

A Sleepy Little Borough with a Big Appetite

With plenty of wonderful dining spots, Hopewell is the place where people eat and meet

DATE POSTED: Thursday, April 2, 2015 11:11 AM EDT

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From left: Will Mooney of Brothers Moon, Aaron Philipson of the Blue Bottle Caf[☒]© and Tom Grim of Nomad Pizza have helped to create Hopewell's restaurant row.

Fourteen years ago, when Chef Will Mooney opened The Brothers Moon, he took a major leap of faith investing in a sleepy little town.

There were two pizza places then (Sansone's, which is now Antimo's, and Vincenzo's/Franco's), a pub (Hopewell Valley Bistro & Inn) and a breakfast place (Rose and Chubby's). Two miles up the hill, in the township, was Hillbilly Hall. That was all.

Chef Will's new restaurant, at the center of the borough, near the intersection of Broad Street and Greenwood Avenue, would be the first of its kind, with a farm-to-table menu created around

ingredients that were, for the most part, locally sourced.

"It was scary and exciting. Risky. But, I believed it to be a sure thing," he says.

His gamble paid off, earning him a nickname, the Godfather of Hopewell. Today, Hopewell is "quite a happening place. It's not sleepy Mayberry anymore," Chef Will says. There are art galleries and specialty shops (children's toys and books, handmade jewelry, antiques and more), and clustered mostly along Broad Street, a United Nations of eclectic eateries — 16 and counting — that's come to be known, informally, as Restaurant Row.

The Brothers Moon: Wholesome Food, Locally Sourced

Even as a boy, Will Mooney had a refined palate. His father, an actor in NYC, often brought home

goodies (scones, meats and cheeses), and the basement of their East Brunswick home was almost never without a stock of homemade sausage, thanks to a family friend with a pig farm. His mother, an opera singer, performed with a company in Austria, so Chef Will and his brother spent their first three birthdays in Vienna and Graz.

Maybe it was the exposure to international flavors at such a young age, or to the unbeatable freshness of home-grown vegetables cultivated by his dad, or the fact that his mother cooks a mean meat sauce that he still asks for today, and his dad a chicken paprikash, but if there's one thing Chef Will knows, and loves, and wouldn't want to live without, it's food.

Beets were a mainstay of his dad's garden, and found their way into Belgian endive salad, which Chef Will always loved, and eventually rediscovered at a café in Boulder, Colorado, where his parents now live. A variation is on his menu, alongside his all-time favorite first course, a goat cheese and caramelized onion tart served with an arugula salad with balsamic vinaigrette.

We're snacking on a warm platter of the tart as we chat in the dining room before the evening rush. Chef Will, as his staff and patrons address him, has a direct manner and an easy way of speaking. He is confident in his ability as a chef, but not cocky. We've only just met, and the conversation flows easily, jumping from topic to topic the way good friends might. There's a lot of laughter.

As we share the tart — which is fabulous, by the way — I learn that with the exception of brief stints pumping gas and delivering paint, cooking is all he's ever done, all he's ever wanted to do.

He lives three blocks from the restaurant, in a home he and his jeweler wife, Beth Ann Judge (proprietor of Beth Ann Designs), bought 19 years ago. She too is a fabulous cook, Chef Will says, and a brilliant designer. The dining room's new look — contemporary and organic — is her doing. She sanded and stained the wood paneling in complementary shades of brown, and fashioned the metal light fixtures from sheet trays left behind when a previous tenant, a bagel baker, went out of business.

But it's the menu that grabs me. Changed six to nine times a year, to incorporate whatever's fresh at the farms (about 90 percent of what Chef Will uses comes from local farms, which keep him well supplied from the end of April through the beginning of December), the menu might, during peach season for example, feature peach gazpacho, grilled peaches and chicken, or peach buckle.

There's no shortage of ideas. After a quarter-century in the kitchens of top restaurants on both coasts, Chef Will has fine-tuned a couple thousand recipes.

