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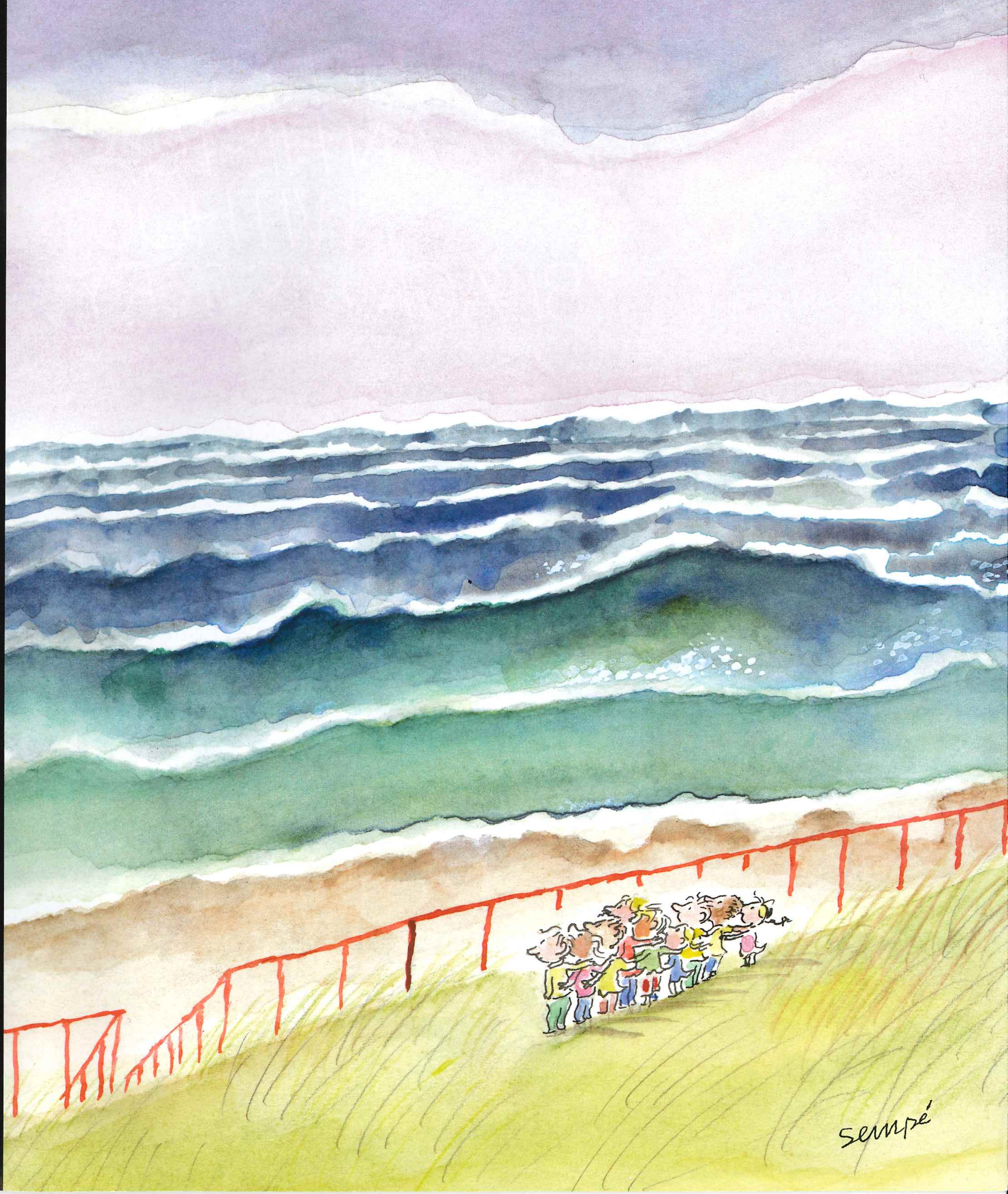


ANNALS OF DINING

THE COUNTRY RESTAURANT

You can't get in. It's booked through 2025. Or is it?

BY NICK PAUMGARTEN

The first time Jeffrey Merrihue came across the name Damon Baehrel, he was amazed that he hadn't heard of him. "I didn't understand how the secret had been kept," Merrihue said recently. "The people I go around with, it's hard for us to find something that is genuinely unique and new." The people Merrihue goes around with are gastronomes, the trophy hunters of haute cuisine, the kind who travel the world to dine at famous, or famously obscure, restaurants. After a trip to Cape Town this spring, to a restaurant called the Test Kitchen, Merrihue, who lives in London and produces promotional videos for restaurants, became, he says, the second person to have eaten at every restaurant on the so-called World's 50 Best list. He's also been to eighty of the restaurants to which Michelin has granted three stars.

Around Christmas in 2013, a friend of Merrihue's alerted him to a Bloomberg News piece about an unranked contender, which Bloomberg called the "most exclusive restaurant in the U.S." It described a gourmet operation—in Earlton, New York, a half hour south of Albany—in the basement of a woodland home. Once called Damon Baehrel at the Basement Bistro, the place was now simply called Damon Baehrel, after its presiding wizard and host, who served as forager, farmer, butcher, chef, sous-chef, sommelier, waiter, busboy, dishwasher, and mopper. Baehrel derived his ingredients, except meat, fish, and dairy, from his twelve acres of yard, garden, forest, and swamp. He made his oils and flours from acorns, dandelions, and pine; incorporated barks, saps, stems, and lichen, while eschewing sugar, butter, and cream; cured his meats in pine needles; made dozens of cheeses (without rennet); and cooked on wooden planks, soil, and stone. He had christened his approach Native Harvest. The diners who got into the restaurant raved about it online. But at the time it was booked through 2020. "We spend our lives looking for places like this," Merrihue said.

