here. I love talking with them. And I love talking about the restaurant.” 🍷

Editor’s Note: A new restaurant from Scott Anderson, *Mistral*, is scheduled to open on Witherspoon Street in Princeton in May. *Mistral* will offer small plates where guests can design their own tasting menus. It will also have an open kitchen.

elements

163 Bayard Lane, Princeton
609.924.1108 elementsprinceton.com



ASPARAGUS WITH MOREL MUSHROOMS, POACHED EGG AND AGED PECORINO CHEESE

Recipe adapted for *Edible Jersey*. Serves 6.

- 3 bunches asparagus
- 1 pound morel mushrooms
- ¼ cup minced shallots
- 2 cloves garlic, minced
- 2 tablespoons butter
- 6 farm-fresh eggs
- 4 ounces aged pecorino cheese, sliced
- Chive flowers
- Chervil
- Salt and pepper, to taste

Cut the asparagus ends off and discard. Cut off the tips of the asparagus at about an inch and a half. Reserve the bottoms for purée. Blanch both the tips and the stalks separately and plunge into ice water. Drain the tips and reserve; purée the bottoms with a little salt and pepper.

Wash the morel mushrooms and dry very well. Sauté the mushrooms in the butter with the shallots and garlic in a pan, then add the asparagus tips and cook briefly.

Poach the eggs to desired temperature.

To plate each dish, add a few dots of the purée to the plates; divide the asparagus tips and morel mushrooms in equal amounts, then place on the purée. Add a poached egg and cover the plate with aged pecorino cheese. Garnish with chive flowers and chervil.