HAWKS? AYE

By Mike Dunne
BEE RESTAURANT CRITIC

Call them “locavorts,” “locavores” or “locavorters,” they’re swarming across the land. Their numbers are growing, their message familiar: Eat close to where your food is grown and meals will taste better, the values and stability of the family farm will be perpetuated, our carbon footprint will be lightened, and terrorism will be thwarted by lessening the odds that something nasty could be added to the food chain.

Can a restaurant whose philosophy is based on accommodating such heavy goals be fun? It can if it’s Hawks, where the staff members take the farm-to-plate commitment so passionately you expect to find dirt under their fingernails.

But you don’t. The setting is airy and serene, the dishes vivid in both color and flavor. This all adds up to a refined and refreshing meal with no overt political or philosophic messages to distract from pure pleasure.

While the husband-and-wife team of Michael Fagnoni and Molly Hawks, the restaurant’s co-owners and co-chefs, may be as committed to locavarian principles as their press kit claims, they clearly don’t compromise in selecting ingredients.

Granite Bay restaurant strays a bit to bring local-food enthusiasts the best hereabouts to buy their loaves from Acme Bread Co. in Berkeley and their beans from Barefoot Coffee Roasters of Santa Clara, but give them this—both produce great products, perhaps unparalleled locally. When a cup of the rich and balanced coffee was set on our table one evening, two guests at a table five feet away boiled upright, turned our way and said that by the smell of the coffee they’d wished they ordered it rather than their wine and cocktail.

The menu, which adapts continually to the season, does read as if it takes enthusiastic advantage of locally produced foods, though Fagnoni and Hawks avoid the tiresome practice of listing every blasted farm that happens to sell the restaurant a head of lettuce.

 Meals start with a complimentary amuse-bouche, a shot glass of a focused and fruity heirloom tomato gazpacho our first evening at the end of summer, a shot glass of a frothy and comforting mushroom soup on our second visit at the start of fall, both starters natural and spirited, both teasing awake any slumbering taste buds.

Fagnoni, trained at the Culinary Institute of America at Hyde Park, N.Y., and Hawks, a
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graduates of both UCLA and the
Culinary Institute in San Francisco, produce a
highly harmonized, collective and per-
sonal interpretation of modern
American cooking that is more
culturally nuanced than rustic, a
trend they like to apply to their
cookery. None of the cooking is
fussy or pretentious, and a few dishes are
dowdy in simple and direct,
such as the signature hamburger ($11),
the Caesar salad ($9) and
the intriguing green-bean "beig-
net," basically a gar-
lacking string beans in a balsamic
butter ($6). While the bean
greens may have been a bit
flavorful, their lemon aioli lacked zing.
Portions generally are
reasonable, though some dishes are apt
to be startled by the disparity
between the size of some serv-
ing plates and their price. No one,
other, ought to complain of the
serving of the green-bean
beignets, easily enough for
three. Most appetizers are
fitting for two.

Another starter to share is the
toasted bread, characterized by a
grainy mustard and four
substantial slices of grilled
garlic-rubbed bread ($12). For
the freshness and craftsmanship
of the meats, this plate is the
best buy in the place — a
pink and coarse texture of flavorful
pork, thin-textured fillets of
duck and herbs, and a rich
and addictive duck-liver mousse
shaped like a cheeseball and
flavored with salt sea.

Precision and artistry char-
atize the execution and
presentation of virtually
every dish. More than at any
other restaurant, I found myself
wishing I'd brought a camera
to record one photogenic dish
after another. A small cut of superb
hamachi had been deftly seared
to give it just the thinnest of
meat edges, then served with
a few leaves of peppery arugula
and six dice-size cubes of bright
watermelon all topped with just
enough salt to accentuate its
sweetness ($15).

No dish was more riveting in
either appearance or flavor than
a single massive short rib,
centered on a delicately sweet
soufflé of sweet onions and
green apples, and scattered with
leaves of Brussels sprout and a
fine dust of caramalized squash
($38). I've never had a better
short rib, the most generous,
lovely, tender and rich without
being nearly as fatty as the cut often is.

Another hit was a crisp-edged
seared Alaskan halibut almost
unstaged by the liveliness of
gilled artichokes and the star-
richness of button beans ($26).

Duck confit seasoned with
roasted figs was classically crisp
and intense, but both the fowl
and the cinnamon-scented
hamburger on which it was
delivered suffered from too
much salt ($20).

Pastry chef Michelle Androne
narrates with deliberation
and finesse a dessert menu dar-
ing for its almost total repudia-
tion of the standards. The closest
she comes to cliché is a Valrhona
chocolate cake, though she is
quick to tweak it with olive-oil
gelato ($6).

Her desserts range from the
lightness of a tall and tangy
lemon soufflé spiked with a
candied-ginger anglaise ($11) to
the brawny of apples roasted
with cardamom, served on briche as
rich and thick as French toast,
and cooled with both a caramel
dressing and vanilla-bean gelato
($8).

Hawks is in the west wing of the
Quarry Pond Town Center complex,
and the front is so
understated it's easy to overlook
(watch for the bold signage of the
electrical fire control room"
next door). Inside, it's all confi-
dence and serenity, unless it's
full; then it can get loud, though
not necessarily oppressive.

Ash beam from reclaimed
whisky barrels forms the floor,
while marble tops the bar, walls
in sea-fan foam provide a
neutral backdrop that flatters the
plates, and a short corridor and
wide entry to the kitchen pro-
duce glimpses into the bright and
bustling room.

Off to one side of the central
dining room, a bar has its
own (tastefully catting cutout,
and separated by a white wall,
with a few local scenes and
drawings, as the dining area
for the "wine
coordinator" to
decorate and hold wines.