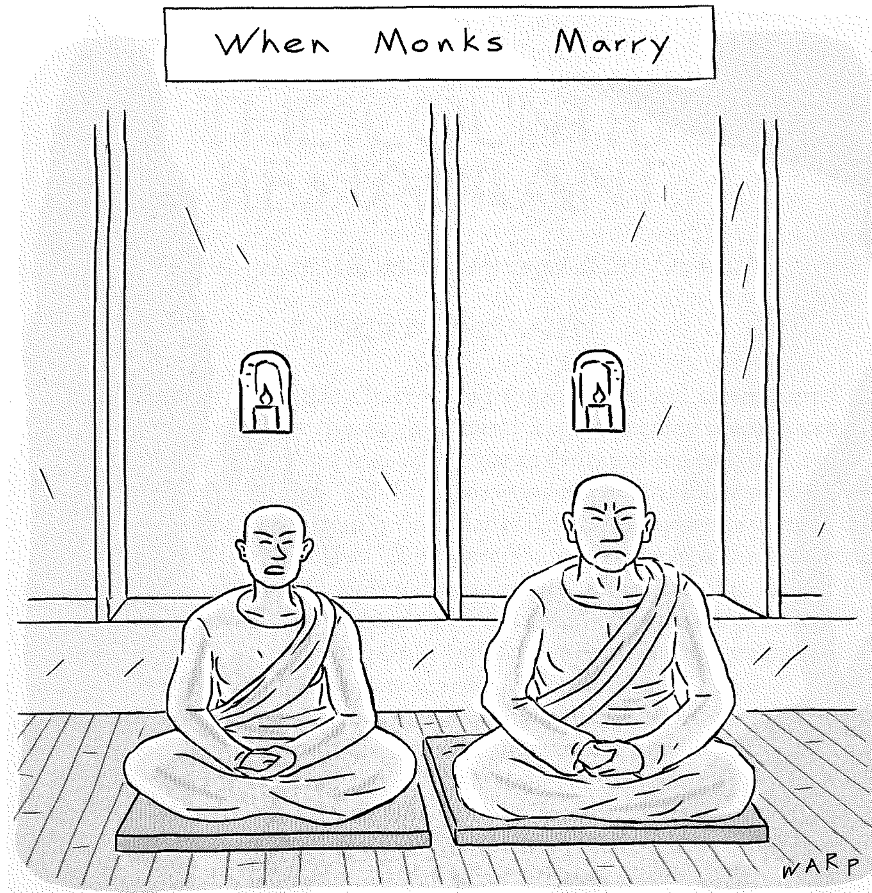
Undaunted, Merrihue sent an e-mail to the address provided on Baehrel's Web site. A man who identified himself as Terrance, a friend of the chef's, wrote that Baehrel had stopped taking reservations. "That wound me up even more," Merrihue said. "I pride myself on getting into restaurants." Still, it didn't look good. "I thought, I might die before I get a chance to eat there."

A year and a half later, Merrihue heard from Terrance again. Baehrel had an opening, three weeks later, on a weekday at 4 P.M. Merrihue hastily assembled a group, a "fantastic four of fine dining." The three others were Kevin Chan, the editor of the Web site Fine Dining Explorer, who claims to be the first person ever to eat at all of the 50 Best; Andy Hayler, a well-known critic who says he is the only person ever to eat at all of the Michelin three-stars; and Mijune Pak, the editor of the Canadian Web site Follow Me Foodie. Chan flew in from Hong Kong, Pak from Vancouver, Merrihue and Hayler from London. They met in Manhattan and hired a limousine to take them the two and a half hours to Earlton. There was a fifth person as well—"my brother, who has no credentials," Merrihue said.

The brother arrived early. The gate to Baehrel's property was closed. Once

"He is an unheralded genius," a food critic said of Damon Baehrel. "He really should be in the upper echelons of the greatest chefs who have ever lived."

ILLUSTRATION BY ELEANOR DAVIS



"The depth of your wrongness is so deep that it is unknowable."

the others had arrived, the gate swung open. The driver left them and headed into the nearby village of Coxsackie for some pizza. They walked up a driveway to a house on a hill. Around back, they came upon a manicured entrance to the basement. Baehrel, in an apron, greeted them enthusiastically.

He told them that he had just served a fifteen-course lunch to fourteen diners. Over the next seven hours, he served Merrihue and his companions twenty-three courses. "I hate long meals," Merrihue recalled. "But we couldn't believe it—it just flew by." In the end, they paid around four hundred and thirty dollars a head, including a corkage fee. (They'd brought their own wine.)

"The consensus was that it was absolutely outstanding," Merrihue said. "It is the most memorable meal I have ever had. Would it have been my favorite if it had been made by twenty people? O.K., no. But top ten, maybe. I have never seen anywhere where one person does everything."

"It was incredible," Chan told me. "High quality, precisely cooked. The flavor profile. Each course so well thought out. It's almost too surreal to believe."

All four wrote glowing reviews online. A few months later, on Merrihue's site, FoodieHub, he named Damon Baehrel the best restaurant in the world for 2015. "He is an unheralded genius," Merrihue told me. "He really should be in the upper echelons of the greatest chefs who have ever lived."

IS BAEHREL UNHERALDED? You can read, and watch, a lot about him on the Internet. There are stories from Bloomberg, the *Daily News*, the *Daily Mail*, *Town & Country*, Fox, Reuters, China Central TV, and ABC News, as well as raves from foodie bloggers who have been there and, in spite of a purported dining-room photo ban, posted the requisite dish pics. His story caters to such gastronomes, as they vie for superlative experiences—most extreme, most local, most remote, most odd. Here's a Fäviken, the exotic farmhouse restaurant in rural Sweden, except it's just one guy, in Earlton, and it's booked through 2025. Its implausibility may be as important to its appeal as any range of textures or tastes. In June, the blog Opinionated About Dining released its list of the top hundred restaurants in the United States, based on a survey of globe-trotting pilgrims like Merrihue. Baehrel came in fifth, ahead of any other restaurant east of Chicago. (Blue Hill at Stone Barns was seventh; Eleven Madison Park was fifteenth.) MSN.com just named it the best restaurant in the state of New York. One evening in May, I happened to be watching "Jeopardy!," and under the category "Almost Fanatical Devotion," in which the other questions had to do with Stephen Colbert, Soul Cycle, and Phish, the following appeared on the screen: "There's a 10-year waiting list for Damon Baehrel's Earlton, N.Y. restaurant & its 5-hour this 'menu' of small portions." A contestant guessed correctly: "What is the tasting menu?"

There are armchair gourmets, too, among the devotees. In June, Baehrel honored the Make-A-Wish request of a teen-ager from Nebraska. The boy has a condition that prevents him from being able to eat food, and, perhaps as a consequence, he has a fascination with food preparation. He wished for a day of working in the kitchen alongside Chef Baehrel, whom he'd discovered on the Web. The family brought along special air filters, and the boy wore a mask.

In February, I got in touch with Terrance through an e-mail address on the Web site. His reply began, "Thanks for contacting Damon! I'm Terrance. I've arranged Damon's reservations from my NYC office since 1993." He added, "I'm not an employee, just a friend. I'd be happy to present your inquiry to him."

