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HAVEN IS FOR REAL

Jean-Georges Vongerichten cultivates rustic cuisine in Pound Ridge

BY NANCY MATSUMOTO □ PHOTOGRAPHY BY MEREDITH HEUER

The quiet lakeside hamlet of Waccubuc in Westchester County seemed to be the ideal getaway. At least that's what globetrotting celebrity chef Jean-Georges Vongerichten thought when he purchased a weekend home there in 2007 with the idea to quit his seven-day workweek and create a haven where he could be with family and friends, cook for fun and unwind. "The Hamptons were a little too far away for me," he says, but the one-hour commute time from Manhattan to Waccubuc was ideal.

The town turned out to be just the retreat he'd envisioned, so much so that two years later, when the owners of the Inn at Pound Ridge approached him through a mutual friend about leasing their building—it had once been an inn and more recently housed a restaurant—he wasn't the least bit interested; that would be bringing work to the country.

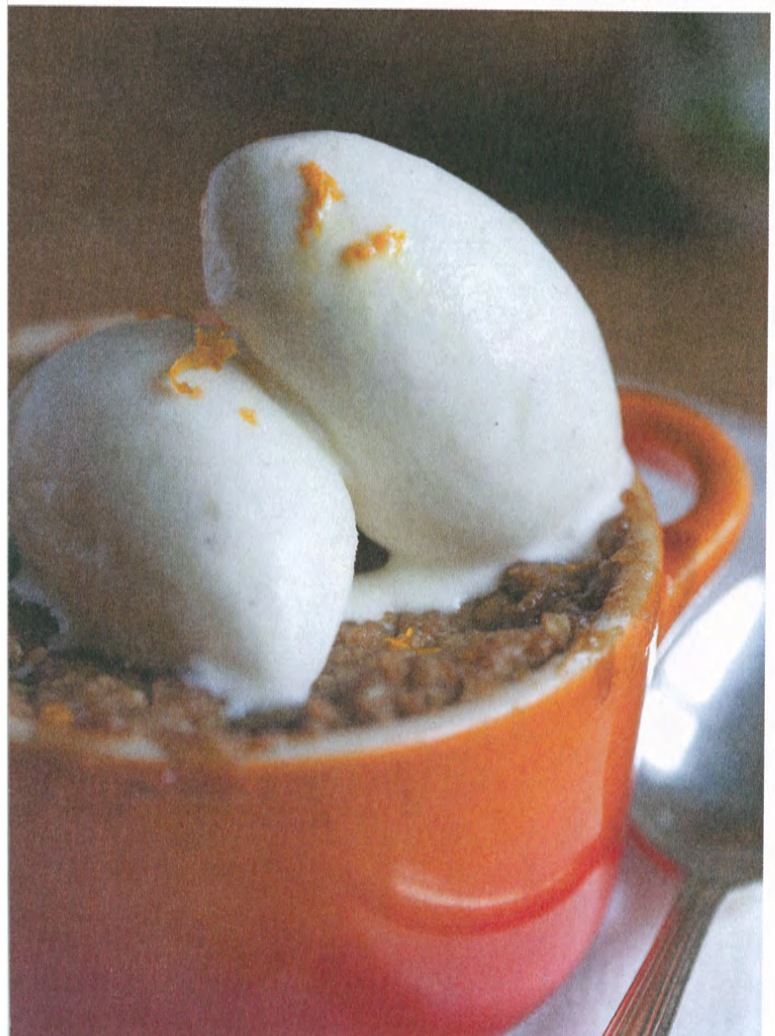
But it was hard to forget the handsome, landmarked 1836 Federal-style building, which Vongerichten knew could be both restored to its original beauty and gently ushered into the 21st century, Jean-Georges style. So in 2012, he and his partners took on the project. Nearly two years and countless planning, zoning and landmarks commission meetings later (as part of the Pound Ridge Historic District, the building is included on the National Register of Historic Places), he unveiled his refurbished Inn at Pound Ridge, a burnished gem of minimalist European luxury nestled in a setting of plainspoken early American architecture. ►



Head chef Blake Farrar and
pastry chef Melody Farrar



Clockwise, from top left: roasted hake with tender broccoli, grated ginger dressing and topped with chervil and mint; a local egg from the chef's table; foie gras brulée with dried sour cherries, candied pistachios and white port gelée; Muscovado rhubarb crisp with Scottish oat topping



Conceived as a country outpost of ABC Kitchen, Vongerichten and chef Dan Kluger's influential Manhattan farm-to-table restaurant, Vongerichten tapped the talent in his own restaurants' ranks to staff it. Heading the kitchen is chef Blake Farrar, an eight-year alumnus of the Mark Restaurant in Manhattan, and as pastry chef, Blake's wife Melody Farrar, most recently of ABC Kitchen and Cocina, also in Manhattan.

