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From left: Hawks Provisions & Public House chef-owner Michael Fagnoni; the restaurant's popular burger with Wagyu beef, Gruyère cheese and caramelized onions

Spreading Their Wings

The husband-and-wife team behind Hawks in Granite Bay brings Michelin finesse to gastropub fare for their Sacramento debut. **by Leilani Marie Labong**

This particular story of Hawks Provisions & Public House, the hotly anticipated East Sacramento eatery that opened in December, starts like a classic one-liner when two doctors walk into a bar, but ends with a bigger payoff than any punch line could ever deliver: a beautiful new restaurant packed with patrons happily sipping Thai-inspired gimlets, nibbling on house-made salami, and smacking their lips on the Dijon aioli that

garnishes the house burger. The celebratory clamor just a natural upshot of friends who gather for one common purpose—good eating.

Rewind three years, when two physicians actually did walk into the bar at Hawks Restaurant in Granite Bay, the fine-dining establishment opened in 2007 by the husband-and-wife culinary team of Michael Fagnoni and Molly Hawks, and half-jokingly offered an unwittingly fortuitous suggestion for the restaurateurs: “Hey, maybe you guys should check out this place near our office in Sacramento—it’s built to have a kitchen.” Little did they know that the couple had been scouting city locations for a second, more casual, gastropub-style venture without much luck. The property in question was unique—a pair of new Mediterranean-style buildings adjoining a Sutter Health parking lot—and rumored to become the future home of a Subway sandwich shop. “The doctors wanted something more artisanal to move in,” says Fagnoni.

More than 15 years into their professional careers, artisanal cooking could be considered an involuntary action for Fagnoni and Hawks, as important as, say, breathing or a beating heart. With the exception of a few culinary tangents (Fagnoni spent a year as a sous chef at Traci Des Jardins’ celebrated San Francisco restaurant Jardinère; Hawks briefly took on front-of-the-house duties at Burlingame’s now-shuttered seafood restaurant Pisces), the couple acquired



Grilled romanesco with smoked trout, crispy onions and salsa verde

much of their ingredient-driven philosophy from executive chef Mark Sullivan of the Michelin-starred Village Pub in the Bay Area, where they worked as chefs de cuisine in the early naughts. “We spent a lot of time together deliberating over what raw materials we were buying, and from where, and how those ingredients would be treated,” says Sullivan, who also helms Spruce in San Francisco, another Michelin-star recipient. “I hope I instilled in them the importance of respect—not just for the product, but also for the cooks who are instrumental in transforming the ingredient into a meal.”

“We’re always trying to make a dish the best it can be,” says Fagnoni, who crafts the ever-changing menu at Public House with chef de cuisine Justin Green, while Hawks runs the business side. “If we think about food that way, our minds just start running.”

To wit, Public House’s decadent, soon-to-be-signature baked rigatoni and meatballs is made even more soulful with freshly extruded semolina pasta (used for its excellent sauce-grabbing quality) and a crunchy breadcrumb topping fortified with garlic, thyme and fennel pollen. The kale Caesar salad is elevated with pancetta that’s crafted in-house (along with the restaurant’s other charcuterie offerings, from country pâté to soppressata). The chefs also transformed an intimidating cruciferous vegetable into a dish that’s rustic at heart, but refined on the plate: Otherworldly florets of romanesco—a milder version of cauliflower—

are lightly charred on the grill to highlight their natural nutty flavor and then presented with flaky smoked trout, crispy onions and a bright salsa verde. “Just because Public House is a casual restaurant doesn’t mean the food isn’t detailed and thoughtful,” says Fagnoni. In fact, watching the chefs work the line in the open kitchen, we spotted culinary tweezers in play—an unexpected find in a gastropub galley. If it’s any consolation, the instrument was deftly wielded by a laser-focused cook with stretched earlobe piercings.

The aforementioned Public House burger, the one so lustfully devoured by many diners on our recent visit, is topped

with Gruyère cheese, caramelized onions, Dijon aioli and house-cured pickles. For the thick burger patty, Fagnoni prefers the marbly succulence of grain-fed Wagyu beef from Snake River Farms in Idaho over the leaner (read: decidedly less rich and tender) grass-fed meat produced by an esteemed Northern California purveyor, even though those particular cows, says Fagnoni, “have the best views, eat the best grass, and breathe the cleanest air.” Apparently, such good care doesn’t necessarily equate to the fullest flavor, and, by Fagnoni’s estimation, neither does the distinction of being “local.”

“We always use the finest products, in season, period. Sometimes that means we source locally and sometimes it doesn’t,” explains Fagnoni, who strongly rebuffs the region’s trendy farm-to-fork movement—“Too much of a marketing ploy,” he claims—for his own best-ingredients-only policy. A recent dish of braised pork shank, for instance, featured humanely raised heritage meat from American Homestead, located 1,700 miles away in Iowa, and the accompaniment of grilled apples started with whole fruit courtesy of Goldbud Farms in Placerville. That said, strict locavores might enjoy a stunning plate of roasted beets from Azolla Farm in Pleasant Grove paired with fresh mandarins from Pine Hill Orchard in Loomis.

This kind of detail and mindfulness also extends to the restaurant’s identity as a “public house”: An increasingly popular concept in the local culinary landscape



The Public House features a concrete floor, maple tables and wooden draftsman chairs.

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Bartender Stephen Dopkins crafts a Hawks Martini, which is made with Tito's Handmade Vodka and blue-cheese-stuffed olives.

(see Federalist Public House, Firestone Public House, et al.), it's defined by Hawks as "an intimate meeting place with good food and a vibrant bar scene; a gastropub." She and Fagnoni were inspired by celebrity chef April Bloomfield's popular restaurants, namely The Breslin inside the Ace Hotel in New York City and Tosca Cafe in San Francisco—dark and moody throwbacks to the saloons of another era, packed nightly with patrons who frequent the spots as much for the yesteryear ambiance as they do for the hearty, artisanal fare. In that vein, Hawks Public House departs from its neo-Mediterranean exterior and instead takes a cue from Bloomfield's aesthetic to get the vibe just right inside.

The restaurant's concrete floor, unfinished maple tables, zinc bar top and old draftsman chairs evoke a vintage-industrial character. The waitstaff dons plaid shirts and brogues without socks. Bartenders, also sporting plaid, have been buttoned into vests. As they shake and stir such imaginative "Hawk-Tails" as the Velvet Tailed Fizz (No. 209 gin, pomegranate-infused port, tarragon) and Eastern Thai Crested Gimlet (Bombay East Gin, Thai basil, kaffir lime, coconut water), you can sense that they are *thisclose* to growing han-

dlebar moustaches and slipping on old-timey sleeve garters—it's all they would need to complete the Prohibition-era look.

Returning now to those two doctors, the ones who had hoped for more than just \$5 Footlongs to enhance their restaurant radius. Needless to say, they got their wish, and now many of their cohorts are coming to Hawks, especially since Sutter's new women's and children's center recently opened a few blocks away. In the mornings, they join folks from the Fabulous 40s, McKinley Park joggers, and defectors from the grid at the Hawks Provisions annex for quick espresso, grab-and-go sandwiches and flaky-buttery confections by pastry chef Misty Greene. In the evenings, the Public House glows from within; the warm, buzzy atmosphere generated by clinking cocktail glasses and convivial banter. Plates of beautiful food are enthusiastically passed among friends. They vie for the last slice of spicy salami. They become romanesco converts. They indulge in a bonus burger. And most importantly, while standing under the lights of Hawks' twinkling marquee, they hatch a plan to reconvene for round two—same time, same place, soon.

**Hawks Provisions
& Public House**
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