Terrance arranged a time for me to talk on the phone with Baehrel, to discuss my desire to write about the restaurant. Baehrel had an avid, guileless way of speaking that put me in mind of Ned Flanders, from "The Simpsons." "How lucky am I to get to do this?" he said. "Most chefs aspire to get out of the kitchen. Not me." I told him that I wanted to see him at work, on a night when the restaurant was full. I imagined something like the setup in an Agatha Christie movie: a convergence of exotic strangers on a remote locale.

Baehrel told me that he couldn't make room for me as a paying diner, and there wouldn't really be space for me to hang around and observe. He didn't want to spoil the experience for his guests, who have been waiting for years, and have often travelled a great distance and are paying a great deal.

Instead, Baehrel invited me to meet him on one of his days off. "I've got great news about Monday February 29," he wrote in an e-mail. "We were able to re-arrange almost everything that day so you and I can get together." He suggested 11 A.M., as he had an unmovable appointment earlier. I asked if it was something I could observe, such as a delivery or a meeting with a supplier. He wrote back, "I got a chuckle out of when you suggested I may be 'meeting with a supplier.' Not sure if you realize, I have no suppliers. No ordering or waiting for delivery trucks . . . ever." The morning obligation had to do with an adult son, who is severely disabled. "My wife takes care of him," he told me. "We can't go away. One of us has to be home all the time."

I drove up from Manhattan. It was a wet, blustery day. The G.P.S. steered me off the Thruway onto narrow winding back roads pegged with "Repeal the S.A.F.E. Act" pro-gun yard signs. After a while, around a turn, I came upon a tidy wood sign painted with Baehrel's name and a logo of acorns, pine needles, and cattail spikes arranged around a sumac bob. I was a few minutes early. The gate was closed. I waited. Beyond the gate, a newly paved driveway curved through a wide lawn, past garden plots and trees hung with sap buckets, and up toward a simple two-story drab-green clapboard house. At eleven, the gates swung open.

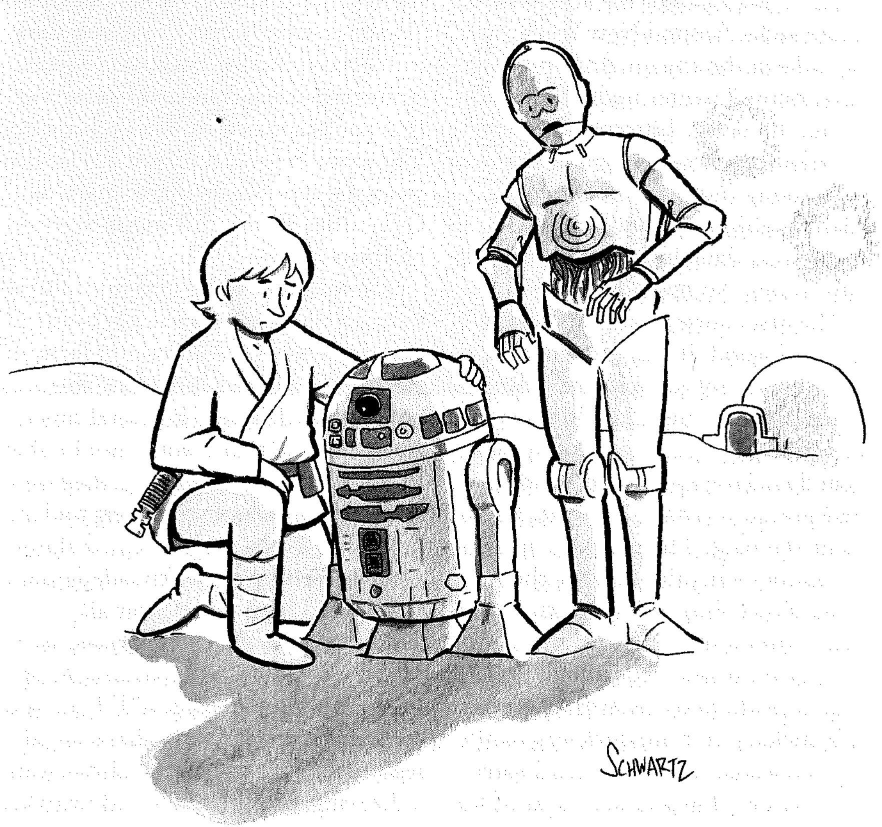
I parked in a small lot. In addition to the house, there were a neatly painted red barn with a brick patio, a small greenhouse, some cold frames, a tractor, and a big silver Dodge pickup. Out back, a brook ran from a broad marsh and through several acres of woods. From the lot, a brick path led under a white arbor to a doorway of leaded glass and wood, with the name Damon Baehrel over the door. I knocked, and he answered immediately and chided me for knocking. "Come on in!"

Baehrel had on a brown apron and a tunic with his name and "chef/grower" stitched on the chest. "I'm going to cook for you," he said. "When I say I'm the luckiest person in the world, I really mean it." He's in his early fifties. He had puffy cheeks, slightly sunken eyes, straight brown hair, and a kind of goofy, high-strung optimism at odds with the popular notion of chefs as chilly sophisticates or imperious pirates.

"The gate is closed," he said. "No one is going to bother us." The dining room was snug, seating no more than sixteen guests, with a table set up in the middle as though for a single party of six. It was tidy, not really rustic, more varnished than one might expect. The walls were painted a brushed ochre. A stained-glass panel in the wall read "Good Food" backward. Baehrel had installed it that way so you could read it in a nearby mirror. Along the back wall, a broad table was arrayed with bowls of seeds, nuts, leaves, roots, berries, and mushrooms; Mason jars of sap and flour; and vials of oil, all marked with painter's tape describing the contents and the vintage—"Acorn oil 8/15," "Golden Rod flour '14." The Native Harvest tag had been his wife's suggestion. "I was inspired by Native Americans," he said. "I wanted it to be based on the people who were here in this country before we were." Supposition was his guide: he said that he had never actually read anything about Native American cuisine.

He worked through the items on display. Lily tuber, cattail stems, milkweed, bull thistle. By watching deer in the woods, he had discovered that the inner barks of certain trees have a salty taste. While chopping wood, he found that a particular lichen takes on an oniony flavor for three weeks a year. He made a cooked powder from it. "You're gonna love it!" Baehrel relies heavily on starch and stock made from rutabagas. He uses wild-violet stems as a thickener. He inoculates fallen logs with mushroom spores. He'll spend seven hours gathering three-quarters of a pound of clover—enough to fill a steamer trunk. "I do it at night, with a headlamp," he said.