Many Hands Make Light Work

The Inn at Pound Ridge is now developing its own ties to local farmers, foragers and suppliers. Purveyors have dropped by the restaurant to show everything from roasted nuts to chickens to foraged ramps, reports Vongerichten, and even local resident Martha Stewart stops in regularly with chicken eggs from her hen house.

Donna Simons, the founder and CEO of the farm and food co-op Pound Ridge Organics, has been instrumental and has helped source produce for the restaurant from Hilltop Hanover Farm (Yorktown Heights), dairy products from Sprout Creek Farm (Poughkeepsie) and honey from Hudson River Aviaries (Cortlandt), plus her own eggs (in addition to the ones they gather from Stewart). "When I bring products to them that I believe are really precious, they treat them with the same dignity as I do," says Simons. "When my chicken Zelda laid her first egg of the season, I presented it to them. All the chefs gathered around, and I talked to them about chickens. They

put it on a pedestal on the Chef's Table (located in the kitchen, it is an artful display of seasonal ingredients)."

Vongerichten and Farrar have even tapped the three maple trees on the inn's property, and bottles of that syrup also claim an exalted space on the Chef's Table, underneath a domed glass cover. The project started when Simons did a maple syrup tasting for the chefs, bringing Crown Maple syrup (made in Dover Plains) and a little of her own. She expected Vongerichten to select Crown, but he chose hers. What he didn't know is that she had only five trees on her property. Panicked, she began tapping the maple trees of friends and neighbors, including three on the Farrars' property, also in Westchester County. Since it was too much to boil down on her home stove top, Farrar offered his 30-gallon braiser pot. When she hauls her sap harvest to the restaurant, says Simons, the scene is like that of an old-fashioned fire brigade as kitchen staff members come running to pass 5-gallon jug containers back up to the kitchen. "They treat it with the greatest respect; it's a wonderful collaboration," says Simons.

At the time of the inn's midwinter opening in 2013, however, it was slim pickings from field and farm. So Farrar started out with some of the Vongerichten family of restaurants' greatest hits: the tuna tartare, avocado and radish with soy-ginger sauce from Jean-Georges, the shrimp salad from Nougatine and the crab and aioli toasts from ABC Kitchen, plus, during the winter, an Alsatian recipe of Vongerichten's mother for lamb *baeckeoffe*, a lamb shank cooked with potato,

Tables, beams and walls were fashioned out of reclaimed barn wood, and the ceiling of the restaurant's main dining room was lifted to create an airy, cathedral ceiling.





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white wine, carrots and onions. Lining the inn’s kitchen shelves is a small fleet of handmade painted clay pots that Vongerichten’s mother shipped from Alsace just for the dish. As the seasons unwind over the coming months, visitors can be assured of more local and seasonal specials. For dessert, Melody Farrar has brought her whimsical and hugely popular salted caramel sundae with candied popcorn and peanuts, her chocolate cake with toasted marshmallow frosting and her seasonal glazed donuts. She’s added a butterscotch pudding with rhubarb compote and changed up her delicious cookie plate, as well.

The menu is designed to run the gamut from casual to special occasion. So in addition to a foie gras terrine with white port gelée and a beef tenderloin, there’s a bacon-Gruyère burger and a selection of nicely blistered pizzas from the wood-burning oven. The latter are similar to those offered at ABC Kitchen, but instead of a whole-wheat crust, made with a fine butter dough crust that Farrar has perfected.

Libations

The beverage program, created by Bernard Sun, corporate beverage director for Vongerichten’s restaurant group, like the menu, aims to highlight local products. Wines include a 2010 chardonnay from the Vineyard at Strawberry Ridge in Connecticut and a 2012 Millbrook Winery pinot noir, while local beers include Yonkers Lager, Captain

Lawrence from Westchester, Ommegang from Cooperstown and Brooklyn Brewery’s Sorachi Ace.

