

BY ASHLEY M. ROY

A RESTAURANT REVIEW OF

NONESUCH

+ A REFLECTION ON THE HISTORY OF OKLAHOMA'S
FOOD CULTURE



BUYING INTO THE LIE OF ONION BURGER CULTURE

When I first moved to Oklahoma a little over three years ago, I felt that the food culture of the state was best represented by the onion burger and an assortment of greasy, deep-fried state fair foods. To put it mildly, I was not a fan of Oklahoma's food scene. I inevitably compared what I deemed this 'onion burger culture' with the food culture of my home state, Louisiana, and the results were not favorable for Oklahoma. I decided that Midwestern cuisine paled in comparison to the rich Cajun and Creole cuisine I was accustomed to, and that the onion burger (which, I assumed, was all Oklahoma had to offer in terms of local flavor) simply could not compete with a filé gumbo with a perfectly-thickened roux.

Needless to say, I was wrong. Since those first few judgmental months of living in Oklahoma, I've learned that just because the history behind food and cooking in Oklahoma might not be as famous as that of a state like Louisiana, this does not mean Oklahoma's food history is nonexistent. Truth be told, I have actually come to find Oklahoma's food culture all the more interesting because of the fact that it is often overlooked and undervalued (as are most elements of Oklahoma, I've learned). Over the course of the last three years, I have taken a great interest in exploring all the hidden gems and local eateries I can find within a one hundred mile radius of Norman, and although I still love jambalaya and gumbo, my harsh attitude towards the local cuisine which Oklahoma has to offer has softened. I have fallen in love with the small, off-the-beaten path diners as well as the newer and more modern restaurants which seem

to be constantly multiplying in downtown OKC. After several years of playing the 'foodie' and eating at just about every restaurant, café, food truck, deli, steakhouse, and pizzeria I could find, I prided myself on the thought that I had discovered most of what Oklahoma — or the Oklahoma City area, at least — had to offer. So imagine my surprise when I came across this headline in the September 2018 issue of *Bon Appétit* magazine, which had just named Oklahoma City's Nonesuch the #1 restaurant in the nation: "How did a 22-seat tasting menu spot from three chefs whom no one has ever heard of, in a city that no national critic has ever paid attention to, become America's best new restaurant?" To say I was confused would be an understatement. I had never even heard of this place, and I was pretty sure no one else had either. But because I love exploring all things Oklahoma, and particularly all things food-related, I knew I had to see what the hype surrounding this restaurant was all about. And so I found myself in front of my computer at 7:00 am on a Monday morning, refreshing my screen and waiting for the reservations for the next two months to open. I managed to get two seats at the (then highly-sought after) eleven-course tasting menu spot for the month of November. All there was left to do was wait.

In the meantime, I began to do my research. I found out that Nonesuch is run by chefs Colin Stringer, Paul Wang, and Jeremy Wolfe, who have all embarked on a collective mission to exploit different elements of Oklahoman cuisine in their seasonal menus. Because these chefs cook exclusively with local ingredients and

rely upon the land to determine which recipes they are able to create during a given season, their menu changes as often as the Oklahoma weather does. What this means is that since you typically have to make reservations a month or two in advance (that is, of course, ever since the buzz which the *Bon Appétit* article has generated) you do not know what the monthly menu will look like for your reservation date; you simply have to place your trust in the chefs.



Picture taken from *Bon Appétit*

HYPER- SEASONAL // HYPER-LOCAL

The chefs at Nonesuch describe their cooking style as 'hyper-seasonal' and 'hyper-local'. What this means is that, as *Bon Appétit*'s Andrew Knowlton writes, "If

there's a protein, vegetable, piece of fruit, or dairy product on the plate, it comes from Oklahoma." In fact, Stringer, Wang, and Wolfe themselves often forage for their ingredients, seeing this step of entering into nature and selecting the very best that it has to offer as essential to their cooking process as a whole. A video produced by *Bon Appétit* shows the chefs wandering the 1000-acre Stinchcomb Wildlife Refuge located in northwest Oklahoma City, hand-picking wild herbs and flowers along the way. The video also shows the trio of chefs frequenting local farmers markets, where, in true Oklahoman style, they warmly greet all of the farmers by name and converse with them before getting down to business. The result of all of this time spent foraging in the wilderness and walking up and down the aisles of farmers markets are strikingly simple and yet incredibly flavorful recipes that feature elements like pecan oil, green pinto bean sauce, duck-yolk sauce, sorrel juice, and shishito jam, to name just a few. All of the wildly original recipes which these chefs are able to craft prove that cooking with locally-sourced ingredients does not have to be monotonous or boring. Chef Colin Stringer says in regards to their hyper-local methods, "It's not a new way to cook; people have been cooking this way forever."

