

Chefs – and farmers – named for high-profile Tower Bridge dinner

In departure from first three years, chefs will be paired with farmers

Farmers will be part of dinner, serve as focal point on Tower Bridge

This year's roster includes first women chefs picked for gala dinner



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Mike Testa explains the new format for the popular Farm-To-Fork gala dinner on the Tower Bridge. **Blair Anthony Robertson** brobertson@sacbee.com

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The Tower Bridge dinner gala, which has quickly become the focal point of Sacramento's annual Farm-to-Fork Festival, will take a new approach this September by bringing farmers out of the shadows and pairing them with six top area chefs and a nationally known celebrity chef.

In announcing the new concept Thursday, the Sacramento Convention & Visitors Bureau also said it will expand its marketing reach for the dinner to attract national media and politicians to one of the hottest tickets on the local social calendar.

“When we talk about the Tower Bridge dinner, the chefs were the obvious rock stars, as they are in most communities across the country. But when we step back, it's really about the farmers in Sacramento,” said Mike Testa, chief operating officer of the convention bureau. “That's why this year we will lead with the farmers.”

Each of the chefs picked for the dinner, including the first two women chefs ever chosen for the event, will be paired with two farmers, the idea being that farmer-chef collaborations, often done behind the scenes, are a crucial component of farm-to-fork dining. Additionally, Las Vegas-based [Rick Moonen](#), a nationally known chef and author who was at the forefront of sustainable seafood practices, has been invited to participate in the dinner, marking the first time a chef has been recruited from outside the Sacramento region.

The fourth annual dinner will be held Sept. 25 and seat 784 people. Tickets will go on sale sometime in July and feature the dinner's first price increase – from \$175 to \$199. The [brisk sales](#) of general public tickets have become the stuff of local legend, with admissions gobbled up online in mere seconds over the past couple of years. The format for ticket sales will be revamped this year to make speed less of an issue, though the convention bureau did not provide specifics Thursday.

The first two women named to oversee the Tower Bridge dinner are Allyson Harvie, formerly of Block Butcher Bar and now with soon-to-open The Patriot at the Milagro Centre in Carmichael; and Molly Hawks, who along with husband Michael Fagnoni owns Hawks in Granite Bay and the new Hawks Public House in

East Sacramento. The other selected chefs are Bill Ngo, chef/owner of Kru Contemporary Japanese Cuisine; Kelly McCown, executive chef at The Kitchen Restaurant; Ramon Purez, chef/owner of Puur Chocolat; and Fagnoni, who is teaming with his wife.

“I’m super honored,” said Harvie, noting that the new concept for the bridge dinner will help create a much-deserved spotlight for farmers. “The farmers have kind of taken a back seat with the dinner until now, but none of this can happen without them. Once their product comes into our restaurant, it’s our job to speak for them through the food.”

The farmers participating in the dinner are: Chanowk Yisrael of the Yisrael Family Urban Farm; Michael Passmore of Passmore Ranch; Thaddeus Barsotti of Capay Organic/Farm Fresh To You; Michael Bosworth of Rue & Forsman Ranch; lamb rancher Martin Emigh; Trini Campbell and Tim Mueller of Riverdog Farm; Heidi and Clark Watanabe of Heidi Watanabe Farm; Suzanne Ashworth of Del Rio Botanical; Stan Van Vleck of Van Vleck Ranch; Scrivner Hoppe-Glosser and Leila Ansari of Azolla Farm; Paul Underhill, Hector Melendez-Lopez and Paul Holmes of Terra Firma Farms; and Susan and Ken Muller of Pasture 42.

The Sacramento Convention & Visitors Bureau has hired a New York public relations firm to recruit national media to cover this year’s events. Dorothy Maras, known in the industry as the “chef whisperer,” has also been tapped to serve in a coordinating role for the dinner. Maras is best known [for selecting chefs](#) for the prestigious Pebble Beach Food and Wine festival each year.

Fagnoni said the Sacramento region, which bills itself as “America’s Farm-To-Fork Capital,” is ready for the expanded marketing campaign.

“I think Sacramento definitely needs some national attention. We’re really upping the game as far as the food scene,” Fagnoni said.

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