



A World-Class Chef Comes **Home** to Indiana



By **Christina Barbour**
Photography by **Steve Raymer**

Opening a restaurant is a risky business – even the most optimistic say that nearly 30 percent of restaurant startups fail in the first year. New Bloomington restaurateur Daniel Orr is betting the farm that his won't be among them.

By now any Bloomingtonian with even a remote interest in food knows that Orr, a Columbus native who went on to hit the culinary big time with stints at Michelin-starred restaurants across Europe, the legendary La Grenouille in New York, and the tony CuisinArt Resort and Spa in Anguilla, has come home to southern Indiana to open a folksy eatery on Kirkwood just off the Square called FARMbloomington – a place Orr describes as a cross between a Dean & DeLuca's upscale gourmet marketplace and Cracker Barrel's lucrative mix of comfort food and nostalgia.

Orr's ambition is huge. The 6,000 square foot FARMbloomington—with its local foods and crafts shop, its restaurant, its crêpe and waffle window, its private dining rooms, its café, and its two bars—is bigger and more complex than any dining establishment in Bloomington. But from the beginning, Orr's vision has been so sure, his confidence so strong, and his public relations people so thorough (even *The New York Times* was dropping hints about FARM last summer), that there has been a palpable buzz around the restaurant and buzz, baby, is what you want when you are starting a new venture like FARM.

By the time the restaurant opened on a limited basis at the end of 2007, it had been mentioned in *The Herald-Times*, *The Indianapolis Star*, *Indianapolis Monthly*, and *Indianapolis Dine*, and many in Bloomington had already been sipping Daniel's chili-edged butternut squash bisque and chewing on his chocolately Asian-inspired ribs at potlucks, cooking demos, festivals, and tastings around town. Appetites were whetted. Anticipated with growling stomachs by those hoping to see Bloomington get another great place to eat, and with skepticism by those who didn't quite get the concept (one doubter dubbed it a

Walmart of food), FARM was indeed the talk of the Bloomington food world.

But even before the hype began, I had heard the rumors: A BIG city chef was coming home. Most New Yorkers (of whom I was once one) know La Grenouille, and friends who had eaten at Guastavino's, Orr's last restaurant in Manhattan, told me the place was huge (700 seats) and the food was good. Then I met the chef himself at last year's Winter Farmers' Market where he was making contacts for the food he intended to source locally. He was already a member of Slow Food, an international organization promoting local eating, and since I am co-director of the Bloomington convivium, they sent him to me. He came to our potlucks with that fiery squash soup and those sinful ribs, and collective tastebuds started to hum.

I heard Orr's vision, read the business prospectus (but sadly, no, I didn't have the \$50,000 to become one of the 20 investors he was seeking). Is this guy for real, I wondered? What makes him tick? Can he avoid the deadly pit that swallows the unlucky 30 percent? And more importantly, can I watch while he tries? Such is Orr's confidence that the prospect of a journalist dogging his footsteps as he put

his restaurant together left him unfazed and I was soon onboard for a fun, crazy, and oh so tasty ride.

Make no mistake, giving an observer access behind the scenes of a restaurant opening takes guts. They say the two things you should never watch being made are laws and sausages; you can add restaurants to the list. I've been in on a few by now and no matter how carefully planned the steps (and Orr, mapping each detail on a multi-colored "Critical Path," planned them very carefully, indeed), the unexpected is the rule—deadlines are missed, budgets are overrun, and the September opening of a restaurant becomes October, becomes November, and then December before you know it.

All of which barely broke a public sweat on the brow of the jaunty Daniel Orr. It's true he admits to sleepless nights spent worrying about the bottom line. "It's so hard to be a businessperson," he grins. "I've always spent other people's money before." Still, Orr has a rock-iron belief that everything will work out. "It usually does for me," he says, with uncanny certainty. But there is nothing magic about what he does; he makes things happen the old-fashioned way, with persistence, arm-twisting, and a steady eye on the goal. "The things that

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I really want to make happen usually happen,” he repeats.

Watch him closely and you believe that maybe they do.

It's not just the cooking pedigree, impressive as it is, that makes you believe he can pull this off. I'd done my homework already, had learned about the culinary degree from the prestigious Johnson and Wales University; the travel in Europe; the three stars (of a possible four) from *The New York Times'* Ruth Reichl for his work at La Grenouille when he was only 34 (she used adjectives like “extraordinary,” “memorable,” “wonderful,” and referred to his “flashes of brilliance”); his recruitment by British design mogul Sir Terence Conran to run the kitchen at the massive and trendy Guastavino (where a review in *Gourmet Magazine* in July 2000 mentions his culinary sense of humor and, describing one dish, says, “Like the best of Orr's food here, it rubs your nose in the corporality, the decadence, of it all”); and his departure for tropical climes when he was recruited to revitalize the kitchen at CuisinArt.

