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New England's Clark and Mark: Celebrating Two Decades of Culinary (and Personal) Glory

by Curtis M. Wong

EDGE Contributor

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Mark Gaier, left, and partner Clark Frasier, right

For a time, it looked as though Clark Frasier and Mark Gaier would go down rather dubiously as the Susan Luccis of the New England culinary scene.

Despite having been praised by the legendary Julia Child, *The New York Times*' Christine Muhlke, and *Bon Appétit* magazine (among others), the gourmet duo had yet to nab a coveted James Beard Foundation Award (known among America's foodie brigades as the restaurant industry's equivalent to an Oscar), despite a whopping seven nominations over the years.

That all changed this year when, on May 2, the pair was named "Best Chefs in the Northeast" at the Foundation's annual awards ceremony in

New York. "It was quite a moment," recalls Gaier, 53, almost matter-of-factly. Adds Frasier, 50: "The whole night was pretty radical and exciting."

You can't blame the pair for their relative restraint; no doubt their six previous nominations taught them to take such gastronomic accolades, even those involving lavish Lincoln Center ceremonies, in stride.

And then there's also the fact that Gaier and Frasier are close to celebrating their 22nd year as business partners - and their 25th anniversary together as a couple. In other words, these are not the sort of men to rest on their laurels. The men are chefs and co-owners of three acclaimed New England-based restaurants: Arrows Restaurant and MC Perkins Cove, both in Ogunquit, Maine, as well as Summer Winter, the flagship eatery of the Burlington Marriott near Boston.



Arrows, Ogunquit, Maine

Culinary Alchemists Adhering to Sustainable Cuisine

Since opening Arrows in Ogunquit in 1988, Gaier and Frasier have developed a reputation throughout New England as culinary alchemists, skilled at crafting sophisticated, elegant dishes that emphasize local ingredients rather than foreign products. All of their menus draw heavily on traditional recipes - from grilled lobster tail to Peekytoe crab - though there are hints of Asian and touches of French, as well as other international cuisines.

Equally important, both men are considered pioneers in the sustainable food movement, growing as much as ninety percent of their own produce directly on site at the 18th-century farmhouse they also call home.

For the past twenty years, well before the "farm-to-table" food craze currently sweeping through restaurants around the globe, Frasier and Gaier have been adhering to sustainable culinary practices. And yet both Frasier and Gaier insist that the organic focus of their restaurants was motivated at first by necessity more than anything else. "When we first opened Arrows," recalls Frasier, "there simply wasn't great produce to be

found in Maine. If you didn't grow it yourself, it didn't exist. Even finding something like virgin olive oil...was difficult."



Dining at MC Perkins Cove

From Pharmacology to Stars - And On To Maine

While Frasier and Gaier's inventive menus draw raves from critics and diners these days, establishing themselves in the notoriously cutthroat world of high-end restaurants was a formidable choice at first.

The couple met in 1984 where they were both on the staff of San Francisco's Stars Restaurant. Frasier was a California native whose background included a stint in China, while Gaier hailed from Dayton, Ohio where he'd studied pharmacy before opting for a culinary career. The two bonded quickly over classic literature, foreign travel, and, of course, a love of fine dining.

"We didn't have any money in those days," Gaier says, with a laugh. "So we'd save our money and go out for lunch because we couldn't afford dinner."

The idea for owning and operating their own restaurant came about relatively early in their relationship. Unfortunately, convincing Bay Area investors to take a chance on a pair of novice restaurateurs proved an arduous task. So when the opportunity to open a restaurant in Ogunquit - Southern Maine's top LGBT resort town where Gaier had previously worked, but Frasier had never visited - came up, the duo jumped at the chance.

"We'd realized just how difficult it would be to survive [as chefs] in the Bay Area without an established reputation," Frasier notes. "We were in our twenties and had nothing to lose."



Summer Winter's herb garden

Number Fourteen on "America's Top 50 Restaurants"

Though Maine's restaurant scene had a less-than-dignified reputation in those days, the duo's friends and family were supportive of their East Coast move. "I'm sure some people did think we were crazy, but they certainly didn't tell us that," Gaier says. "I think most were just really excited that we were finally going to do our own thing."

More challenges lay ahead for the intrepid duo. "We opened our business at a relatively early point in our careers, so we had to learn to become businesspeople and chefs at the same time," notes Gaier. Nonetheless, Arrows was a tremendous hit, earning a number fourteen ranking in "America's Top 50 Restaurants" by *Gourmet* magazine in 2006.

Seventeen years later, in 2005, the pair opened the brasserie-style MC Perkins Cove, their second Ogunquit location, followed by Summer Winter in 2007.



Summer Winter, Burlington, Massachusetts

A Perfect Balance, Through Private Time and Travel

Not the sort to rely solely on critical success, Frasier and Gaier remain steadfastly focused on expanding the Arrows name, even in an economic climate where fine dining seems like more of an indulgence than ever. This fall, the chefs are featured guests at "Harvest on the Harbor," a Maine-based food festival aimed at celebrating the state's rapidly-developing culinary scene, where they will participate in a cooking demonstration as well as oversee a lobster cook-off.

And they've just finished penning a second cookbook titled "Maine Classics," focused almost exclusively on New England staples such as seafood, chowders, and cobblers, due for release next spring. "Simple doesn't necessarily mean rustic," Gaier notes.

Even with such industry success, operating within Maine's high-end dining scene (as opposed to San Francisco or New York) has come with its share of detractors. "Though there are a lot of really cutting-edge restaurants and people doing amazing things in Maine, people still have this sort of ample prejudice," says Gaier. "There is this grand misconception of the state as a land of lobster rolls and steamers - not that there's anything wrong with a well-made lobster roll, of course."

If anything, Gaier says, having to persevere as restaurateurs in the face of an oft-cynical dining public has strengthened the pair's relationship outside of the kitchen. "I think it's made us even more tight, even more solid actually," he says. "I know some people may think it's surprising, but we really rely on each other - not that we don't want kill each other occasionally."

It's interesting to hear that their palates vary. While Frasier lists MC Perkins Cove's crab cakes as his favorite dish, Gaier opts for roast chicken and deep-fried trout. And while each one of them describes the other as "the perfect" collaborative partner, the two men admit that maintaining a perfect balance between their personal and professional lives is a challenge - and one achieved through plenty of private time and travel.

Having just returned from London in early October, they are set to tour Southeast Asia in early November, where they'll no doubt pick up a few

more colorful recipes to work into their extensive menus. "Even though we're working together a lot, we have very similar visions [for ourselves and our restaurants]," says Frasier. "We've really developed our own philosophies."

LINK: <http://www.markandclarkrestaurants.com/>

Arrows Restaurant Berwick Road P.O. Box 803 Ogunquit, ME 03907 207-361-1100

MC Perkins Cove 111 Perkins Cove Road Ogunquit, ME 03907 207-646-6263

Summer Winter (located in the Burlington Marriott) 1 Mall Road Burlington, MA 01803 781-221-6643

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