And indeed they have. Stringer's words are, whether he realizes it or not, a nod to the Native American roots of Oklahoma cuisine. The *Bon Appétit* article describes Nonesuch's cooking style as 'Nordic,' when in fact it would be more accurately described as Native American. An utter dependency on the changing seasons and on the changing availabilities of certain

locally-sourced ingredients forces Stringer, Wang, and Wolfe to be as creative and as resourceful as possible. This resourcefulness is a quality of Oklahoman cooking that dates back to the Native Americans, who, like the chefs of Nonesuch today, recognized and honored the fact that there exists an intimate connection between the land one lives on and the food which ends up on the plate. Furthermore, the American Indians, too, saw cooking as an art form, and even as something quasi-sacred. Because such similarities exist between the Native Americans and the Nonesuch chefs, it should be little surprise that there are striking parallels between the seasonal Nonesuch menus and the traditional recipes of the Great Plains Indian, who were the first people to live and cook in Oklahoma. Take the following example. Here are some of the recipe headings found in 'The Wandering Hunters of the Plains' section of *The Art of American Indian Cooking*, a collection of traditional Native American recipes that have been passed down over the years: Dried Corn Soup, Mushroom Soup, Charcoal-Broiled Buffalo Steaks, and Skillet Cabbage. Compare these recipes with the following courses taken from various Nonesuch menus: Chilled Corn Soup with Baby Corn, Mushroom Broth, and Grilled Bison Ribeye with Grilled Baby Cabbage. The recipes of the Great Plains Indians align almost word-for-word with the recipes featured on the modern-day Nonesuch menu. By using only locally-sourced ingredients, the head chefs of Nonesuch have made their dining space a living, breathing representation of the continuing influence which Native American food preparation and cooking methods have on Oklahoman cuisine. Since

Native American food culture has played such a prominent role in the modern-day food culture of Oklahoma, I want to take a moment to examine our Native American heritage in greater detail before moving towards what the tasting experience at Nonesuch looks like today.

OKLAHOMA'S FOODWAYS: A LOOK BACK

The word 'foodways' refers to the intersection of food, culture, history, and geography. In essence, a 'foodway' is the story of how a certain food culture has influenced its surroundings, as well as the story of how those surroundings have influenced that food culture. As folklorist and ethnologist Dr. Jason Baird Jackson states, "Oklahoma's foodways are the product of the state's special history and its location at the convergence of geographic regions." Oklahoma was a cultural mixing pot long before its official statehood. Throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Native Americans, European settlers, and African Americans were the three main groups of people coming together in the Indian Territory that was later to become the state of Oklahoma. In his article, Jackson explains how each of these peoples contributed different elements to the culinary heritage of Oklahoma as a whole, shaping what was to become a uniquely



Comanche Woman Cooking, 1947. Tatoue Negative Collection, White Eagle, Oklahoma Historical Society.

Midwestern cuisine. The African Americans, many of whom had migrated from the Deep South, brought with them dishes like sweet potatoes, okra, and fried chicken, whereas the Europeans contributed livestock like cattle, pigs, and chickens. And, Jackson states, "at the base of this new cuisine were staples long domesticated by American Indians before 1492 — beans, squash, and most importantly, corn in myriad forms." The food culture we Oklahomans know today is the result of the fusion of these various ethnic groups. Indeed, longstanding diners like Someplace Else and newer, more fashionable food venues like The Jones Assembly both showcase Oklahoma's African, Native, and European roots in



Ponca Powwow. 1947. Tatoue Negative
Collection, White Eagle. Oklahoma Historical
Society.

dishes like potato salad and fried chicken. For example, the current menu of the latter restaurant features okra with a cornmeal crust, Kabocha squash and apple soup, and short ribs — the African, Native, and European influences in this menu are obvious.

Out of the three groups discussed, however, it was the American Indians of the Great Plains who contributed most significantly to Oklahoma cuisine as we know it today. As the first inhabitants of Oklahoma, they were the ones who knew the land most intimately, and consequently, they were the ones who knew how to make the most of cooking

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with the wildlife and vegetation that the land had to offer. The Great Plains Indians were characterized by incredible resourcefulness. This was a quality born of necessity, since these tribes inhabited one of the most difficult regions in North America in terms of farming and cooking. As stated by Yeffe Kimball and Jean Anderson, the co-authors of *The Art of American Indian Cooking*, "The Plains women did not have the gardens and orchards that the Pueblo women had, they had none of the elegant seafood of the East, the succulent fruits of the South, nor the salmon of the Northwest." Yet, Kimball and Anderson go on to write, "still they developed recipes that have become very much a part of the American menu today." The Native American tribes who either originated in or came to inhabit this region — among them the Cherokee, Choctaw, Creek, Kiowa, Comanche and Wichita, to name just a few — typically relied on buffalo as well as crops like corn, potatoes, peppers, and cabbage for their meals. But most of these foodstuffs came and went with the changing seasons. The buffalo, for example, typically migrated to the Great Plains in the springtime and left in the wintertime. Because of such migrations and because of seasonal crops, the Great Plains Indians developed special kinds of cooking cycles that followed the rhythms of the seasons. If these tribes had written down set 'menus' the way the chefs at Nonesuch do today, theirs would probably change monthly, too.