And still (still!) he'll take suggestions from diners. If a patron isn't grabbed by what's offered on the menu that day, the wait staff knows to suggest using the menu as an inspiration board and come up with the right combination of ingredients.

He's already thinking about the spring menu, which will likely feature asparagus, fiddlehead ferns and

baby leeks. And overall, his menu will be a bit healthier this year: Less flour, more whole grains and beans. Fewer simple carbs, like pasta and potatoes, and more complex carbs to sustain the body longer. Better fats (avocado and coconut oil), more olive oil and less butter, more hard cheeses instead of soft. A regular, who has diabetes, swears by Chef Will's menu and says it's the only place he can eat out and feel healthy the next day.

Working in hospitality is Chef Will's life. "This," he says, "is what I get to do. How awesome is that? I get to do this every day. Most nights when I leave this place, I still thank it. I thank this place for being here, for letting me do my thing."

Before I leave, a member of the wait staff brings me two bags of food. I'm blown away by the chef's generosity, and when I mention it over the next couple days to friends who know him, or of him, not a one is surprised.

There are three first courses, three main courses, three desserts, and for good measure, one snack. For the next several days, we'll sample Belgian endive with roasted beets, toasted hazelnuts, goat cheese and lemon dressing (my husband's favorite); goat cheese and caramelized onion tart with arugula salad (my favorite); and a cod cake served citrus-dressed mixed greens (all three of us fought over this one).

The main courses are braised beef short rib with creamy polenta and roasted asparagus (my daughter's favorite); olive oil-sautéed shrimp with Yukon gold potatoes, asparagus, cabbage, red peppers and Tabasco aioli (my favorite); and sautéed salmon with roasted beets, asparagus, scallion, roasted potatoes and beet gastrique (my husband's favorite).

The desserts are crème brûlée, a mainstay of the menu since the very beginning, and with good reason: It's divine, and my daughter's new favorite; a new menu item, lemon cheesecake with lemon curd and raspberry sauce (my favorite); and a rosemary nut tart with berries, cream and white chocolate sauce (my husband's favorite.)

The snack is a plate-sized chicken quesadilla (delicious!), which are available in the to-go case on Tuesdays and some Fridays.

Every single item we've sampled is something we would undoubtedly eat again, but the one that really gets us with its brilliant simplicity is the cod cake. It's served with a side of something neither of us can identify by taste. At first, I think it's pasta, but the bite's not right, so I email Chef Will and learn that it's celery root julienned so thin and brined for a few hours, then tossed with caper mayonnaise. He's been making it for more than 16 years, and I hope, I pray, he never stops.

The Blue Bottle Café: Finding Inspiration in Far-Flung Locales

About five years after The Brothers Moon opened, Rory and Aaron Philipson, the husband-and-wife team behind The Blue Bottle Café, brought their version of farm-to-table dining to Hopewell.

Five months later, they were nearly burned out. That's when a college professor of Rory's cautioned them against working themselves silly. "He suggested we learn to pace ourselves, take a break, regroup and do it again," says Chef Aaron.

The first vacation was in Las Vegas because they were afraid they "would sleep through a great trip if we didn't go somewhere very exciting." Since then, they've shut down the restaurant twice a year, in January and July, and traveled to such culinary goldmines as Morocco, Portugal, Aruba and Hawaii. They've also stayed closer to home, traveling to Florida, South Carolina, the Poconos, the Outer Banks and Ohio.

That last wasn't as much for the food as for the fun.

"I am a huge roller coaster enthusiast, and Sandusky, Ohio, is home to the best roller coaster park in the country," Chef Aaron says. "Plus, we had just bought our Mini Cooper and wanted to stretch its legs."

When the Philipsons opened their restaurant, Hopewell wasn't yet the culinary scene it is today. "It was basically Will Mooney and Soup Du Jour," Chef Aaron says. Watching Hopewell grow gastronomically was "very cool to watch. I think the big reason this happened is the lack of liquor licenses. The clientele is here, but without a bar, the chefs really have to try harder."

