



A MORE PERFECT UNION

In Asheville, a chef and a farmer dig deep, forming a collaboration ten years in the making

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"ODD PLANTS"—TETRAGONIA, MINUTINA, SALAD BURNET, RADICCHIO CASTELFRANCO



ONE EVENING

LAST WINTER, WHEN THE TEMPERATURES dipped below thirty degrees and the weather report signaled snow, a group of folks met at the Western North Carolina home of farmer Evan Chender for a special meal prepared by Brian Canipelli, chef-owner of Asheville's Cucina 24. On the menu: a twelve-course collaboration between friends, the culmination of four seasons shared year after year.

Outside, winter had taken over Chender's one-acre garden, save the greenhouse and hoop structures on his property. Vestiges of the last snowfall enveloped the brassicas. Shriveled aji dulce peppers withered on naked vines. Around the dinner table, twelve of us gathered to share in Canipelli's latest creations, a dinner-length illustration of his inspired friendship with Chender, who also goes by the name the Culinary Gardener.

The partnership between a chef and a farmer is nothing new. For most restaurants at the top of their game, it's a given. The chef has preferred farms to buy from; the farmer sends a list of products each week; an order is placed; food is delivered. Maybe the chef puts the farmer's name on the menu. Maybe they talk about ingredients from time to time, small exchanges that happen via text message or in the scant few minutes the farmer pauses at the back door on delivery day. But a partnership that digs deeper than this business exchange is quite rare. It's the sort of process that can take years. For the chef of Cucina 24, it's been a decade.



PASTA AND REVELATIONS

Canipelli has a black notebook, and like most chefs, he jots down notes and thoughts in its pages when inspiration strikes. For years, since opening Italian restaurant Cucina 24 in 2008, he and that black notebook had a routine. On his days off, he'd pour a glass of wine, open his notebook to the next blank page, and write a menu for the coming week. It'd usually be something that sounded good in his head, or something he read about in one of the many cookbooks he collects, or a riff fashioned from something he'd recently eaten.

Early on, those menus reflected the sentiment he carried with him before he ever opened the doors to his restaurant on Wall Street, a cobblestone thoroughfare in Asheville, North Carolina's epicenter. "I wanted an Italian restaurant that wasn't dried pasta, spaghetti and meatballs, lasagna, and chicken parmesan," says Canipelli. "My idea of Italian food wasn't that."

So, he penned ideas in his notebook that were not those things, which seemed to be the only kind of Italian food one could find in Asheville at the time. But Cucina 24 offered something different, Italian food that was decidedly un-Americanized. Antipasti selections of calf's liver crostini or cipollini onions and eggplant, wood-fired pizzas with the perfect chew, handmade pappardelle pasta with local rabbit, and maccheroni alla chitarra with duck egg carbonara. In those days, he proudly imported Italian ingredients like prosciutto, and even more common items like ricotta and mozzarella.

Cucina 24 found its footing in Asheville's early procession toward its current status as a formidable food city on a mountainous perch—an independent gem that gained a loyal local following when such restaurants were just gaining momentum. Cucina 24 built a worthy reputation those first few years, Canipelli at its helm in loose jeans, a t-shirt, and a pair of beat-up Vans (his signature footwear), crafting menus for a steadily growing audience.

In 2013, a trip to Italy traversing Rome, Umbria, Calabria, Campania, and Sicily made a lasting impression. He discovered a simplicity in Italian food that he previously had not known. Italians focused on what was around them, the things available to them in their specific place. The logical result then, Canipelli observed, was that the ingredients that

Evan Chender's Weaverville home. **Opposite:** Chender inside his greenhouse.



The farmer and the chef.



CHENDER FOUND HE COULD PUSH CULINARY BOUNDARIES BY GROWING HIS OWN INGREDIENTS.

defined a region were simply the things that grew abundantly there—whether seafood, cheese, wine, or a specific vegetable—and those ingredients became the basis from which that region’s food culture grew. He returned home, five years into restaurant ownership, humbled. He thought to himself, “I’m doing everything completely wrong.”

Soon after, he backed that seminal experience with a new approach. “Instead of importing or buying these expensive ingredients that are Italian and serving them in North Carolina,” he thought, “why don’t we use ingredients that are from here and then treat them the way an Italian chef would?” He began using butterbeans in the way Tuscans would use chickpeas, or country ham instead of prosciutto, connecting his place in the North Carolina mountains to his chosen cuisine. He switched to making cheese, breads, and all pastas in-house.

FARMER AS CATALYST

Right around the time of Asheville’s local food boom, Chender arrived in Asheville, a dedicated grower with prodigious focus who had already apprenticed at Stone Barns in New York and staged at famed Copenhagen mecca, Noma. He’d taken over the garden of a local bakery where he worked part-time, continuing a trajectory that had begun long before he moved to town. For as far back as he could

remember, Chender’s love of food, and the desire to cook it, drove his interests. At 17, the discovery of local farmers markets in his hometown in Westchester County, New York, and his subsequent engagement with growers bridged a gap in his consciousness (or perhaps formed the lasting synapses), that connected him to one of his core values: Growing one’s own food brings a freedom that can’t be found elsewhere, not even at the farmers markets. Chender found he could push culinary boundaries by growing his own ingredients.

By 2013, the Culinary Gardener began selling to Asheville chefs from his 8,000-square-foot garden space. He remembers leaving a “super awkward” phone message for the chef at Cucina 24 early on. Canipelli kindly returned the call. He was Chender’s first customer.

As most relationships go, this one started slowly. The Culinary Gardener’s produce was different from other growers in the area. He leaned toward more unusual varieties, stuff chefs had to Google to identify. Canipelli would buy from Chender, but only the produce that fit into the menus he penned in his black notebook. If Chender had a variety of pristine baby bok choy or some other odd plant, the chef would pass on it. “I’d be like, ‘Nope, we’re Italian, that’s not what we need,’” he says.