He had me sit at a table in the corner, a two-top, from which I couldn't see



"He says he feels empty inside."

the door to the kitchen. He wanted me to have the dining experience. He said, “Don’t worry, I’m a professional. I’m not going to kill you.” He filled my glass from a pitcher. “It’s sap. Sycamore sap.” It tasted like water, with a hint of something. A few minutes later, he came out with another pitcher. “This is sparkling maple sap, with dried lemon verbena. I have lemon trees in containers, but I don’t get many lemons. Just the leaves.” He said he harvests about a dozen saps: maple, birch, sycamore, hickory, walnut, butternut, beech, hardwood cherry. “Sycamore sap, when concentrated, is a little salty. You can brine things in it. Hickory sap is very briny and salty. Good for long cooking. I’ll brine a pork shoulder in hickory sap and pine needles for nineteen days. Cherry sap is salty and sweet, bitter, with herb hints like marjoram and lavender.

“My biggest challenge is creating enough flour,” he went on. “I make it from cattails, pine—the inner bark—dandelions, clover, goldenrod, beechnut, hickory nuts, acorns. A huge part of my life is making flour. It takes one to one and a half years to make acorn flour. Acorns from the red oak have bitter tannins. White oak is more like a nut. In fall, I gather the acorns up in burlap sacks. Around New Year’s, I put the sacks in the stream, tied up. I leave them there all winter, under the ice. By spring, the tannic bitterness is gone.”

I asked him how he’d figured this out.

“Soaking didn’t work. I tried a circulation tank, and that didn’t work, either. I press them by hand, in a vise, or with stones. No machines.”

The first course was served on a slab of sawed wood. It was a small rectangle of what looked like salami atop a curled cracker. He said, “It takes me sixteen to eighteen months to make cedar flour. I use a pull knife, a two-handled grater, to shave off some cedar under the bark. The shavings are bitter, tannic—inedible. I soak them in water. Every four to six weeks, I soak them. After a year or a year and a half, I can grind it into cedar flour. So the crisp is made from cedar flour, with a little hickory-nut oil, duck-egg-white powder, water, sea salt, which I sometimes render.” He produced a jar of sea salt from the sample table. “I made the batter and baked the crisp today.” The rectangle of meat, he said, was bluefoot chicken cured in pine-needle juice, pulp, and powder for eighteen months.

The morsel was delicious, though it was difficult—and would continue to be, during the next four hours—for an amateur and glutton like me (in fact, for anyone who is being honest with himself) to tell whether my appreciation, fervent as it often became, had been enhanced by the description of the work and the ingredients that had gone into it. The tongue is suggestible. New words register as new flavors. As numerous blind wine tastings over the years have demonstrated, you taste what you want to taste.

He cleared the slab and arrived with a plate with a spoon on it, and in the spoon a piece of fish with a chip on top.

“I wanted to show you the power of the sycamore sap,” he said. It was Scottish salmon, which had been brined for thirty-nine days. The chip was a slice of black burdock root. “I peel off the fibrous outside of the root, slice the inside, and bake it.” A drizzle of sauce bisected the plate and spoon. It consisted, he said, of pickerel-weed seeds and unripened green strawberries stored in homemade vinegar of a low acidity, then blanched in water in a stone bowl. “With another stone, I mashed them into a paste. Added homemade green-strawberry vinegar and wild-sorrel vinegar and grapeseed oil. That’s the paste. The copper-colored powder is the ground leaves of wild marsh marigold.” Of course. Every milligram seemed hard won.

He told me, as he had told others through the years, that he got his meat and dairy from a Mennonite farm in the area, and his fish from a seafood broker who delivered it several times a week. He said that I would not be able to talk to the Mennonites, as they were extremely press-averse. Having told me he had no suppliers, he seemed almost embarrassed by the acknowledgment that he did have some, after all.

Over the next several hours, as he brought in course after course, he appeared and disappeared (“I’ll get you some more sap!”) like a character in a resort-hotel farce. But the dishes were a dizzying array of tastes and textures. Oyster mushrooms, palate-cleansing ices (one was made of wild carrot juice, stevia tea syrup, pickled baby maple-leaf powder, violet leaves, and lichen powder), cured turkey leg, mahogany clams, lobster, prawns, swordfish ham, brined pork with goat sausage—all of it subjected to a jumble of verbs and nouns, many of them new to me. Bull-thistle stem, chopped barberry root, ostrich fern. I deployed an index finger to dab up every woodland fleck. The platings were whimsical and inspired. The sprigs and needles that adorned the mid-meal platter of cheese and cured meat brought to mind Saul Steinberg or Paul Klee.

The fifteenth, and final, course was something he called Earlton Chocolate. It consisted of the fermented leftovers of his “coffee,” which he makes in the autumn from hickory nuts and acorns. (He does not serve actual coffee.) The nut dregs become a kind of paste. “It gets gloppy after three months, then it relaxes.”

That observation kind of explained how I felt after four hours, especially without coffee. Embarrassed by all the labor undertaken on my behalf, I offered, as one does, to help clean up, and Baehrel laughed. Now he invited me to see his kitchen. It was quite small, about two hundred square feet, and immaculate. It didn’t look or smell as though anyone had prepared a gourmet meal in there. My first thought, as a failed clean-as-you-go guy, was a tip of the toque.

BAEHREL IS FROM Massapequa, Long Island. His father was a Nassau County cop. On weekends and in the summer, the family went upstate to Earlton, and when his father retired they moved up there for good. Baehrel’s mother, who was from Brooklyn, was an avid gardener, and he credits her with his early expertise in native plants. He remembers being fascinated by the big red sumac bobs on the side of the road, and his mother using them to make sumac-ade, but no one paid any particular attention to cooking or food. “My dad, he likes plain stuff,” Baehrel says. “We grew up eating roast beef, baked ziti, leg of lamb.” In terms of the precocity of his palate, Baehrel recalls, “I was the kind of kid who melted my ice cream. When it was warmer, it had more taste.”

Baehrel was also into motocross, and for several years, in the eighties, he raced professionally. He told me that he’d turned pro as a teen-ager and entered races all over the country. “I made a little bit of money, but would’ve done it for free,” he said. “So much of it was mental. What it taught me was how to divide your mind up to multitask.” I asked if he could connect me with anyone from that era I could talk to. “Oh, God, that was a long time ago! That’s a lifetime ago—wow, I’d have to think about it. Geez, I wonder if anyone is still alive.” In a motocross chat room, I found the name of Carlo Coen, a local racer from the eighties. He replied to me through e-mail that Baehrel had been a “track friend”:

> He was fast, competitive. He could run up front. Great family. His father would work the starting gate at local Claverack Motocross track. Still running today. Good times.