No, the cooking pedigree wasn't in doubt, but as many a chef can attest, cooking skill does not a successful businessman make.

But there were early signs that Orr is more than just a fancy chef in a white jacket. His degree is in restaurant management as well as in cooking, giving him valuable business know-how. And, perhaps more importantly, Orr does not shy away from self-promotion. He is the kind of chef who got himself written up in *The New York Times'* Habitats column for growing herbs and vegetables on the rooftop garden of his Manhattan apartment, who has been on TV multiple times, who has not only published a cookbook, *Daniel Orr: Real Food*, but has two more in the works, and who has developed his own line of Kitchen d'Orr spice mixes to boot. His very professional website makes him look like a one-man band of cooking enterprises. Maybe the multi-faceted FARM concept isn't that much of a stretch after all.

The Journey Begins

My whirlwind tour of all things Daniel began at his Columbus office in late July. Although the restaurant location in Bloomington's old Odd Fellows Hall was an empty shell awaiting construction, this office was FARM Central where employees, high school friends of Orr's, or spouses of high school friends, were already



The front of FARM is a small market selling many of Orr's own products.

busy getting paperwork sorted out, sampling products for the market shop, or looking for antiques for the dining room. Orr believes in delegation, but he had a hand in every project, in every search, and our short stop there became a long one.

From the office we headed out of town to the home of Gretchen Sigmund, an old friend of his family who was designing art for FARM's walls—paintings on feed sacks—that fit Orr's rustic vision of the place. He saw it, he explained, as an old country store that might have been in the family for 100 years, where he might be the young grandson come home to turn it into a restaurant. His story was half design concept, half fantasy. After all, there is an old family farm, out near Princeton, Indiana, and it might have happened that way.

A long day watching Orr's energetic efforts to bring his restaurant together ends up at his parents' home. Mary Lu and Tom (aka Lefty) Orr live in the house where Daniel grew up, on Harrison Lake outside of Columbus. They are a large part of the reason that Orr has come home—older and, in Lefty's case, in flagging health, they could use a son nearby. Though he had been gone for nearly 20 years, Orr seems to have slipped back home as into a well-worn slipper, tender with his dad, and a cheerful companion to his mom.

This night he throws dinner together in Mary Lu's kitchen, a place where he is clearly comfortable, where bottles of jewel-toned,

homemade vinegars and flavored salts, bundles of home-grown produce and herbs, jars of preserves and sauces clutter the counters and leave precious little room for cooking. Many of these products are prototypes for condiments that will in time end up being for sale in the FARMmarket shop.

Though Orr is normally a jokey guy with a big laugh, cooking snaps him into a zone of focus and concentration. The food he put on the table wasn't the rich, fancy French food of La Grenouille—the later Caribbean influences were clear, and the food was clean and fresh tasting, many of the ingredients local or from the family garden. But it was seriously good and reflected what Orr has come to believe about cooking. Anyone, he says, can throw butter and cream into a dish and make it taste wonderful. But really good cooking is 90 percent shopping for great ingredients, and 10 percent not screwing up what you bought. (And if you do screw it up, he laughs, be sure to throw in lots of butter and cream.)

And it's that kind of cooking Orr plans for FARM—heartland cuisine reflecting top notch Indiana ingredients. But it's not country cooking as Hoosiers might understand it—not the homey food of Cracker Barrel that keeps people in their culinary comfort zone. “What I have is travel experience,” he says, thinking of the years he cooked in Europe and traveled the Caribbean and South America. In planning the menu he lets that travel experience play

out over the local ingredients he finds. “The world has become very small,” he says, “and we can experience it all around one table.”

Dinner is just phenomenally good, big city chef stuff, indeed. We sit down to cool minted cucumber soup with crabmeat, borage flowers, and fennel, an amazing paneer cheese in fragrant green coconut curry with basmati rice and crispy shallots, a sweet and tangy marinated salmon belly with fresh herbs, coconut water and white balsamic, and caramelized beef with garden vegetable tabouleh and chickpea casserole. No dessert, he says, with a who-could-possibly-eat-dessert-now laugh, and I drive home through the late summer dusk wondering what Bloomington will make of this talented, driven chef come home to roost.

