

FROM PRINTER'S ROW AND BEYOND

A PIONEER IN THE LOCAL FOODS MOVEMENT EXPLORES NEW TERRITORY

BY AMELIA LEVIN

With buzz words and phrases like “sustainable,” “green,” “local food,” “farm to table,” and others inching their way into Webster’s dictionary, memories of the pre-slow food movement seem foggier by the day. What was life like before they had these words to describe this way of cooking, eating, and growing food? Where and when did this food movement truly begin and who were the chefs behind it? In case you didn’t know, Chicago’s very own Chef Michael Foley was one of these pioneers.

Foodies no doubt view Foley as a legend of sorts, celebrated as the former owner of Printer’s Row, a 25-year Chicago institution he gave birth to in the South Loop neighborhood. He is also credited with a cooking and restaurant style that created hundreds of followers, many who mourned the establishment’s closing as its lease ran out in 2004. Foley has returned to the food scene since then, consulting other food industry professionals, and also learning and teaching about the interactions of food and fitness.

Edible Chicago caught up with Foley to get his perspective and thoughts on the American Cooking Movement that broke away from Depression Era comfort foods into a foray of culinary experimentation. In essence, the notion and practice of local/sustainable food and farming that has shined in the press during the last few years really began with this overarching movement long ago, before the days of the Food Network and *Bon Appetit* magazine. The shift to an emphasis on local foods only makes up one part of the changes in cooking and eating that swept the nation, we learn from Foley. In fact, his own biography as a successful chef, farmer, and restaurant proprietor paints a clear picture of the changes this American food movement has undergone, particularly in the Midwest and Chicago.

This is because part of the movement took place at Printer’s Row. Since its inception in 1981, the clubby eatery was a place to see and be seen, with a look and feel that was both elegant and hip with its dark woods and white-linen tablecloths. A classic Chicago restaurant all gussied up with modern light fixtures, cool artwork, other interesting décor, Printer’s Row was also a pioneer in the real estate world, taking up space in what was once an essentially abandoned part of the loop. The neighborhood has become a bustling center of urban, residential and restaurant life.

Foley’s Printer’s Row was a place for experimentation where he and his cooks combined different foods and flavors in ways that, at the time, outdated the old school Chicago favorite of steak and potatoes. There were dishes on the menu like “lightly roasted salmon with wild mushrooms in a wild mushroom juice,” or a “chili spice-rubbed filet of turkey salad with brie on potato crisps,” Foley says.

Food, essentially, became more inventive. “I re-stylized a classic dish like ‘pot roast’ to be veal pot roast with caramelized onions and thyme,” Chef Foley says. It seems so simple now, yet then, it was ahead of its time.

This was the American Cooking Movement, also referred to as “Progressive American Cuisine” that took shape in the 1970s, Foley says, of which he was a part, with many winemakers, beer masters, growers and chefs, the likes of Alice Waters, Wolfgang Puck, Larry Forgione,

Jonathan Waxman, Jeremiah Tower, Paul Prudhomme in New Orleans, and later, Emeril Lagasse.

Foley forged ahead, working through the media to establish a whole new look at food, bringing inventiveness in cooking to the Midwest, showcasing foods from the region with influences from his international travels. His style, he says, was basically taking classic cooking techniques from the French, Japanese, and other cultures, and combining those with foods native to the Midwest and America. He solidified his ideas in an ongoing column in the *Chicago Sun-Times* called “The American Chef,” which only strengthened the focus on the growth of American cuisine, heralding local produce and foods, and “good ecological sensibility for soil,” Foley says, an idea that we would now equate with *sustainability*, or *reducing carbon footprints*.

“Suddenly, menu writing had a new simplicity,” Foley says. Menus showcased the main ingredient, its origin, the technique of how that ingredient was cooked, and the other supporting ingredients in the dish. “Menus became an opportunity to further designate the origin of the foods, like lavender honey, or Texas antelope,” Foley says. The state, region or farm where the food came from was pointed out. There’s been a resurgence of that nowadays, with the local food focus.

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Printer’s Row was not Foley’s only foray into showcasing the best of the Midwest. Developing the restaurant for Tabor Hill Winery in Buchanan, Michigan, Foley sourced fresh produce and game, and he worked with winemaker Rick Moersch on the vineyards. “This was an area that not only grew grapes for the wine but one that had duck, chickens, rabbit, trout, blue gill,” Foley says. “It was a dream for a chef to go out and get all these things and put them on the menu.”

Fascinated by the agriculture and ecology of the area, Foley bought 42 acres of farmland near the winery and started his own vineyard on seven acres of the property. “I had a small pond and an old 1890s farmhouse,” Foley says. “Whatever I grew, some of it was used at the restaurant; some I sold; some I gave away.”

It was around that time that the USDA was just beginning to explore the notion of certifying food as organic on a larger level.

Foley certainly had his hands full back then. In 1992, he took over Le Perroquet, which had closed a little over a year prior to a nearly 20-year run as an esteemed, fine dining French restaurant under the celebrated, Jovan Tryboyevic. The restaurant was full of history, and some of Foley’s own, not just because he trained there as a chef under Tryboyevic, but because what Foley was trying to do with the new American Cooking Movement paralleled a similar movement among chefs in France and in the U.S., he says.

“There was a regeneration of New World Cuisine in France under Ferdinand Point in the 1940s,” Foley says, which fostered the creation of new, lighter versions of traditionally heavy French recipes to incorporate more subtle flavors and ingredients. Later, Paul Bocuse, Jean and Pierre Troisgros, Alain Chapel, Michel Guerard, Dominique Versini at Olympe, Pierre Orsi, Bernard Constantine, our own, Jean Banchet

of Le Francais and other chefs took Point's idea and centered it on menus through cooks in their kitchens.