In 2002, Baehrel said, he shut down the restaurant for renovations and got back into competitive motocross, entering races around New England. “I made some money,” he said.

“The family’s plan was that I’d be a lawyer or a businessman,” he told me. But he never went to college. He met his wife in the area. They were married in 1986. Baehrel’s parents had sold him a plot of land across the street from their own—a thousand dollars for six acres. (He bought the additional six acres in 2011.)

“We built this house by hand that spring,” he said. “My mother, my father, my wife-to-be, and me. There were nets on the windows to keep out the mosquitoes. The restaurants opening now, these multimillion-dollar places—young chefs don’t want to start off small. There’s an attitude, there’s arrogance. They forget that this is hospitality. When we started, we had no investors. We couldn’t get a loan. Although, eventually, we got a loan.”

The main thing, in the early years, was a catering business, which they called Sagecrest. At its peak, in the mid-nineties, they were doing a few hundred weddings a year. “We did two thousand weddings over twenty years, all over upstate New York and New England,” he said. “We had hundreds of part-time employees.”

Baehrel has said that he invented Native Harvest in 1989, when he opened for business. A few years before, he had an epiphany that everything he needed was on the property. “Every flour, oil, and seasoning. I wanted to create the components. I was walking around in the woods. It was autumn of ’85 or ’86. Leaves were falling from the trees. The worms were there. That means you’re going to have soil. I don’t know if you know this, but worms are the source of all life.”

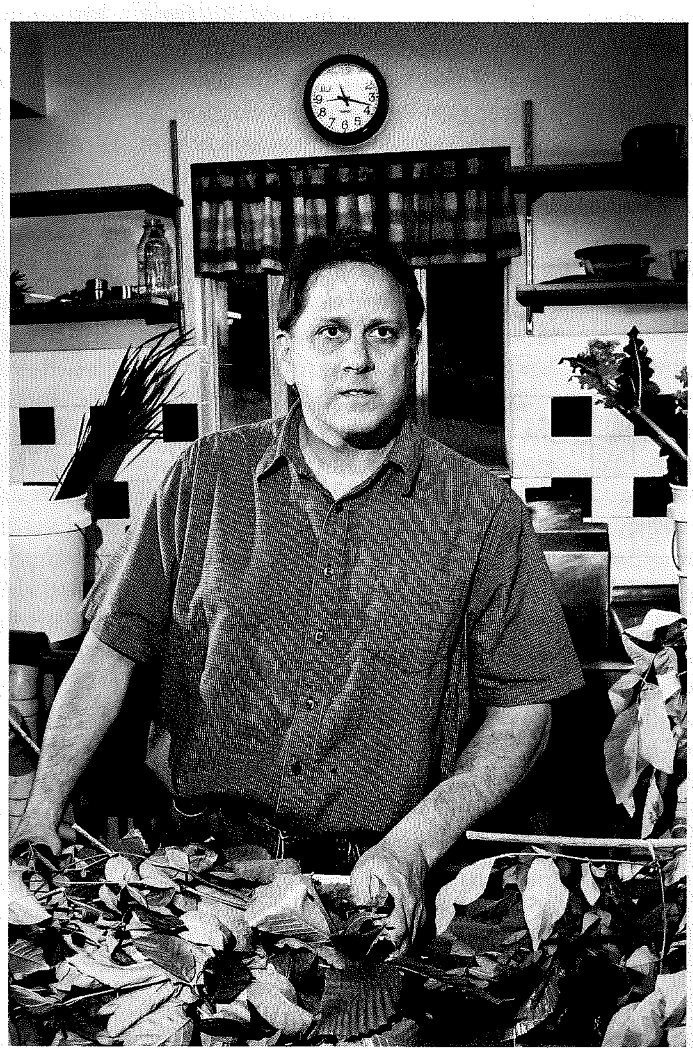
After this epiphany, he said, “I didn’t sleep for three days.” (He says he has never taken drugs: “Not even aspirin.”)

Over time, he made inferences: “I knew that pine needles fall to the ground and sour the soil. They make it very acidic. Very few plants will grow. So why can’t I take the acidic reaction and transfer it to things?” He began to make pine-needle juice, powder, and pulp and use them to cure meats.

The inventing seems to have happened gradually. People who dined at the restaurant in the nineties have described a more conventional operation. Between 1995 and 2001, he had a sous-chef, a local named Mark Esslie, just out of college. Esslie, over the phone, recalled seventy-hour workweeks and hectic weekends of weddings and summer parties. “Damon’s a phenomenal chef,” Esslie told me. “I would put him up against anyone in the world, in terms of talent.”

In the late nineties, Baehrel had waiters and bought from local suppliers. Esslie had hoped to take over the catering part of the business, which he said was very lucrative, but when that didn’t work out he left the food business and went into finance. The price of a meal at the restaurant has steadily risen. When Esslie was there, and when Baehrel first offered the tasting menu, it was thirty-five dollars for eight courses. Five years ago, it was around a hundred and fifty dollars, far below the current four hundred dollars a head.

Baehrel has often described himself as self-taught, acquiring his culinary expertise through trial, error, and observation, and not from books, or even from other chefs. He watches TV only for weather reports, has no cell phone, and can’t remember going to a movie in decades. “It’s been twelve or fourteen years since I’ve been out to a fine-dining restaurant,” he said. “I’m dying to have someone bring me something. A sandwich!” He told me that



Baehrel is steadfast in insisting on his total self-reliance.

PHOTOGRAPH BY JONNO RATTMAN

when he was a teen-ager he'd worked for some French restaurants in the area. "They are all gone, and everyone is dead. I learned what *not* to do."

One of the restaurants, which Baehrel didn't mention, was an old-school French bistro called Chez René, in Glenmont, ten minutes south of Albany. It was owned by René Facchetti, a Breton, who sold it around thirty years ago.

"He learned from me," Facchetti told me, when I called. "He has never mentioned this. He was my cook, my assistant. I knew his father and mother. I'm the one who taught him to pick watercress, chanterelles, and all these things in the woods."

Facchetti's wife, Corinne, said, "Never once has he acknowledged my husband. Why can't he acknowledge us? There's no such thing as a self-educated chef."

It's hard to know why Baehrel is so steadfast in insisting on his total self-reliance. There's mythmaking in it, clearly, but of a kind that seems unnecessary.