And try harder the Philipsons do. "We try to keep reinventing and improving the Blue Bottle Café, and people notice that. For instance, my new goal is to get out every single possible GMO. It was very hard to find a clean canola oil, and the cost of GMO-free flour is almost double the commodity stuff, but it's worth it," Chef Aaron said. "The lamb is certified hormone and antibiotic free. It makes a difference."

Because I need to take the food home, the Philipsons choose for me something that travels well and reheats beautifully. I have containers of Chef Aaron's signature gnocchi, served two ways. In one, the gnocchi is dressed with mushrooms, spinach and caramelized red onions, deglazed with sherry, and accented with touches of mushroom puree and cream. In the second, it's in a ragout of braised lamb. I suspect, the moment I taste it, that the lamb is cooked very slowly; complexity and richness like this don't happen when the process is rushed. Turns out I'm right.

"The lamb braises for four and a half hours in veal stock, wine and vegetables, and after the meat is tender, there's another two hours of preparation, between picking the meat off the bones, to stewing it with mushrooms, tomatoes, more wine, more mire poix," says Chef Aaron.

The gnocchi is Chef Aaron's signature dish, and his Achilles' heel, all in one, Chef Rory tells me.

"In early June 2006, a writer from The New York Times opened an excellent review with a paragraph about Aaron's gnocchi. Then, that same New Year's Eve, she talked about it again with her best-of-the-

year wrap up,” she says. As a result, “it has become a dish that people expect to see on the menu, no matter what.”

Still, the chef’s creativity seems to know no bounds. The menu includes such first courses as sous vide farm egg with smoked salmon, American caviar butter sauce and a housemade crumpet; and black bean, quinoa and vegetable cake with broccoli walnut pesto. Featured entrees — obviously influenced by the couple’s world travels — are pan-roasted golden tilefish with red curry, butternut squash, coconut broth, sweet potato and bok choy; and coriander-dusted sea scallops with roasted fennel, black rice, orange zest and carrot ginger broth. (We don’t sample these items, only the gnocchi.)

For dessert, Chef Rory has selected for us a decadent tart. The base is hazelnut shortbread cookie, pulverized and moistened with butter and formed into a shell, and filled with roasted hazelnuts and chocolate ganache. It’s served with Frangelico Crème Anglaise and hazelnut ice cream, though since I’m taking our order home, Chef Rory has wisely omitted the ice cream. Even without, it’s divine, everything you want in a special dessert.

Nomad Pizza: Neopolitan-Style Crusts Topped With Seasonal Ingredients

When Tom Grim, aka Teddy, first became obsessed with making pizza, he lined his kitchen oven with bricks and tried to bypass the safety mechanism that keeps ovens from exceeding 500 degrees.

“Ovens self-clean at 800 degrees, but you can’t open and close the door when it’s that hot, so I broke the glass,” he said, smiling at the memory. “That’s when I put a wood-fired oven in my kitchen.”

By this time, he’d been dabbling in bread and pizza making for several years. When he perfected his technique, he took his skill on the road. Literally.

“I started with a pizza truck, and I built it to cater parties. We still do that, cater about 200 parties a year, graduations, weddings, etc.,” he says. “We did that for two years, but needed a commissary. We were working out of my house. There was flour everywhere, and it was illegal anyway.” He’s laughing as he tells me this story.

“We were only going to be open a few days a week, but we got crazy busy. We opened another day, and then another day. Now we’re open six days a week.”

I’m there to chat with him, and to take pizza home for our family movie night, but he persuades me to stay because he believes his pizza really tastes best fresh out of the oven. Since it’s a Friday night, I don’t mind that our 7-year-old will be out past her bedtime, so I call my husband with the change in plans and they drive over to join me.

