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Foodies on the Hudson

By KATHRYN MATTHEWS

BEFORE the post-9/11 influx of second-home owners to the [Hudson Valley](#), sophisticated restaurants taking advantage of the region's bounty were scarce. Christine Jones and Bert Goldfinger, New Yorkers who have owned a farmhouse in bucolic [Ghent](#), N.Y., in Columbia County, since 1993, remember the way it was.

When they ventured out to eat, Ms. Jones said, they found "old-fashioned food from the 'Joy of Cooking' era." Veal Parmesan. Pasta salads. [Turkey](#) tetrazzini. "Honey-stung" chicken — frozen, breaded, honey-injected chicken that, once thawed, was deep-fried.

Salad dressings came out of a bottle. Packaged hamburger patties and French fries, purchased in bulk, lurked in restaurant freezers. The main source for ingredients seemed to be multinational food companies. It was convenient, and prices could be kept low. But this wasn't the kind of fare the couple sought.

"Ironically, most restaurants in the country used very little farm-fresh food," Dr. Goldfinger, 56, a Manhattan dentist said, adding only half-jokingly, "Christine and I had to open our own restaurant."

And so they did.

In 1996, while maintaining a daytime practice, Dr. Goldfinger enrolled in the evening professional chef program at the French Culinary Institute in SoHo and then worked part time at Aureole and Le Cirque for three years. Ms. Jones, 59, a former marketing executive at a SoHo design firm, honed her dessert-making skills by taking a bread-baking program at the institute. In 2001, the couple opened the Red Barn, a 60-seat American bistro, in Ghent. "We pattern ourselves after Balthazar in Manhattan," Ms. Jones said.

About 80 percent of their clientele consists of second-home owners, who appreciate the style and range of the Red Barn menu — from a raw bar and whole grilled fish to sweetbreads, octopus and hanger steak frites — and its well-edited wine list, and who are willing to pay for quality. "Many of our customers eat at Le Cirque and Daniel during the week," Dr. Goldfinger said.

The epicurean standards of second-home owners, many of whom are from New York, have raised the bar for restaurants in the Hudson Valley. You'll never quite have Manhattan. But these days, you can come closer.

Hilary and Brian Weisfeld are typical of the new breed of country-restaurant patrons. Even with a toddler and newborn in tow, the Weisfelds, who live on the Upper West Side and own a weekend house in Rhinebeck, N.Y., remain discerning diners.

“Regardless of the location or price, I won’t settle for a mediocre restaurant meal,” emphasized Ms. Weisfeld, 35, a former network marketing executive who is now a full-time mother. They were delighted to discover Mercato, a 36-seat osteria owned by Francesco Buitoni and his partner, Michele Platt, in Red Hook, just north of Rhinebeck.

Ms. Weisfeld raved about the “authentic Italian food that is very upscale in a low-key way.” Since its opening last year, Mercato has become their regular go-to restaurant.

Mr. Buitoni, 39, a seventh-generation member of the Italian pasta family and a veteran of such Manhattan restaurants as San Domenico, Teodora and Gemelli, said that serving the second-home crowd from the city enables him to cook the way he grew up eating in [Italy](#). Many of his customers are well traveled, knowledgeable about Italian food, and appreciative of his market-driven menu that changes weekly and his rotating Italian wine list.

They’re also familiar with the economics of procuring local, organic or specialty foods: a \$20 entree doesn’t raise eyebrows, and a \$38 red snapper from [New Zealand](#) will sell. “Quality sources cost more, and our customers understand that,” he said.

The artist Brice Marden, who owns a country estate in Tivoli, north of Red Hook, has become a regular patron of Madalin’s Table, in the village’s restored 1909 landmark Madalin Hotel. Mr. Marden, who describes his wife, Helen, as a “very good cook,” resisted dining out upstate until this restaurant opened two years ago.

The appeal, he said, is that the chef, Brian Kaywork, trained at the [Culinary Institute of America](#), delivers reliably well-executed food, from a simple roast chicken to seasonal specials like roasted bone marrow from grass-fed cattle. Another draw is the professionalism of the amiable staff members, who know what Mr. Marden likes and give it to him when he comes in: a tucked-away table in the bar and minimal intrusion.

SECOND-HOME owners don’t necessarily want an exact facsimile of a Manhattan dining experience. “In the country, I want a great meal without a trendy scene, a three-month wait for a reservation or a pretentious attitude,” said Bob Kaus, a SoHo-based [music](#) industry public relations executive.

