



Harlan "Pete" Peterson and his small but mighty crew have put the hamlet of Ellsworth, Michigan, on the nation's foodie map. Can the state's most celebrated restaurant keep the party going?

TAPAWINGO TURNS

20



OPPOSITE AND INSET RIGHT: TODD ZAWISTOWSKI, ABOVE: BRIAN CONFER



Dan Flynn and Edward "Fritz" Girrbaach stand a foot apart, heads bent over a wood-topped stainless-steel counter in the main kitchen at Tapawingo. An exhaust fan drones behind them, neat piles of colorful vegetables lie before them, and their razor-sharp chef's knives are slicing away with surgical precision.

Deep into the preparation of a duck confit terrine with a foie gras mousse for a party of 18 that's showing up this evening, Flynn lines up a row of slender chives, and with the tip of his knife, makes a swift backward cut, releasing a fresh, pungent aroma. Each succeeding cut is exactly the same.

Girrbaach mimics Flynn's labor-intensive detail with a red bell pepper: Lining it up, slashing backward with the tip, turning it around, lining it up, chopping forward with the blade, producing uniform crimson squares. The work is repetitive but not the least bit robotic; no machine could duplicate their practiced hands. In the end, each bit of chive, each piece of pepper will

TEXT BY PATTY LANOUÉ STEARNS

BLACK-AND-WHITES AND FOOD PHOTO: TODD ZAWISTOWSKI



The Local Connection

Tapawingo is driven by Northern Michigan's fresh bounty in high season. Over two decades, Tapawingo has forged long-time, consistent relationships with Northern Michigan's agricultural crème de la crème, notably:

Fifteen different types of organic greens, baby tomatoes, herbs, haricots verts (French baby green beans), baby squash and radishes: Mike Werp in Buckley.

Rabbits: Steve Edwards of Aspen Hills Farms in Boyne City.

Dairy products: The Shetler family, Shetler Dairy in Kalkaska.

Pheasants: David Rinckey, Pheasant Ridge Farms in Beulah.

Asparagus and other vegetables: Cindy and Russ Bolt of Bolt Farm in Ellsworth

Shiitake and other mushrooms: Matt Malpass's farm in East Jordan.

Fresh herbs: Sue Falco's Circle Herb Farm of East Jordan.

Other regular farm stops on U.S. 31: King Orchards, Altonen's, and a whole bunch of local people, who just call up and say, "I just picked some

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be an identical 1/6-inch square. If not, it won't make it onto the plate, because every plate that leaves the kitchen at Tapawingo must be a work of art.

Across the way, Grady Larson is sending dough through a pasta maker for the fifth time, finally achieving the correct thinness for the rabbit-dumpling appetizer he's assembling. In another corner of the stainless-steel-clad kitchen, Nick Niedzielski stands with a pan full of lustrous red onions. "Always rub them down with oil and roast them in a 400-degree oven until they start to crumple up a bit, then deglaze them with balsamic vinegar and put them back until they're nice and wilted," he advises.

Down the hall in the pastry kitchen, Pete Peterson is assembling a luscious, fluffy lemon dessert made with paper-thin pistachio-flecked tuile pastry, a raspberry coulis sauce, just-cranked ice cream and a side of handmade dark chocolates from molds shaped like tiny bundt cakes and large diamonds. With all the enthusiasm of a man half his age, 61-year-old Peterson, restaurant founder, humble good guy and chef extraordinaire, is still in the kitchen, loving every minute of it.

Each season for two decades, the accolades for Peterson's cooking prowess have come in like Broadway reviews. *Detroit Free Press* restaurant critic Molly

Abraham praised Peterson as a culinary wunderkind during his first stint as a chef, just up the way at The Rowe in Ellsworth, where he gained a legion of fans in the seven years he worked there. "The Rowe opened the door for Tap," Abraham says. "Because of Wes Westoven and his (then) wife Arlene, Ellsworth was already a dining destination." So in a full-page article, she chronicled Tap's opening day. A four-star salute in *Detroit Monthly* magazine observed: "This may be the very best restaurant in Michigan because it so successfully combines a pastoral setting, food and service with delicately orchestrated harmony."