Another nod to local sources is the way Sun showcases top wine importers from the area: Kobrand (imports include Louis Jadot and Taittinger Champagne) in Purchase, and Polaner Selections (which imports wines and spirits from South America, Europe and Asia, many of them organic and biodynamic), based in Mt. Kisco.

“When we build a restaurant, we build for the long-term,” explains Sun. “We don’t want to be the Jean-Georges restaurant coming in from the outside, but to be part of the community, part of the fabric of the town.” That has happened already, he adds. “One night we’ll have the Pound Ridge garden club here, and the next night the equestrian club. It’s a great neighborhood place to hang out.” Since the launch of the Inn at Pound Ridge, Sun has installed a new sommelier, Portland, Oregon, transplant Michael Galluccio.

Like the Farrars, Galluccio had had his fill of urban living and was ready to move to the country. Farrar says that as a South Carolina boy who grew up playing in the woods, he began to long for the country. Pound Ridge has satisfied that itch. “We have windows to outside in the kitchen,” he marvels, “and we can prop open the back door and get a nice breeze. That’s just amazing because for eight years I was cooking in a basement. Fresh air and natural light, those were big for me.” ▶



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his experience working with modernist architect Richard Meier was the perfect combination for the Inn at Pound Ridge, Vongerichten thought. Juul-Hansen’s mandate was to “keep it comfy,” and evoke an earlier, slower pace of life, while Descotte’s role was to bring a touch of the modern through his lighting.

The footprint of the building and its gorgeous, broad, oak-beam flooring were retained, but only after painstakingly lifting each plank of the floor to redo the building’s plumbing and electricity. Tables, beams and walls were fashioned out of reclaimed barn wood, and the ceiling of the restaurant’s main dining room was lifted to create an airy, cathedral ceiling. Hanging kraft paper lamps cast a buttery light over tables, bathing guests in a charmed glow.

From the street, the restaurant looks a fraction of its true size: three levels, two bars and seven fireplaces, seating for 240, and a basement space broken up into romantic nooks. Next to the 2,500-bottle wine cellar is a sanctuary-like wine room decked out with a long table that seats 20. Illuminated only by candlelight, it is booked almost nightly, says Vongerichten.

Tables are set with mismatched antique silverware and china, part of the restaurant’s sustainability effort, says Vongerichten, noting, “We tried not to buy too much new.” What he did invest in, though, are the buttery beige leather that covers the inn’s banquettes and comes from the same factory that supplies Hermès and the curvilinear chairs made from a design by Juul-Hansen’s grandfather.

Vongerichten happened to spy the design in a drawing on the architect’s office wall.

Despite a network of 23 restaurants that stretch from Los Cabos, Mexico, to Shanghai, and his original intention of protecting his country weekends from the encroachment of work, Vongerichten, it seems, has a hard time staying still and seems genuinely enthralled by his Pound Ridge project. The best part of it for him, he says, “was really the planning of it.” He adds, “We did research online, talked to people in town, and were able to bring [the building] back to life,” to the gratitude of many of the locals “They say, ‘Thank you for bringing back the best thing in the area. Our property values are coming back thanks to you!’” ✕

THE INN AT POUND RIDGE

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Build-out

On a late-April Saturday evening visit to the Inn at Pound Ridge, we found ourselves relieved of our car by valet parking attendants and inside a wood-paneled foyer decorated with crates of dusky green asparagus and purple-tinted artichokes. The combination city/country vibe continued: a pair of glamorously attired front desk attendants in spike heels greeted us, but in the dining room, servers dressed in plaid shirts and jeans lent the room the casual feel of a country fair, albeit a chic one. As Vongerichten led us through the sprawling premises, we saw that the dual nature of the inn was central to its identity: unobtrusive elegance swathed in rustic charm, like a socialite dressed for a weekend in the country—a lot, in fact, like the restaurant’s guests themselves.

To get this effect, Vongerichten teamed up with longtime collaborators, Danish-born architect Thomas Juul-Hansen and French lighting guru Hervé Descottes. Juul-Hansen’s old-world upbringing and