But there was no denying that the produce Chender delivered was



CABBAGE TWO WAYS—RAW AND FERMENTED—FILLED WITH CURED TROUT; TROUT SKIN FURITAKE



RABBIT LIVER MOUSSE
WITH NASTURTIUMS
AND PICKLED MUSTARD SEEDS



“INSTEAD OF ME WRITING A MENU AND SOURCING OUT INGREDIENTS, IT BECAME ME JUST BUYING THESE THINGS AND FIGURING OUT HOW TO USE THEM.”

better quality than anything else coming through the doors. He started to be more receptive to obscure herbs and salad greens, and welcomed varieties of vegetables that he wasn't all too familiar with. Soon, his menu writing routine shifted. “Instead of me writing a menu and sourcing out ingredients, it became me just buying these things and figuring out how to use them,” says Canipelli.

Meanwhile, Chender left his part-time bakery gig and began farming full-time. By 2015, his business had grown to include some of Asheville's top restaurants and it was time to find a larger, more permanent space. He found it in Weaverville, just outside of Asheville, and scaled up five times the size of his original garden space to one full acre. Chender's methods are hands-on, focused on soil health, and deeply invested in diversity. This season and last, he grew 180 different crop varieties.

On the farm, Canipelli and Chender would walk through the garden blocks—exploring, tasting, talking about food and other things. The chef learned through observation about the complete life cycle of a plant and how each moment in time can yield a different food product; a new way to think about how food presents itself on the plate. “He had sunflower plants and I was thinking about how the sunflower itself is kind of like an artichoke heart, so we started growing these buds of tiny, unopened sunflowers,” Canipelli says. The buds were treated like

carciofi alla giudia, artichokes that are deep-fried. He served them with sunchoke aoili, a member of the plant kingdom that hails from the same genus as the sunflower. That experiment blossomed into more trials, and just last year, Canipelli served carciofi alla romana with Chender's first true artichoke harvest.

The two share similar interests too—both had life-changing experiences in Italy. While spending the summer in Tuscany cooking and learning at a small agriturismo, Chender had an epiphany. “I was like, ‘Wow, I could grow these things and be able to connect back to these people and this landscape,’” he says. Now, every time Canipelli returns to Italy (once or twice a year), he'll sneak back seeds for Chender, including beans, radicchio, and tomato varieties like the Cuor di bue Albenga, or oxheart tomato (currently in its second season on his Weaverville property).

From their time together, a friendship sprouted, and by 2016 the influence of that friendship made itself known. A quick look at Canipelli's Instagram account and that of Cucina 24's revealed a marked shift. One could liken it to the phases of an artist. Vegetable-centric and refined, a single ingredient became the star of each plate. In one image, slices of bulam squash are delicately plated with avocado in a pattern akin to seigaiha, shades of vivid green variants arranged like the waves



on a traditional Japanese painting. Strewn atop are green coriander seeds and wisps of coriander flower. The plate—sophisticated, clean, and ripe with an awakened maturity—a testament to an intimate relationship between chef and farmer.

A NIGHT TO REMEMBER

On the morning of his special dinner with Chender, Canipelli casually sorts through the particulars. Over coffee, he exudes a laid-back confidence, a playful steward of ingredients rather than a chef bound to the written menu. An early course, he decides, will be a dish straight from the top of Cucina 24's tasting menu. He calls it "mine and Evan's signature dish." Odd plants and anchovy dip is a rotating selection of raw succulent herbs and plants (remember the weird stuff he'd refuse back in the day?) served with a cold riff on bagna cauda, the anchovy-spiked staple of Italy's Piedmont region. Canipelli says it's a dish comprised of "whatever Evan is growing that no one's ever heard of." At the restaurant, odd plants have replaced charcuterie as a gateway to the tasting menu. The dish is plated starkly to call attention to the distinct shapes of each plant—the slender salinity of mineral-rich minutina, the water-filled leaves of tetragonia, the bitter but delicate rosette of radicchio castelfranco.

At dinner that night, the courses vacillate between the genius of utter simplicity and creative complexity. Scallions that Chender purposefully buried extra deep in the style of leeks—to achieve sweet, tender white stalks—are grilled whole over fire like Basque-style calçots. Wrapped in newspaper, the charred onions are paired with a romesco sauce made from those lonely, yet jammy, aji dulce peppers withering on the winter vine. Cover crop porridge, inspired by the nutrient rich crops used to replenish a farmer's soil, is a warming combination of oats, lentils, and winter peas cooked risotto-style in the whey left over from making cheese. Zolfini beans (seeds that Canipelli brought back from Italy, which were then grown and dried by Chender) are cooked in a rich broth bolstered by nduja made from country ham scraps and

the fruity kick of espelette peppers. Braised duck leg with turnips gets draped in ribbons of crunchy tardivo, a tender radicchio striped electric magenta and bright white thanks to a cultivation process called "forcing." Sweet, gummy knobs of sunchokes, dehydrated then rehydrated, are served with a sunchoke hollandaise, and a sprinkling of powder made from its skins—roasted, dried, and ground.

The meal is tactile and multi-sensory, an emotional experience representative of a

relationship that has formed slowly, with intention, over time—a rare friendship that has pushed both chef and farmer deeper into their crafts and further outside the box.

That night, a dozen lucky guests bubbled over with contentment, soothed and sated by good company, wine, and exceptional food. In the kitchen, among the mise en place and cacophony of empty wine bottles, was Canipelli's black notebook, set aside in favor of spontaneous creation.