

plate



Mary and Patrick O'Neil

A Sure Bet

More than 20 years ago, Patrick O'Neil revolutionized the New Trier dining scene by advocating for the modification of laws that made it difficult for his customers to order a simple glass of wine. This month, with the help of his wife, Mary, who has imbued their new restaurant, Trifecta, with a chic yet comfortable vibe, he continues the revolution, offering a cutting-edge wine bar designed to make enjoying a glass of *vino* as simple and satisfying as ever. **By Peter Gianopulos**

SOME DAY, years from now, Patrick O’Neil is going to have a whopper of a real-life fairy tale to share with his future grandchildren. It won’t be your standard fairy tale per se — no dragons or magic kisses or Fairy Godmother-sanctioned glass slippers — but it’ll be a fascinating yarn nonetheless.

It will involve a strange land in a time “long, long ago.” There will be “royal” edicts. And a band of Robin Hood-esque figures fighting what they perceive to be injustices. There will be a romance. There will be fights, not with swords so much as logic. And a happy ending. It will, in short, be about their grandfather Patrick’s battle — incredulous as it might sound — to serve his neighbors a simple glass of wine at his restaurants.

No, the year wasn’t 1929. Try 1989. If you were of sipping age in this grand Oz we call New Trier Township around then, you can probably corroborate his story. You probably have your own horror stories about how difficult it was to order a glass of Pinot in your own zip code, how, as O’Neil remembers all too clearly, there were strict laws on the books in Winnetka preventing anyone from requesting a glass of wine without ordering what amounted to full dinner entrée.

The prospect of a small nibble and a glass of Chardonnay for lunch? A casual girl’s night out, capped with a shared bottle of Zin between bits of juicy gossip? The ability to enjoy a beer with the boys on Bears’ Sunday? You can thank Patrick O’Neil for helping usher in all of those “modern” conveniences.

“We were the first ones to bring a bar to the North Shore with Patrick & James,” says O’Neil. “There used to be legal language that said you literally couldn’t pass a drink over the bar. Wine, at one time, had to be accompanied by a full meal. And then there were restrictions on the number of TVs allowed in the bar. We changed that. *All of that.*”

“They trusted our judgment, though. They didn’t want to turn this into a bar town. I understood that, but I said, ‘Have more faith in your village residents. That’s not the makeup of our town. You have to give them a shot.’ So we took baby steps, and I kept going back to the village. By now I think I’m about maxed out. I think they even said don’t come back for a while.”

So you can forgive O’Neil and his wife, Mary, for their enthusiasm over the wine system they’re installing in their new restaurant, Trifecta, an eclectic small-plates bistro with a inventive wine program.

In many ways, Trifecta — so named because restaurants are always a gamble and this marks their third Winnetka restaurant — will bring the fairy tale full circle. The O’Neils were there on the front lines when Winnetka was nearly dry, and they’re here now as they install a pricey new gourmet wine station, which will allow guests the opportunity to saunter up to an assisted-service stainless-steel wine bar and choose from 2 oz. samples, half glasses or full glasses of 28 different bottles of wines.

The idea, of course, is to make their wine program as simple and unpretentious as possible, the adult version of those shiny candy stores with giant bins of gummy bears and Raisinets. There will be a sommelier on hand to offer suggestions but also descriptions of each available wine for individual perusal. Customers will be given a “wine card” —

the size and shape of your Visa card — which can be loaded with as much or as few dollars as you like. The card is then swiped and out flows the wine.

“It’s really an opportunity to sample wines, to try a bunch of different options without having to buy a full bottle,” says Patrick, who will also devise a separate wine list for the main dining room. “For instance, let’s say you want to try an Opus One, a very high-end and expensive red. You don’t really want to spend \$180 on a bottle, but you are willing to spend \$15 on a glass. This is your opportunity.”

Trifecta, when is scheduled to open in January, will be the eighth restaurant to debut under the stewardship of Patrick and Mary O’Neil. It’s a restaurant empire that began back in 1989 with the opening of the Dancing Noodle on 12th Street in Wilmette, followed by a second location in Evan-



An example of the fare to expect at Trifecta includes braised short ribs in a sweet-chili sauce over mashed potatoes.

ston and then their flagship, O’Neil’s, in Winnetka, a fine-dining staple that continues to thrive some 20 years after its debut.

There have been others as well, each with their own interesting backstory. There was the fine-dining spot Patrick & James in Glencoe, which earned best restaurant honors from *Chicago* magazine but was sold when the O’Neils got an offer for the building itself they couldn’t refuse. There was the expansive O’Neil’s in Libertyville, which was sold to Ron Santo in 2002. And the short-lived Rum Point in Racine, Wis., which lasted only 72 days when the locals found prices too high. Not to mention Little Ricky’s, which continues to thrive due, in part, to an insistence on freshness: from quality pork and homemade dressings to hamburger meat ground fresh daily from Lakeside Foods.