Then there were the "Oscars"—the James Beard nominations for best chef in the Midwest three years in a row. Last year, in a piece for *The New York Times*, R.W. "Johnny" Apple Jr. said Tapawingo "may be the best restaurant anywhere in the country that's a four-hour drive from the closest major city." That was on top of a cover story in last June's *Food & Wine* magazine that named Tapawingo's executive chef, Stuart Briozza, one of the top 10 best new chefs in America.

So how do you eclipse that, especially since Briozza and Nicole Krasinski, Tapawingo's equally talented pastry chef, left the restaurant last fall to return to their native California?

"People should never forget that the reason Tapawingo exists is because Pete is a great chef—the first chef to turn the nation's eye toward Michigan. Pete's food is full of flavor,



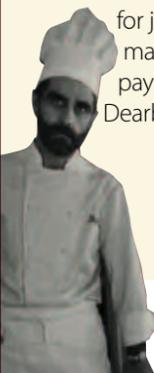
Herb-crusted rack of baby lamb with basil spaetzle and Mike Werp's tomatoes.

THE TAPAWINGO TIMELINE



1976 Pete takes a weeklong cooking class at LaVarenne in Paris, decides to quit job as designer for Ford Motor Co.

1977 After working at the Rowe Inn for free, Peterson leaves Ford for job at Rowe, making 1/3 the pay he made in Dearborn.



1983 Bought summer cottage on 7 acres known as Tapawingo, up the road from The Rowe.



1984 Tapawingo the restaurant opens May 10 with tight, \$80k investment. Al Nick is partner. Entrees cost \$16-\$21.

1990 Rich Travis joins Tapawingo as sous chef. Pete leads first foodie tour group to Europe.



1991 Assembled Michigan Chefs dinner; first time top chefs cooked together in same room.

1992 First American Chefs dinner with Emeril Lagasse, Bradley Ogden, Charlie Trotter, et al.



1993 *Bon Appetit* magazine calls Tapawingo "Michigan's Northern Star."



Tap Alumni Many chefs have not only cut their culinary teeth at Tapawingo and gone on to wonderful things, they've also shaped our regional cuisine along the way. Here are just a few:

Stuart Briozza: Just named executive chef at Rubicon, one of San Francisco's hottest venues, owned by TriBeCa Grill biggies Drew Nieporent, Robert De Niro, Robin Williams and Francis Ford Coppola.

Nicole Krasinski: Now pastry chef at Rubicon with Briozza.

Rich Travis: Executive chef at Latitude in posh Bay Harbor.

Don Steuer: Chef at Chandler's in Petoskey. Formerly with the Blue Goose in Gaylord.

Derek Boyer: Chef/owner of the Harbor Cafe in Elk Rapids.

Paul Bradley: Chef at Terry's Place in Charlevoix, also is pastry chef in the off season at Tapawingo.

Nancy Kelly: Traveling chef, teacher and caterer based on a 40-acre farm in Lark's Lake near Harbor Springs.

John Norman: Chef at City Park Grill, Petoskey. Also ran the kitchen at Pete & Mickey's in Charlevoix.

clean to the eye, clean to the palate, simple, but lush," says Mickey Bakst, who spent nearly 10 years as Tapawingo's maître d' and partner in Pete & Mickey's restaurant, which lasted two years in Charlevoix. "What created Tapawingo was truly Pete's demands on all of the details."

Indeed, to achieve status and friendships with the likes of superstar chefs Rick Bayless, Charlie Trotter, Daniel Boulud, Bradley Ogden, Emeril Lagasse, Jacques Torres—and to run a profitable fine-dining restaurant in a seasonal market in the middle of farm country—demanding is the least of what he needs to be. Peterson, a Leal, North Dakota, farmboy-turned-automotive designer-turned restaurateur is also passionate, patient and talented. And, says Bakst, "he also happens to be one of the nicest human beings you could ever meet."

Rich Travis, Tap's chef de cuisine from 1991 to '99 and now executive chef at Latitude in Petoskey, agrees it's his personality: "He's always striving for quality and never lowered his standards." Briozza's just as complimentary: "He's just got a fantastic palate and a great eye for design and theory of a dish." It has also helped that 80-year-old Al Nick and his wife Ellen, Peterson's financial backers and partners from day one, love



Chocolate tuile pastry with mocha and pistachio ice cream.

food and have been there for the long haul. Unlike many restaurants of this caliber, Tapawingo has made money from its very first season. But for Peterson and his followers, Tapawingo's mission goes far beyond mere dollars.