I CAN'T SAY WHEN, exactly, I began to question the myth. It may have been at the end of that meal, when Baehrel took me on a tour of the property, sticking to the perimeter of the lot, making a great fuss over bits of incidental vegetation that would seem hardly ample, even in high summer, to provide for, say, dozens of guests a week. I asked him what was in the red barn, and he said not much. He declined to show me his living quarters. (He had said that his wife and son would be returning during my visit, but by the time I left they had yet to come home.) Whenever I asked Baehrel questions about his past, his family, his influences, or even the rudiments of his business, he changed the subject to whatever flora or provender was at hand. Dandelions, violet stems, burdock. "More sap?" He took me by the cold frames alongside the barn. There wasn't much in there. He said that on snowy winter nights he sometimes crawled in under the translucent corrugated covers and lay on his stomach in the warm soil.

In the days that followed, I called the diners whose names he had given me: Merrihue and others like him. They raved about the restaurant, but all of them, it seemed, had been there only for a special seating, either on a day he was usually closed or in a slot he'd shoehorned in between regular seatings. I wanted to hear from people who had been there recently when other parties were there.

"You can kill me, but you can't kill the navy-blue-blazer-and-khaki-pants combo."

Several months later, I've yet to find any. Within days of my visit, I talked to a range of people who, either after their own meals or after failing to get a reservation, had concluded that Baehrel couldn't possibly be serving as many diners as he claimed, or be fully booked through the year 2025, or make do with what he foraged on his patch of land.

I came across a story by the restaurant columnist for the Albany *Times Union*, Steve Barnes. It ran last November: "BS alert! A 10-year wait for reservations! Locally!" Barnes referred to Baehrel's fully booked claims as "utter bogusness." He noted that Baehrel had once told him that the White House had inquired about the Obamas coming to his restaurant. Barnes had published this news and then learned from a friend in the White House communications office that it wasn't so. (A White House spokeswoman wouldn't confirm any of this.)

Dominick Purnomo, the owner of Yono's, one of Albany's fancier restaurants, told me, "I'm doing the math, and it's just not making sense." The last time Purnomo was in Baehrel's basement, five or six years ago, with a group of eight, he recalled, "We asked to see the kitchen, and he declined. I've never been to a restaurant where you can't see the kitchen." Baehrel told them that a group had just left, and that another was coming at 10 P.M.

Many people who've dined there report similar instances of Baehrel's mentioning earlier or later seatings—highly improbable, in light of materials, labor, energy, and the likelihood of, say, a bus of Japanese tourists travelling to Greene County for a twenty-course dinner starting at 11 P.M. Anyway, when I visited, Baehrel said he did "less and less as I get older. In a good week, maybe thirty-five to forty guests. But I never talk numbers." He was scaling back, he said, to four days a week. "It just takes me more time and effort to execute these cooking techniques and everything, and I'm doing more courses—probably three times as many courses as I was seven or eight years ago." He disdains the industry practice of referring to customers as "covers." "I never thought of a dining guest as a cover," he said. "I must be weird."

Baehrel has described the skeptics as jealous peers—what he calls the Albany club, whom he accuses of a long campaign to undermine him. He suspects them of hacking Yelp to portray his restaurant as closed. One club member is Barnes, who, after failing to secure a reservation over the course of six years, had a testy e-mail exchange with Baehrel's wife, writing, "No one I have ever even spoken to has been to Damon Baehrel in that period. That's not a restaurant as it's commonly understood; it's Brigadoon."

This spring, Barnes's colleague Susie Davidson Powell, the *Times Union's* food critic, managed to get a table and publish a piece. "If the workload and culinary science seem fantastical, it's true of the dining experience, too," she wrote. "It's hard not to imagine Baehrel as a real-life Wonka with a tribe of Oompa Loompa helpers in his Earlton woods." Still, she related what Baehrel had told her. He mentioned a few previous guests: the band Journey and, on another occasion, René Redzepi, the world-famous forager and chef at Noma, in Copenhagen. After the review went to press, Powell heard from Redzepi, through Twitter, that he'd never been there. Baehrel then denied having said it. The paper published a correction. Recently, I heard from the members (and ex-members) of Journey. None of them can remember having been there.

In each instance, Baehrel has a plausible explanation. People must have misheard him, he says. It was Redzepi's former partner who'd come; he always says he *wishes* Journey, his favorite band, would come; it was an Obama *supporter* who had tried to arrange a visit for the President and the First Lady. People hear what they want to hear.

Yet the implausibles pile up. Three dozen cheeses! Cheese experts I spoke with considered it highly unlikely, especially in light of Baehrel's claim that he makes cheese without rennet, the standard curdling enzyme; he said that he used organic coagulants, such as nettles or carrot-top hay. Even for a full-time cheesemaker, three dozen would be a lot, especially if they aren't mere variations on one or two basic cheeses.

Baehrel wouldn't let me meet or talk to his friend Terrance, his wife, his Mennonite meat supplier, or his seafood broker. "After contact is established, it's all me!" he wrote. He declined to give me their names. (I had that of his wife, Elizabeth, who goes by Beth; he had included her name as a co-sender of a mass-marketing e-mail.)

In June, I wrote Baehrel to tell him I'd need to talk to these people for fact-checking purposes. He replied, "I do not and cannot make it public information any of the current associations or past business arrangements I have or have had. I can assure you my meat comes from farms & seafood comes from the ocean." He added, "I would also not reveal things like who I purchase propane from (a propane supplier) or where we buy our toilet paper, insurance or anything else." He didn't want me to talk to the Make-A-Wish family, either. (I was able to verify that story with the foundation.)

A few weeks ago, he provided a fact-checker with a surname for Terrance, who he said had since "moved on": Hyll. We couldn't find anyone in the country by that name. Informed of this, Baehrel wrote in an e-mail, "I have not given you or [the checker] the complete personal or business name of our former reservation & appointment assistance."

"The whole element in this day and age of putting everything out there—it's a different generation," Baehrel told me. "We like to keep to ourselves and leave a little bit to the imagination." At the same time, he's an evangelist for his way of cooking, often welcoming writers and television crews. For all his protestations of being a humble chef of the woods, and his professed amazement that anyone should have heard of him, he seems to seek the validation of the establishment. "Food writers weren't coming," he told me. "They weren't interested. You want to share it. But they didn't believe it. They'll say they haven't heard of it. How can that be, when I have guests on the waiting list from over eighty countries? The New York *Times*, *Gourmet*, *Food & Wine:* No one was interested." In 2013, he was a semifinalist for a James Beard Award. He failed to advance, perhaps because very few Beard judges could get in to dine at his restaurant. Nonetheless, the omission contributed to his contention that there is a kind of conspiracy against him.