But there’s nothing in the family’s restaurant portfolio quite like their plans for Trifecta, partially because the restaurant will fill a niche the O’Neils believe is lacking up here: a casual yet trendy spot designed to let diners graze on tapas-

like delicacies ranging from sweet-chili short ribs to rolled salmon “lollipops.”

But the restaurant is also unique in that it’s a true collaboration between husband and wife, with Patrick overseeing the food and Mary doing all the design work, both inside and out on the restaurant’s ambitious outdoor patio complete with bluestone pavers and comfortable “fire” tables.

This idea of equally shared responsibilities was tried once before, long ago, when the couple was engaged and prepping their first Dancing Noodle. It didn’t end well. “I think at one point,” says Mary, “I gave him the ring back.” But slowly, as time was freed up by their children growing older, their sensibilities have begun to mesh, most recently in 2002 when Mary performed a full makeover for Little Ricky’s, changing the color scheme to warm barbecue hues, painting the ceilings black and rearranging the bar.

“We hated working together in the beginning,” says Mary. “He didn’t want to hear me tell him what to do, and I didn’t want to hear him tell me what

Recipe Book

Gilson’s Chocolate Cake

It’s pretty hard to settle into a table at **Gilson’s** restaurant on Central Avenue in Wilmette and not find something to get all gushy about. It’s intimate without being cramped. The food is approachable; the artwork elegant. Wine is valued over cocktails to encourage meaningful conversation and careful sipping. Plus it’s located next door to the Wilmette Theatre, making it a perfect starting or ending point for a date night.

Impressive, for sure, all perfect lures for Valentine’s Day. But the most impressive thing about Gilson’s has to be the motivation for its existence. Its original owners — Chuck Rometty and Sean Traci — have said they opened up the restaurant to have a place close to home that made “their wives happy.” Take that De Beers.

For a while, we assumed nothing about the place could be more romantic than that sentiment. Then we had a forkful of the house’s signature triple-layer chocolate cake, which is made by Ted Georgeson and pastry chef Moon Shin, who also operate The Cook catering service in Highland Park. We stand corrected. It’s creamy. Decadent. Rich. And gorgeous, both on the plate and the palate.

We recommend having a bite with the one you love at Gilson’s, an experience that can’t be matched at home, but should you want to recreate that spark in your own dining room, here is a simple yet magic recipe for instant romance.

Gilson’s Chocolate Cake

- 4 sticks butter (room temperature)
- 3½ cups sugar
- 5 eggs
- ¼ cups cocoa powder
- 4 cups cake flour
- 2 teaspoons baking soda
- 2 teaspoons baking powder
- ½ teaspoon salt
- 3 cups warm water

- 1) Sift cocoa powder, flour, baking soda and baking powder.
- 2) Cream the butter, sugar and salt in a bowl.
- 3) Slowly add the eggs to the butter mixture.
- 4) Add ⅓ of the dry ingredients and mix.
- 5) Add ½ of water and mix.
- 6) Add second ⅓ of dry ingredients and mix.
- 7) Add the rest of the water and mix.
- 8) Add the rest of the dry ingredients and mix.
- 9) Pan and bake at 350 for about 25-30 minutes. Frost with chocolate butter cream and serve.



PHOTO: ROB WARNER

Gilson’s, 1126 Central Ave., Wilmette, 847/256-2430

to do. The restaurant business is tough. But then we had kids, and slowly I kind of came back into the business, and he started appreciating my input and perspective. Now we've gotten to the point where he says 'Go do it. Just go with it.' And I do."

The most appropriate label that Mary can find to sum up her design is "industrial chic." There won't be a single remnant — right down, as Patrick points out, to "the air coming out of the new air conditioner" — that will remain from the space's former life as JP McCarthy's. Large beams of reclaimed wood will gird the ceiling. A meticulously restored 16-foot-long bar will anchor a main dining room of exposed cream brick, zinc tables and even a romantic floor-to-ceiling booth. There will be a lounge, right by the front door, perfectly positioned for people-watching and small groups, with the wine lounge in the back room offering communal tables.

"We want it to be casual yet comfortable," says Mary. "The atmosphere will match the food."

For Patrick, however, Trifecta is more than just another notch in his restaurant empire. He sees it as a defensive move. Ever since 1989, when he drove an old tan Nissan pick-up truck from Wilmette to Allentown, Pa., to ask his father for a loan to open the Dancing Noodle, he's believed that a good offense is a good defense. Whenever he's noticed a need in the New Trier restaurant scene, some niche that needs to be filled, he's felt duty bound to fill it.

Is he, as his father has asked, competing with himself by having three restaurants in the same suburb? No, he doesn't think so. "I said, 'If I don't do it

someone else is going to do it. They're going to go after me. And instead of that, why don't we eliminate the competition by doing it ourselves."

