Chain Reaction

In a land dominated by franchised restaurants, two young chefs with a national pedigree and a GM from the Ritz-Carlton are setting out to bring white-tablecloth dining and New York prices to a new dining and shopping center that's quickly establishing itself as one of the region's great culinary rest stops.

By Lark Park
Photographs by Marc Thomas Kallweit
Granite Bay may be one of the most exclusive communities in the region, but as with many chain-fed burbs, high-end dining there has proven to be as rare as a Beluga whale. Enter chefs Molly Hawks and Michael Fagnoni, who graduated from the prestigious California Culinary Academy and The Culinary Institute of America, respectively, and worked at notable restaurants in San Francisco and New York. With their new Hawks restaurant, the young married couple is applying their pedigreed education and experience to the bounty of Central Valley produce to bring forth a concept in contemporary American dining where California farm meets French service and technique.

"There's a niche to be filled," says the 33-year-old Hawks, whose family moved to Granite Bay from the Bay Area six years ago and has helped finance and build the white-tablecloth eatery. "We realized spending time here that there wasn't really anything in Granite Bay. We had trouble finding places to eat. And Roseville has a ton of restaurants but they are [mostly] chains."

And though adjacent to Roseville, Granite Bay is a world apart, far less developed and with little of the big retail that defines its neighbor to the west. So apropos of its concept, Hawks restaurant is tucked away in Granite Bay's new Quarry Ponds Town Center, which is already filled with boutique retail food purveyors such as Vande Rose Farms Meat & Fish, Bay Gourmet Deli & Gifts, and Regionale Produce Market, as well as specialty apparel and other shops.

And as much as the restaurant owes much of its creation to the Hawks family, its genesis really began at a restaurant more than 1,500 miles away. While both spent time cooking in San Francisco establishments—Fagnoni at Jardinière (he was also a chef at the acclaimed seafood restaurant Oceana in Manhattan), and Hawks at LiveFire (an erstwhile French-American eatery owned by celebrated Bay Area chef Fred Halpert), the two met at The Village Pub, a high-end contemporary American restaurant with French and Mediterranean influences in tony Woodside, California. The Village Pub not only brought them together, but nurtured their styles and honed their business acumen.

"Not only were we cooking in the kitchen, we got to a point in our careers there where we were dealing with the financials and the day-to-day reality of running a business," says Hawks, who held both the sous chef and chef de cuisine positions at the restaurant. "And Mark Sullivan [Village Pub's executive chef whom Food & Wine once named one of..."
the best new chefs in America just has a really clean style with his food that we both appreciate."

This means starting with the best ingredients (mostly local ingredients from seven to 10 regional growers), but keeping the preparation simple enough to showcase true flavors of the food. The Hawks burger is a perfect example: a simple construction of premium Hereford beef from Vande Rose, seasoned with salt, pepper and grapeseed oil, on a house-made bun that’s a hint sweet, and pickled cucumbers that provide a subtly tangy counterpoint to the other flavors. Likewise, a hamachi dish that combines the sweetness of

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heirloom watermelon with a hint of jalapeño heat and the velvety texture of yellowtail, is refreshingly simple.

But simple doesn’t mean lacking in labor or flourish. Such dedication to true flavors often mean hours and hours of work, whether it’s shucking oysters on a half shell, producing more than 120 quarts of stock from fresh bones daily, making all the breads and the pastas, or aging meats for charcuterie. "They’re labor-intensive preparations," says Hawks, "but when you see the finished plate, it’s not over-fussy or overcomplicated in its presentation."

Perhaps not over-fussy, but some of the dinner presentations are clearly meant to impress. After a few weeks and some practice, servers will be carving the whole roasted chicken at tableside, such as is done in France. "We’re trying to create more interaction with the table than other restaurants in the immediate area," says Fagnoni. Adds Hawks, "It’s really something when you walk through the dining room [carrying] a whole roasted chicken with crispy skin. It’ll get the attention of all the guests."

Diners may be yet more impressed when they find out that this is no ordinary free-range chicken. It’s Fresno-based Mary’s Free-Range Chicken, a special air-chilled chicken, whose natural flavors do not get diluted through the conventional cooling process. A normal chicken collects more water in the flesh, explains Fagnoni, because they’re soaked in cold water when they’re eviscerated. But with air-chilled chickens, says Fagnoni, "the flavor’s better—it’s not watered down. And the chance for infection is less because it’s not in a bath with 500 other chickens."

It’s just one of the things they’ve learned on the job, or, in this case, through their association with Vande Rose. "If you’re going to be a responsible chef, you’re always talking to your purveyors and seeing what’s new on the market," says Hawks. Of the two, Hawks is more focused on the business end of running the restaurant.

And there have been plenty of business decisions to be made. When it became clear that they would not be receiving
one of just eight liquor licenses Placer County awarded last year (which is akin to winning the lottery, says Hawks), they were confronted with either trying to buy an existing license for resale, which could have run them in excess of $200,000 (or nearly 20-fold the cost of a new license), or take advantage of a loophole that allows the establishments that brew their own beer to sell liquor. Hence, the birth of Hawks Brau, an ale they hope will be popular with patrons.

Similarly, the menu was influenced by the couple's own personal tastes, but a consciousness about what would resonate with diners factored in as well. "All the items that we put on the menu are things that we would like to be served at a restaurant," says Hawks, "but we're definitely conscious of what would work in this area. We didn't want to get too esoteric with the menu." To be sure, the menu is sophisticated but not daunting: a foie gras terrine contrasts with simple brioche; a duck confit is offered with warm bulgur-wheat grilled peaches; a familiar beef filet is accompanied by diced potatoes braised and crisped with duck fat (not to mention a big-city price tag of $96).

Likewise, the restaurant itself feels sophisticated, but comfortably so. The color scheme is both rich and cool with chocolate browns, silvery blues and splashes of white. Dark alder wood cabinetry, old-fashioned barn door closures, rich mohair fabrics, lotus flower chandeliers, and an enclosed glass wine room holding some 200-250 selections, exude a unique contemporary rustic feel with fine dining touches. In addition to the style of food, impeccable attention to detail—from the posture of the servers, to how close one carries the plates, to the visual cutting of the bread on a farm table in the dining room—is part of the restaurant's appeal. The experience of general manager, Frenchman Laurent Desbat, who comes from the highly service-oriented Ritz-Carlton in San Francisco, should help set the restaurant apart. "There's a better awareness of..." begins Fagnoni, pausing only long enough for his wife to complete the sentence, "what service should be and what food quality should be."

The two chefs pass sentences back and forth the same way they pass recipes, which according to them, is how they get the best results. As for the restaurant, it's the culmination of an idea they've been passing between them for the two long years, from the overall concept to the color scheme. Asked how it's turned out, a pleased chef Hawks beams with just the slightest hint of wide-eyed incredulosity, "Exactly like how we pictured it."