"U.S. and French U.S. Chefs saw this opportunity for new freedom and set out to take advantage of the openness," Foley says. That translated into the birth of Chicago French dining institutions like Le Francais, Le Boheme, Le Titi de Paris, and of course, Le Perroquet.

"Le Perroquet..." Foley says, his voice trailing off as he reminisces. "A lot of people across the nation and the world visited that restaurant to see what I was doing," he says, referring to Tryboyevic. "There were new textures, flavors and presentations, influenced from a French point of view." The restaurant gained international recognition during the 1970s, winning countless awards. When Foley took over, his goal was to maintain the comfortable, quiet, and charming atmosphere that the restaurant was known for, but he also introduced some of his contemporary cuisine dishes into the mix.

Foley continued at Le Perroquet what he started at Printer's with new American cuisine, bridging the gap between American and new French flavors. He and celebrated Chef Didier Durand invented dishes like lamb prosciutto, fig compote and herbed skatewing wrapped in rice paper as alternatives to the traditional French classics like steak frites, which still had their place on the menu.

It was this fascination with French cooking and the nuances of French cuisine that drove Foley to keep the reign of Le Perroquet going. "I took the restaurant to its 25th year by the time I closed it in 1997." A change in the spending habits of diners, high rent prices, and economic pressure drove the decision to close the doors.

Before his training at Le Perroquet, Foley worked in various restaurants in New York and Washington D.C. as well as in France. He came back to Chicago and met Gordon Sinclair of the renowned Gordon's. There he joined notable chef John Tercak and others to start that effort that he says makes Chicago one of the world's best places to eat. But Foley wasn't always on track to be a chef and restaurant proprietor.

"I wanted to be a professional golfer; that was my goal," he says. "After being third generation from a restaurant food and beverage family, I wanted no more part of that." While at Georgetown in Washington D.C., Foley played on the college team, but had to drop out after breaking his right hand, an injury that left him in a cast for three and a half years. "My career as a golfer was over."

Deciding after all to go into the family business, Foley did food and beverage masters work at Cornell University. While there, he took on the job as one of the night cooks at L'Auberge du Cochon Rouge in Ithaca, N.Y. "With its organic growing acres, L'Auberge was truly from the farm to the table," Foley says. "At L'Auberge, hunters dropped off fresh, certified game, and we had wine from the wineries in the Finger Lakes region nearby." This is where Foley's interest in agriculture and fresh foods flourished, years after growing up on a 360-acre farm his family had in Bloomingdale, Illinois. "We raised chickens, ducks, and had a full line of husbandry in lamb, pigs and cattle. We grew feed. We had a full orchard, and a hot house. We even produced some of our own energy with a windmill."

Like his prolific past, Foley has just as productive a present. In addition to his consulting business, he also holds cooking demonstrations throughout the world, locally at Bloomingdale's in Chicago and ChicaGourmet events, and even to New Trier High School to talk about the chemistry of food, nutrition and their interplay with a fun, healthy lifestyle. He is experimenting with what he calls "vegetable alchemy," or

the chemistry of food and how it affects and can enhance our lifestyle.

In fact, Foley's been devoting much of his time researching the interplay of food, nutrition and fitness. "I'm taking a closer look at the excitement of food and nutrition, and at the molecular level. I want to try to understand how your lifestyle affects your body and issues of longevity, this is a very interesting focus."

Last year he also began holding tasting events at Casteel Coffee in Evanston, discussing how certain foods, from starches to proteins, herbs and spices interact with the flavors of coffee. The events have proved to be popular, with six to seven coffee and cuisine pairings from Latin America, Asia and Africa and beyond. "It's pretty interesting," Foley says. "We've done three of these coffee and cuisine tasting events and we're going to continue with more in 2009."

In December, Foley opened a new studio in the West Loop, which he said resembled more of an office with a small kitchen that he uses for his consulting work. He's also building a library of reading materials on food, nutrition and fitness that he hopes will serve as a learning center of sorts for his clients and others.

Foley describes himself as a "flexitarian" — not to be confused with veganism or vegetarianism, Foley stresses, "While I am predominantly into vegetables, I balance it with small amounts of meat, fish and poultry. I'm not against any food or cuisine, but I would like to encourage people to look at why we eat certain foods."

"I did the culinary world for almost 35 years, and I may have been a good cook and traveled and had a great restaurant, but I never felt I was in my own world," Foley says. "Right now, in the food and fitness arena, I feel I'm finally hitting my stride."

Amelia Levin is a freelance food/dining writer and editor based in Chicago with training in hard news reporting and business journalism. She recently became a certified chef and is a regular contributor to Edible Chicago.



Chef Foley with Casteel Coffee Owner Carol Harris

Join Chef Foley at Casteel Coffee in Evanston for exclusive coffee and cuisine pairings with small plate dishes demonstrating the balance of acid and robustness against herbs and spices, starches and proteins with carbohydrates to bridge his

flavor pairings. Learn about the subtleties and boldness of fresh roasted coffee with select foods.

Upcoming event:

February 28: Island Coffees and Cuisines

Event includes demonstration, presentation and lunch of 6-7 cuisine pairings beginning at 12:00 p.m. at Casteel Coffee 2924 Central St., Evanston. Cost is \$25 and all proceeds benefit Coffee Kids. For more information call 847-733-1187 for reservations. Space is limited.

Photo by Sharon Meyers