So he will do what he always does: Keep the space small, the menu creative and hire a manager — for Trifecta it will be Stephanie Strauss, a former manager at Little Ricky's — who respects high-end service and cultivates quality relationships with customers.

"We have the toughest, most educated demanding crowd on the North Shore," Patrick says. "You're going to get demands, and if you don't meet them, you're gone. But I think that's fine because that's what we're like that when we go out. We are of that same makeup. In the end, it's rewarding because if you give people something unique, something they want, they'll be extremely loyal."

But this time, as in every new venture, there will be new additions, new passions for both Mary and Patrick to perfect. Twelve-inch pizzas with exotic ingredients, a wine bar, a contemporary design sensibility. If they do it right, they say, it will feel both familiar and new at the same time. On the one hand, it will clearly be an "O'Neils restaurant" but be also represent a major step forward for the local dining scene.

"Whenever we go to parties, our friends don't ask how our kids are doing; they ask us if we're going to open a new restaurant," says Mary "If anything we've been able to gain their trust. We plan on holding onto it."

Trifecta, located at 501 Chestnut Ave. in Winnetka, is scheduled to open in January. Call 847/441-1700 for further information.

the LOCAVORE Upper Crusts

By Peter Gianopulos

The antidote to dark, snowy winter nights? Warm, crusty fresh-baked breads. Here are the best local options for filling your kitchen bread basket.

- 1 Once a Highland Park-only treat, the new **Once Upon a Bagel** in Winnetka, scheduled to open in late February or March, offers true New York-style bagels: boiled first then baked, perfectly crunchy and chewy, especially its all-season egg bagel topped with onion, sesame, poppy, garlic and kosher salt. 85 cents each. 1050 Gage St., Winnetka, 847/784-1411
- 2 **Convito Café & Market's** pepper-cheese bread is as soft as focaccia with a richness that comes from using quality *formaggio*. It's beyond versatile: great with eggs in the morning, for a sandwich at lunch, warmed in tinfoil for dinner or, after a few days, as a crunchy crostini. \$4.99. 1515 Sheridan Road, Wilmette, 847/251-3654
- 3 With its perfectly round shape and gentle coating of snow-white flour, a loaf of country French from the **Heavenly Hearth** looks worthy of its own still-life treatment, but its mix of wheat and rye flours make for an equally inspired taste. \$5.25 per loaf. 1101 Central Ave., Wilmette, 847/853-0200.
- 4 Using a recipe from legendary baker Raymond Calvel as inspiration, **Bennison's Bakery** owner Jory Downer creates impossibly crunch French baguettes thanks to years of practice and his Polin oven, the brand he says that's used by BMW and Mercedes to cure the paint on new cars. \$2.50. 1000 Davis St., Evanston, 847/328-9434
- 5 Being owned by the Highland Park Baking Co. has its advantages. When **D.C. Sarnies** created its pretzel roll, it leaned on its parent's expertise, crafting a roll that works equally well as a base for deli meats as cheeseburgers. \$5.25 per package. 649 W. Lake Cook Road, Deerfield, 847/509-2000



PHOTO: ROB WARNER

Worth the Drive Nellcôte

By Peter Gianopulos

You know people like chef Jared Van Camp. You probably work with a few. And you might even live with one or two. The do-it-yourself types. Type A all the way. When they want something done, they want it done right. So they do it themselves.

If you've ever eaten at Van Camp's Chicago restaurant Old Town Social, you've probably tasted the advantages of letting the man do his own thing. There's hot dogs made from scratch, one of the best artisanal charcuterie lists in town, which include handcrafted finocchiona salumi, and the option to take home 15 pounds of Van Camp's own dry-cured prosciutto for 260 bucks.

All fine. All delicious. But come January, with the opening of his second spot, **Nellcôte**, Van Camp's going to do something no other restaurant

in the Midwest has dared to do: he's going to have his own 9-foot-tall, 11-foot-wide stone-wheel flour mill freshly ground his own flour every morning. Why? Because about the only people lucky enough to experience the flavors of fresh-ground flour are either A) living somewhere on an estate in Italy or B) working on a farm a half a day's drive away.

"Fresh flour is so important when it comes to flavor," says Van Camp. "It's like the difference between freshly ground spices versus the pre-ground stuff in grocery stores."

Should you want to dine at Nellcôte, you can



expect intricate options like smoked swordfish with radishes and apple butter and wood-grilled scallops with charred cucumber and sea urchin, but Van Camp will be selling bags of the fresh-ground flour for visitors to take home as well, an incentive, he hopes, for do-it-yourself types to create something special of their own.

Nellcôte Restaurant, 833 W. Randolph St., Chicago, 855/635-5268