And the food doesn’t have to be fancy. When he and his girlfriend, Juliet Dominguez, go to his weekend house in Millbrook, they ritually dine at Cafe Les Baux there, which serves their favorite French comfort foods, like moules frites and grilled salmon, in a casual, relaxed atmosphere. The staff is always accommodating. “If we’re running late, we call in our dinner orders from the car, and when we arrive, we’re seated and served,” Mr. Kaus said.

A restaurant owner or chef who makes weekenders feel comfortable and welcome often earns their loyalty. For Jean Wardle, a retired film editor, and her husband, Ray Mortenson, a photographer, who own a second home in Germantown, north of Tivoli, Joe Cicileo, 44, the gregarious front man at Madalin’s Table, is a big part of the reason to return there again and again. “Going there is like having dinner at Joe’s house,” said Ms. Wardle.

Mr. Cicileo, who owns the restaurant with his partner, Domenic Scarpulla, offers what he once sought as a

weekend-home owner himself: social connection. He frequently introduces patrons to one another, and table-hopping is common on Friday and Saturday nights.

“Living on a secluded weekend property, where neighbors are invisible, you can feel isolated,” he said. “Madin’s is conducive to friendly social contact.”

Some restaurants have undergone complete transformations. Dan Glubizzi, an Upper East Side artist who owns a weekend home in Millbrook with his wife, Holly Burguières, an interior designer and owner of a property management company, praises the Stissing House in Pine Plains for its muted lighting, architectural details, layout and what Ms. Burguières described as “beautifully presented food.” It wasn’t always this way.

In 1989, when Patricia and Michel Jean, bought a weekend home in Pine Plains, the Stissing House, a tavern built in the late 1700s, had deteriorated into a rough biker hangout. Fifteen years ago, the building was restored, and in 2006, the Jeans sold their SoHo restaurant, [Provence](#), and moved to the country full time to run Stissing House.

“We wanted to create a cozy ambience because you really have to entice weekenders out of their houses,” Mrs. Jean said. They stripped the pink-painted hardwood floors, brightened the walls in warm yellows and replaced contemporary art with Hudson River paintings. They also upgraded the basic macaroni-and-[cheese](#) and fried calamari offerings to a refined tavern menu featuring local foods, like Coach Farm goat cheese and a Herondale Farm pork chop. Mrs. Jean estimates that 75 percent of their customers own second homes nearby.

THE influx of weekend-home owners has created more opportunities for chefs trained at the Culinary Institute of America in Hyde Park, itself a Hudson Valley institution. While many graduates still head for the bright lights of Manhattan, others, especially older career-changers, now inquire about openings nearby. Since 9/11, restaurants owned or run by the school’s alumni in the mid-Hudson Valley have increased by 45 percent, estimated Steve Swofford, the [C.I.A.](#)’s executive director of alumni relations.

Chefs from elsewhere are also attracted to the Hudson Valley. In 2005, Daniel Nilsson was working at a Manhattan property management firm when his sister, a Dutchess County weekend-home owner, alerted him to a former restaurant for sale in Hudson, a bit north in Columbia County. Mr. Nilsson, 29, a former private chef, had dreamed of opening his own restaurant.

He bought the building and recruited Ola Svedman, a childhood friend from summers spent in [Sweden](#), as executive chef. Together, they opened DA/BA, a 75-seat Scandinavian-influenced fine-dining restaurant, in June 2006.

His customers, 80 percent of whom are second-home owners, have welcomed the sophisticated, creative fare, like foie gras brûlée and scallops with white chocolate potato purée served with an orange-fennel sauce. Entree prices average \$25, but, Mr. Nilsson said, many weekenders are willing to spend that and more for fine dining. He also offers a bar menu, featuring soup, sandwiches and fries, as a casual alternative, with items priced at \$4 to \$7.

Ten years ago, when people were leery of venturing into Hudson after dark, it would have been difficult to imagine a restaurant like DA/BA, packed with weekenders sipping \$13 glasses of gewürztraminer and nibbling on \$12 cheese plates. Mr. Nilsson sees the change as an encouraging sign of the times.

“Everything we do is quality-based,” he said. “Some second-home owners who come here have told me I don’t charge enough for my beef burgers.”

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