It’s Restaurant Week in Hopewell, so we order the special: Salad, pizza and dessert, all for \$20. With three of us eating, we order two of everything: Caesar and arugula salads, a Roman-style Margherita

pizza (that crust isn't on the menu, but Teddy, as his staff call him, has raved about it, so when I ask for it, he's happy to oblige), and the Neopolitan-style crust (thicker and denser) topped with Italian tomatoes, spicy sausage, fresh mozzarella, basil and caramelized onions. Dessert is the house classic: Nutella-topped pizza.

We're at the communal table, and from where I sit, I've got a clear view of the blue beehive oven in the corner of the cooking area; Nomad is spelled out in white tile. Shipped intact from Naples, the 3,000-pounder is lined with brick, and heats to 800 degrees. It flash cooks a pizza to perfection in 90 seconds.

Teddy stands near it, where he'll be most of the night, putting in one pizza after another. By the end of a typical evening, he'll have cooked between 180 and 300 pies using ingredients that are either homemade or imported from Italy, and dough that has risen slowly for three days.

It's what makes Nomad's crusts sweeter and more complex. "Dough that's used too soon has no flavor, like cardboard," Teddy tells me.

Serious about providing the best, most authentic pizza experience possible, two years ago Teddy closed the restaurant for two weeks and took 15 staffers on a 10-day, expenses-paid trip to Naples.

"I wanted the staff to see pizza as Italians do, and better understand what we are trying to do at Nomad," Teddy says. "We ate pizza every day. Pizza in Italy is spectacular. A trip to Italy many years ago is what inspired me to make pizza in the first place."

While there, they visited their tomato and flour suppliers, and the farms where their Parmesan and mozzarella di bufala are produced.

Like some of the restaurants they visited in Naples, Nomad keeps its menu uncomplicated: Salad, pizza and dessert.

"We have special pizzas every night, but we keep it simple. Want to do one thing and do it well," he says.

The night we're there, the specials include spinach and fig pizza for dinner, and apple and almond paste pizza for dessert. The menu also has regular favorites, like shiitake mushroom and caramelized onion pizza with mozzarella di bufala. Seasonally influenced menus mean you can expect garlic scape pizza in spring, and pesto, corn and heirloom tomato pizzas in summer. In winter, kale pizza makes an appearance alongside citrus salad.

The keep-it-simple approach works.

The Caesar salad we order is devoured by my husband and our daughter, who has two helpings, anchovies and all, and flashes a smile and thumbs up at Teddy. I get most of the baby arugula salad to

myself. Dressed with housemade lemon-thyme dressing and garnished with wood-fire roasted pecans, cherry tomatoes and goat cheese, it's summer on my plate. Wow.

The pizzas, too, are delicious — just the right balance of sweet and spicy for the sausage pie, and just the right ratio of cheese to sauce for the margherita. And, because we're saving room for dessert, some of each pizza makes the ride home with us.

Teddy asked earlier if our daughter's ever had Nutella pizza. She's never even had Nutella, that I know of, so I can't wait to see her reaction. I spy Teddy watching too, and a smile erupts on his face when he sees her eyes glaze over. We can't finish this pie either, so we pack it for home and...

...break it out for breakfast the next morning. It's great cold or at room temperature with a piping hot cup of freshly brewed coffee. The regular pizza is great cold too.

Nomad seats about 30 people inside, and another 30 outdoors. They don't take reservations, and it's not unusual to wait 30-45 minutes for a place to sit. I notice several families waiting; not one complains.

That's Not All, Folks

Elsewhere in Hopewell borough, a wide array of restaurants is on hand to please every palate. There's Brick Farm Market, Antimo's Italian Kitchen, China Wok, Sweet Grass (tucked behind Boro Bean), Hopewell Valley Bistro & Inn, Jack & Charlie's 23 (for ice cream), Da's Thai Kitchen, The Peasant Grill, Paint The Roses Tea Room & Café, Franco's/Vincenzo's Pizza, Village Express (Indian to go) and Michael's Deli. A couple miles outside the borough, there's Hillbilly Hall.