It was the first post-9/11 Sunday afternoon. Rain had been pelting Ellsworth all week. Suddenly the skies cleared, people tore themselves away from their television sets and showed up for the annual soiree with jazz musician Bob James on Tapawingo's lawn. On the patio and under white tents, 80 lavish platters decked with edible flowers were set out for a five-course strolling feast. The wine flowed, laughter returned and the horrors that earlier in the week changed the world forever were, at least temporarily, muted. Chef Pete and his staff min-

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gled with guests from all over the country. They gazed out at the velvety lawn, the glorious gardens and the towering cedars that framed two swans floating together on St. Clair Lake.

Then Bob James sat down at his shiny black baby grand and played as the 200 guests listened appreciatively to his new tune, "Tapawingo," which he dedicated to Peterson. And during his finale—a soulful, jazzy version of "My Country 'Tis of Thee"—tears streaked down everyone's cheeks.

True to the meaning of its Native American name, Tapawingo felt like a place of peace. A place of joy. A place that appealed to all of the senses.

Sitting in his modern main dining room, light pouring in from a wall of windows that look out to the lake, Peterson is hoarse from a cold, but still glows when he talks about his restaurant. It's still his baby, even though at age 61, this bachelor and motorcycle freak dreams of slowing down. But since Briozza's departure, Chef Pete has become more hands-on, teaching pastry classes, overseeing the menu, doing the day-to-day. "As long as my name is on the restaurant, I have certain standards I want to maintain. And that requires that I be here."

Yet staying at the pinnacle of America's food world while retaining a loyal following and attracting vacationers who might want a spontaneous meal is an ongoing challenge. "The casualness factor is becoming more and more obvious. It's what people want," the chef says. Tapawingo is not formal, but reservations are required. The outside patio is a drop-by diner's only

hope for a meal in high season. But Peterson is bowing to customers' requests for larger portions and that certain mainstay items return to the menu—like steak, which had all but disappeared under Briozza's amazing but esoteric menu.

Peterson calls Briozza "one of the finest chefs in this country—he was always flawless." But certain dishes, such as Briozza's Chianti-style beef with arugula sauce and chards of Parmesan, simply didn't fly with Midwestern palates.

"It was an awesome dish—I mean it would just make you cry it was so good," Peterson explains. "But our customer base is a wide band of people. People who really can't afford to come but they love good food. And there are people who have a lot of money and they say, 'I'm not going to eat this arugula sauce.'"

As Peterson moves into his 21st year at the helm of Tapawingo, he's returning to his roots—with food that's a little more down to earth, minimalist in its beauty but maximized in its flavor. "I want it to be challenging, offer some uniqueness in the presentation. But people still have to be able to relate to it."

Whether by circumstance or design, Chef Pete's back in the driver's seat, moving full-tilt into his third decade. That's something for Northern Michigan to celebrate.

Tapawingo kicks off its big 2-0 with two weekend feasts May 7 and 14 with a menu of its "greatest hits." Cost is \$52-\$56 per person. Call 231-588-7971 for reservations. patty@traversemagazine.com

Patty LaNoue Stearns is senior editor of TRAVERSE.

1995 *Gourmet* magazine raves about Tapawingo in its American Dreams issue.

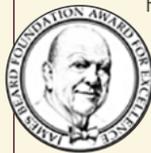


1996 *Zagat Survey* readers say Tapawingo serves best food in Michigan.



1997 Named best Michigan restaurant in a *Gourmet* readers poll. Pete makes Norwegian lefse for Julia Child at James Beard Awards reception.

1998 Tap doubles its space, adds chef's table and patio. James Beard Foundation nominates Pete as best chef in Midwest.



1999 Peterson gets Beard nomination again.

2000 Stuart Briozza joins Tap as executive chef. Peterson nominated by Beard again. First strolling dinner with jazzman Bob James.



2001 Earns prestigious four-star rating from *Mobil Travel Guide* and every year since.

2003 Tap is featured in *New York Times* article. *Food & Wine* names Briozza one of top 10 new chefs in U.S.



2004 Tap turns 20. Pete is the subject of HGTV's *The Good Life* in April. A feature on Tap is due in June's *Saveur*.

