



Chef Mark Cutrara has dedicated himself — and his new restaurant — to sustainable cuisine. The restaurant has its own organic herb patch and Cutrara makes his own butter.



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Cowbell ★★½

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By GINA MALLET

THINKS LOCALLY, COOKS CHARMINGLY

The buzz in California is sustainability. I wasn't sure what the term really meant so I Googled the words Sustainable Table and my eyes crossed. LOL, this is Utopia. "Sustainable agriculture involves food production methods that are healthy, do not harm the environment, respect workers, are humane to animals, provide fair wages to farmers and support farming communities."

A pig escaping from *Animal Farm* just flew by my window.

Sustainability is a hard row to hoe. St. Alice Waters of Chez Panisse, in politically correct Berkeley, decided to stop importing French

mineral water because of the carbon footprint/miles. But there's evidence now that inefficient local production squanders fossil fuels more than the miles a food travels. Anyway, an equally ignorant but adoring restaurateur in Los Angeles wanted to copy Waters but couldn't — he can't afford to not sell bottled

water, he needs the money.

The dilemma moves to Toronto. I want to eat our own delicious Ontario strawberries but my local shop has only California strawberries for sale. Whaa? I learn that our own strawberry growers are not sustainable because they're being put out of business by the Californian growers

who produce assembly-line strawberries with the same relationship to our fruit as cheeseless Cheez Whiz has to cheddar. But taste doesn't matter. The Californians' vast lobotomized strawberries are available year-round and they're so cheap that Ontario supermarkets can't resist them. This is where the low status of

food really hurts. If only food had the clout of, say, cars, the government would denounce the Californians' ability to undercut local strawberry pricing and cry "dumping."

All I can do is personally boycott California food and Whole Foods, the faux-green United States supermarket that has colonized Hazelton Lanes. I doubt whether those consumers who depend on California citrus all winter will want to join me.

Frustrated, I look for a true believer. I find one at Cowbell in Parkdale. Owner-chef Mark Cutrara (formerly of the Globe Bistro) has dedicated himself to sustainable cuisine. Cowbell is a warm little bistro with found furniture, pews and tables from an old church and local artists' pictures on the walls. Cutrara has his own organic herb patch, he

makes his own butter (the milk is from the organic Harmonie dairy) and he ages and butchers meat from such organic/free-range sources as Weber's and the Healthy Butcher.

Tonight I'm joined at Cowbell by three eaters anxious to test the taste of sustainable food. We are soon browsing through the menu, chalked on strategically placed boards. Gary, a lawyer who moonlights as family chef, is seeking relief from the fashionista trend of "food that has so many things in it that moving your fork around is akin to being inside a pinball machine, leaving you unable to savour any sensation before another arrives." He tucks happily into the single-minded sensation of the green tomato and vegetable stock gazpacho; when I taste it, I'm amazed to discover that I am finally eating a version of the soup that I like. A too modest but pinkly tender veal steak follows with more green tomatoes.

Sarah, an editor whose discerning palate leads her to almost invariably order interesting food, is right again with a skeleton structure of deep-fried polenta brickettes garnished with house bresaola and a plangent roasted pork shoulder with roasted garlic, shallots, apple chutney and bacon.

I start with deep-fried zucchini blossoms, then a blade steak. Here's the beauty of chef's custom butchery: a blade steak is cut from the shoulder blade or chuck area, a part of the cow's anatomy that doesn't turn up on uptown menus. It is lean, pink, tender and has an insistent steely taste.

The accompanying fries need refreshing, but I shouldn't be eating potatoes. They contain fat-soluble, neurotoxic, natural pesticides that show up in the blood of all potato eaters. (Some pregnant rats fed po-

tatoes have had ratlets with birth defects.) The lack of green veggies suggest that Cowbell is following the pesticide debate: While organic-heads demonize synthetic chemicals, they ignore the fact that we eat far more organic pesticides — like broccoli! — than synthetic pesticides. On the other hand, the resto may be facing the reality that most omnivores avoid veggies when they eat out. Nutritionists have destroyed veggies' taste-bud appeal by branding them super-healthy. VEG is now a mnemonic for cancer prevention — "I'm eating these carrot tops to prevent colon cancer" is hardly amusing dinner conversation.

Stephen, a winemaker with the pickiest palate of all, strikes out. The opening *salade composée* contains good ham but is otherwise without identity. The grass-fed chicken thigh confit and ballotine stuffed with leeks evoke a sigh: "virtuously produced perhaps but too bland." We all found absurd the tiny daubs of cheese that passed for a cheese plate. Just let us pay for a couple of cheeses.

We ate the Ontario strawberry soup perfused with sparkling wine and the strawberry crêpe with the mixed feelings of a wake. The waiters are friendly and unobtrusive — "Not so overwhelming that we need to get a restraining order so we can talk to each other," says Gary. We all pitch in on the summation. Chef Cutrara is charming, and once Cowbell finds its pigs' legs, it's going to be hard to keep away the YAWNS, young and wealthy and normal, who wear work clothes, bike to work, drive hybrid cars and want to keep the planet safe by eating ethically.

■ Dinner for two plus tax: \$112. To comment on this review and read others, visit blog.ginamallet.com.

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