Driven he clearly is, but it's not immediately clear what does the driving. If it were the quest for fame, he'd still be in New York. If he were

other ways you're kind of shy and just want to do your work and not have anybody bothering you. I think there's that little kid that's still there that hasn't quite figured everything out.

“I'm not coming here to impress people,” he goes on, “because if I was, I wouldn't be doing the type of restaurant I'm doing. It's about coming home and trying to share with people the places that I've been, the places I've seen. And I think that *The New York Times* stars and the high profile-kind of jobs in the Caribbean and stuff were more of that little kid trying to make a point. And now I think I'm coming back here and trying to just be happy in my own skin. Those other things were not to make me happy; they were to make other people happy. So now I'm trying to do something to make me happy.”

Throughout the summer and fall I check in on Orr's progress. It is slower than he'd like.

for everyone. In late summer he imports Valerie Serrao, a New York colleague from his Guastavino days, to manage the place for him, and she is busy immediately, sourcing supplies for the dining room and worrying about things like whether linen or recycled paper napkins leaves the smaller carbon footprint, meeting with wine reps, writing up the employee manual, and starting to hire staff for the front of the house. Orr finds a kitchen manager at a local restaurant and begins to train him to take over the kitchen, and he hires a shopkeep for the market, and a barkeep for the bar—positions that come with a sense of ownership and participation in the fate of the place.

Still FARM is not open and those sleepless nights worrying about money are putting a strain on Orr's usual ebullience.

By mid-November the website is almost up and running for holiday shopping from the market—hawking baskets of Orr's barbecue sauces and vinegars and spice rubs and cocoa mix. The front shop opens, and lures people in, anxious to find out what's going on. People are hungry and ready to try this new place, but it's not quite ready for them. Finally the kitchen opens—for bar snacks and a small dinner menu for a limited number of guests. One woman looks in on a crowded evening and tells Orr, “You are doing pretty well for a place that's not even open yet.”

FARM is not out of the woods, but things are looking good. Following a grand opening on January 14, the restaurant is now serving a full dinner menu with dishes like sorghum pork chops, grilled elk steak, and tandoori salmon. In the bar, people snack on “Hoosier tapas”—pizzas, chili fries, and other table shares. The Root Cellar is set to open, serving beer, bourbon, and blues downstairs. FARM is gearing up for brunch as well in February and the waffle and crêpe window will open in the spring.

Orr's three ring circus of a restaurant is unfolding if not in a timely way, nevertheless true to his vision. Corners may have been cut to keep costs in line, but Orr still likes what he sees when he looks at the old family quilts turned into wall hangings, the turquoise chairs, the ruby red light fixtures, the cheerful green placemats on Formica tables. And yes, those are antique bedpans hanging on the wall between the restrooms. Orr's sense of humor and fun has survived the process intact. ✨

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going for the splashiest impression, he'd be cooking haute cuisine. If he wanted to be rich, he'd be in a less risky business. But it turns out what makes Orr pursue this huge dream is a complex mix of motives that he traces to his childhood and to a deep-seated need to make people happy.

“I lost two brothers,” he tells me. “One died before I was born, and the other died when I was ten. He was fifteen. And so I was the baby. I think that puts you in a position where in some ways you want to kind of disappear, because you don't want to upset anybody. And in other ways you want to make people happy because people have been sad around you. That's part of why I'm in this business, is to try to make people happy, to nurture them, make their day a little bit better. So I guess it's a weird thing, where you kind of want to be in the spotlight, and doing things and get notoriety, and in

Bids come in from contractors more expensive than he expected and, “I dropped my truffles,” he says, chef-speak for something less polite. Back to the drawing board, “because sometimes the best inspiration is lack of money,” he uses color to differentiate the parts of the restaurant—turquoise and barn red and sunny yellow. He works with a local architect and designer to create the “jollification” of the space he seeks—a fun and cheerful place, but with a thoughtful edge, things like the old Odd Fellows masks on the wall “that make you go hmmm.”

He hires a public relations firm to get the word out beyond Bloomington—a considerable expense but one he hopes will yield returns by getting stories about FARM into magazines like *Food and Wine* and *Bon Appétit* that will send people to central Indiana to see what he is up to, and will turn Bloomington into a food destination in the process, bringing more business



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(clockwise from top left) A FARM breakfast sandwich, *photo by Christine Barbour*; Orr fillets a salmon; bacon-basted roasted cod filet with shiitake mushrooms, wilted greens, and lemon, *photo by Christine Barbour*; a banquet table with masks from the original Odd Fellows Hall hanging above.