FOR YEARS, BAEHREL says, he fielded interest from publishers who wanted to do a book with him. He turned them down, because they wanted him to team up with a writer. He was also put off by their questions about whether celebrity diners might be willing to write promotional blurbs. Then some occasional dinner guests, Ken and Virginia Morris, had an idea. The Morrises run Lightbulb Press, a publisher of financial-education manuals. A recent title is "Guide to Understanding Annuities." They had never published anything like what Baehrel had in mind—a coffee-table book outlining the precepts of his Native Harvest cuisine—but they thought, Why not try? Baehrel started writing. "Damon does the drafts, and we put it in a format," Ken Morris told me. "We will share the proceeds." The book—"Native Harvest"—is due out in December. I've read a great deal of it. It is, characteristically, a recitation of ingredients, principles, and practices.

The Morrises' first meal at the restaurant was ten years ago, with a cousin who lived in Schenectady. It wasn't hard to get in back then. They returned on their own another time, and on the third visit Baehrel walked them through his process. "He's a crazy genius," Ken Morris said. "How does he conceptualize these things? How does he figure them out?" The Morrises put Baehrel in touch with friends who run California Winemasters, a festival that benefits cystic-fibrosis research. Baehrel went out there. "His station was cleaned out in an hour," Morris said. The trip increased his renown. He and the Morrises hope the book will do so further.

In 2012, Eric Steinman, a writer in Rhinebeck, New York, who was interested in Baehrel, got a table three weeks after inquiring, and he went with his wife. One other couple was there. A few months later, Baehrel let Steinman watch him cook. "No doubt, he's talented there," Steinman told me. Nonetheless, Baehrel refused to provide information or corroboration—the Mennonite farmer, the seafood guy. Steinman said, "I got a call from Terrance. It was Damon, representing himself as Terrance." He added, "Damon has a very particular tone and cadence." I had heard this suggestion—that Terrance is Damon—from others as well. "What the hell is that?" Baehrel said, when I ran it by him. "That's nuts!"

There were other nagging matters: a supposed visit from the comedian Aziz Ansari (which Ansari denied), a laudatory quote attributed to the Per Se chef Thomas Keller (which Keller disclaimed). There was one guest who, on one of those nights when Baehrel said he had another party coming, realized, after leaving, that he'd left something behind. He had to drive back and climb over the gate to get in. The house was dark. Baehrel was cleaning up: no sign of the late seating. Steinman looked into suppliers in the area and couldn't find any who were serving Baehrel. I, too, called an array of food suppliers. None were doing business with Baehrel. One said that he used to sell him cheese and charcuterie but hadn't in years.

Steinman wrote a sixteen-hundred-word piece for his magazine, *Edible Hudson Valley*, giving no hint of his skepticism, even though, as he told me, "I couldn't in good conscience tell an editor, 'This is real.' I think it's sort of a J. T. LeRoy thing."

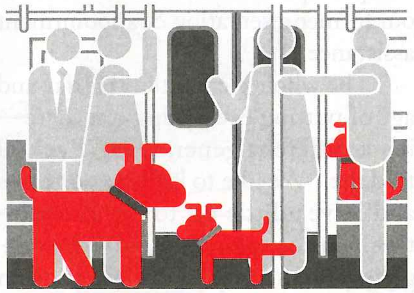
Consider, once again, the reservation backlog. You have to first accept that anyone would reserve anything ten years out. Then you do the math. Baehrel, or, if you will, Terrance, has cited, in e-mail responses to people seeking reservations, "125,000 new reservation TABLE requests from 72 countries that came in between late December 2013-March 15, 2014 which is when we stopped accepting new requests for an extended period."

A hundred and twenty-five thousand requests in three months—that's an average of around one a minute (twenty-four hours a day). He has also claimed to have two hundred and seventeen thousand pending "TABLE requests"—from all fifty states and more than eighty countries. That's a lot of countries. Say each request is for an average of four people. That's almost a million diners willing to wait many years for the privilege of travelling to the sticks in order to drop four hundred dollars a head. "No one is more surprised than me that this has happened," he told me. "This isn't something I sought out."

WHEN I DESCRIBED the situation to a friend of mine, he suggested a "stakeout." But that seemed crazy. Doughnuts and coffee? Full camo? This wasn't a crime story.

If Damon Baehrel is in some measure a fairy tale, what, exactly, isn't true? And, if it isn't entirely on the level, what's the hustle? What's he up to, out there in the woods? The perception of exclusivity and privileged access enables him to charge big-city prices, but if he were serving only a handful of diners each week it wouldn't add up to a huge haul. For what, then?

Baehrel has concocted a canny fulfillment of a particular foodie fantasy: an eccentric hermit wrings strange masterpieces from the woods and his scrabbly back yard. The extreme locavore, pure of spade and larder. The toughest ticket in town. Stir in opacity, inaccessibility, and exclusivity, then powder it with lichen: It's delicious. You can't get enough. You can't even get in.

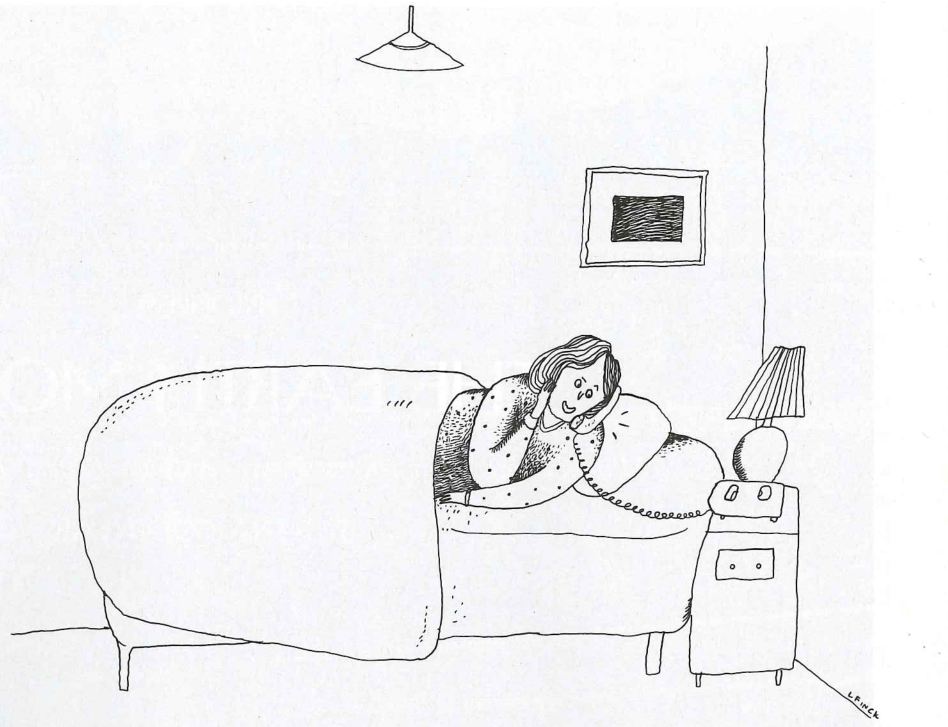


If Baehrel didn't exist, foodies would have to invent him. And to a certain extent they have. In the fall, the ABC News digital series "Garage Geniuses" visited the restaurant for a segment that came out in April. At one point, the camera lingers on Baehrel's handwritten reservation list for the year 2025. There are no specific dates, no contact phone numbers or e-mail addresses, or, for that matter, national or state affiliations—just names and a number denoting the size of each party. My attempts to contact twenty-nine of these people—Ginny Grizzle, Donetta Helper, Vi Rollin, King Mona, Cherri Burbank, with nary a Tom, Chris, or Mary among them—came up empty. This seemed damning. But a call to the producer of the segment, David Fazekas, revealed that it was he, and not Baehrel, who had come up with this phony reservation roll. "Damon wouldn't let us see his actual list, so I wrote it myself—like a reënactment in a documentary," he said. "There are services on the Internet that generate fake names."

The media has certainly been complicit in gilding the Damon Baehrel mystique. Baehrel himself, when called out for various inventions or exaggerations—inflated numbers, mis-dropped names—has tended to blame the messenger. "I don't know where they get this stuff," he says.

A gourmet meal is a kind of magic act, a sleight of hand and heat, often performed with a little misdirection and some fast talk. Many restaurateurs mythologize their cuisines and pretend to be doing better than they are, to stir up interest. In April, the Tampa Bay *Times* published an investigation into the farm-to-table claims of local restaurants, which found that many of them were bunk. Perhaps it is a matter of degree. At a certain point, one has to draw a line between a chef who is running a restaurant, with all its tedious arithmetic of supply, demand, and cost, and instead is hosting elaborate private dinners, by appointment only. It's this distinction, or perhaps the failure of the food press and rankings mavens to make it, that riles other restaurateurs.

Many of Baehrel's dishes are trompe l'oeil, with foraged ingredients subbing for more traditional ones. Consider a favorite of his book publishers, the Morrises—what he calls "the phony egg." "I use native components to build an egg," Baehrel told me. "The egg white is cattails. The yolk is pickled heirloom tomatoes in a broth of wild parsnip juice. I use willow bark to make the home fries, and squash as bacon." Though he did not serve this one to me, I have seen photographs of it. It's uncanny. I have no reason to doubt that the phony egg is phony in the way he says it is. But in the context of all the other questions surrounding his operation the egg can seem like a provocation. Why not just serve an egg?



"No, you die first."

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I WENT BACK FOR a second visit, in late May. I'd asked, repeatedly, for a better look at his process of culling and preparing the comestibles. A photographer came along with me. The property had burst forth with greenery since I'd last been. Baehrel rolled up on a utility vehicle and invited us inside for a pitcher of sap and a bottle of Pellegrino—which he said he keeps on hand for the Morrises. "You want to see how this happens?" he said. "I'll show you the cheesemaking, the cured meats." He said he'd never shown a journalist any of what we were about to see.

There were two cars in the lot—a BMW S.U.V. and a truck. His wife and son, he said, were up at a cabin they have in the Adirondacks. He took us out to the barn, pointing to sprigs along the path: wild barberry, garlic, bergamot, sorrel, sage. "Oh! Check it out. See all the wild strawberries!" A door led into a sort of side garage full of shelves: his root room, which was a more extensive version of the dining-room display table—Mason jars of flour, oil, vinegar, and sap, bowls of wild seeds, wine boxes of soil with sprouting potatoes and rutabagas. The supply was spare and very orderly.

He took us through the front door of the barn, into a large prep kitchen—his base of operations and the former headquarters of the catering business. On an island in the middle was a bushel of beech shoots. He was trimming and baking the leaves, to grind them into powder, and clipping the branches into finger-length sections, to create a beechwood broth. On the stove behind him were a couple of large pots. "I make my cheeses in clean pots, in small batches," he said. "I don't have boilers or evaporators." I had asked about a cheese cave, as cheese experts had suggested that one would be important. "No cave! No, between my one cooler here and other storage in my house, I probably have twenty-five in the works. I usually make a cheese or two a week." They were on racks in a fridge with a glass door, displayed with great symmetry and with their frog-tape labels facing out, denoting milk source, date, and curdling agent. I counted three dozen, and a block or two of butter.

He led us into a walk-in refrigerator. Several sausages of various shapes hung from a rack. Elsewhere on shelves were a leg of lamb; a rabbit carcass under a layer of conifer sprigs; a single cooked lobster on a bed of ice; swordfish ham; a few pieces of salmon, air-sealed in sycamore sap; a pork shoulder brining in pine-needle juice; four marrow bones in a bag with mustard greens.

I asked again about the source of the meat. "Yeah!" he exclaimed. "A bunch of different farms. I have one particular farm that I've worked a lot with—they're Mennonites. About a half hour away, in Schoharie County." I hadn't been able to find any Mennonites in Schoharie County. He said they might be closing, owing to the difficulty of paying minimum wage. "They are thinking about maybe going to Michigan. But very low key."

Later, back outside, as Baehrel led us around the property and identified plants, my attention wandered, and I thought about my first visit, months before, and a particular dish, the sixth course, which had so engaged my attention that the only surreptitious photo I got of it was of a plate licked clean. It consisted of a small layered cube of wild daylily tuber and wild honey mushrooms—a phyllo of the soil. He'd sliced the tubers thin and soaked the mushrooms in fresh maple sap, then stacked them in more than a dozen fine alternating layers. He then roasted it on a slab of oak wood, dribbled it with grapeseed oil and wild-fennel-frond powder, and added a drizzle of dried milkweed pods cooked in fresh birch sap, which he'd mashed in a stone bowl with some rutabaga starch, and a second drizzle that he called burnt-corn sauce, made from liquefied kernels that he'd scraped off the cob onto a stone, dried, then thinned out with sycamore sap. Somehow I got all this down in the notebook. Beneath it, I'd written, "Sublime."

Now, down by the road, near the gate, Baehrel guided us alongside his garden beds. In one of them, a single sprig of asparagus rose from the earth. He snapped it off and handed it to me. It tasted like—asparagus. ♦