OKC'S NONESUCH: A LOOK FORWARD

Kimball and Anderson praise the Great Plains women as 'artists' for their culinary skills, and go on to say the following: "Plains dishes are for the most part simple, but then the most eloquent foods are often the simplest." And with this, we return to our discussion Nonesuch, whose very philosophy is to achieve the 'simple yet eloquent' quality of Native American cuisine.

I had decided from the very start that I would bring my best friend Mary Kate along to Nonesuch with me, since she was the person who first made me fall in love with Oklahoma (against my will, I might add). Born and raised in Oklahoma City, Mare is pretty much a historian specializing in all things Oklahoma, an expert sports commentator for Thunder basketball, and a professional local food critic. Her undeniable love for Oklahoma is present in her every word and every action; it was only natural that I took her with me. When at last the time came to experience 'America's Best New Restaurant' for myself, Mare and I hopped in the car, drove from Norman to Oklahoma City, and found ourselves outside of a small building on North Hudson Avenue with no sign. On a

street full of restaurants whose names were advertised in bright, bold-lettered signs (including popular spots like Ludivine, Cheever's Cafe, and Barrios) Nonesuch was tucked quietly and humbly away. Hesitantly — I say hesitantly, because we did not know whether or not we would be glaringly out of our element upon entering — we walked inside of the single-room building to find that its interior was as simple as it had promised to be. There were exactly twenty-two leather chairs, and these were arranged around a U-shaped countertop that filled the entire room. Sprigs of dried plants were suspended from the ceiling by strings, and ceramic vases teeming with orange zinnias rested on the countertops. These were the only decorations. The space was modern and utterly charming in its simplicity. The kitchen, rather than occupying a separate room, was divided from the dining area by a single wall of open-faced shelving. This design allows the patrons the ability to gaze between the rows of wine bottles and jars of pickled-everything if they should wish to see their food being prepared. I watched as the chefs bent carefully over each dish, garnishing their creations with perfectly-placed edible flowers and artfully-drizzled sauces. I imagine that watching these guys cook must be similar to watching painters put the finishing touches on their work. The undeniable artistry that was tied into the cooking process made me think of the Andrew Knowlton's words in the *Bon Appétit* article: "The best analogy I can use to describe the trio... is three guys in a band, heads down, making incredibly beautiful music together." I could not agree more.

Amidst the sounds of forks scraping on plates and lively conversations, Mare and I took our seats at the counter. We were immediately greeted with warm smiles from the staff and cold glasses of champagne. Looking around at the other people in the room assuaged our fears that we were out of place. Before we had arrived, Mary Kate had asked the same question over and over again: *What if we don't look nice enough?* But as soon as we saw the heterogeneous mix of people inside — a pair of young and sharply-dressed couples, a small group of thirty-something year old men wearing jeans and untucked shirts, an older married couple, and a group of girlfriends who snapped pictures of each other in between each course — we realized that we were not at all out of place. Everyone seemed to be welcomed (and, indeed, when I later went back through the Nonesuch website, I found this statement under the FAQs section: “There is no dress code. You are welcome as you are.”). As we looked around the room, one other thing was obvious: All of the seats were full. Clearly, Nonesuch's pre-*Bon Appétit* obscurity was a thing of the past.

While we were still taking in everything around us, a woman brought out the first course, an oleaginous mushroom broth, and set it in front of us. For this course and for each ensuing course, one of the chefs or servers would stop by to explain what ingredients the dish featured and how they recommended eating it — *We recommend drinking this broth like a tea* or *We recommend spreading the ice cream over the top of this biscotti*, and so on. As soon as we were left to enjoy our food, I picked up the little ceramic bowl with my

fingertips — it is worth mentioning here that every course is served in or on ceramic dishes handmade by a local artist — and took my first sip. Though simple in appearance, the broth had an overwhelming intensity and richness of flavor, the result of a mixture of beet oil, persimmon oil, and an herb oil. It made me think of Kimball and Anderson's description of the Plains Indians's recipes: “The most eloquent foods are often the simplest.” I guessed from this very first sip of mushroom broth that the meal as a whole was going to be phenomenal, and I was right.

The broth was followed by what was probably my favorite course, a ‘snack trio’ made up of an heirloom black bean fritter, a sourdough waffle with allium paste, and a crunchy daikon with grasshopper — yes, grasshopper — mayo. Nonesuch is not for the non-adventurous eater, since grasshopper mayo is just one of many unusual ingredients that appears on the menu. A few of the other courses I ate featured hackleback caviar and chicken liver mousse, while previous menus have included grilled chicken hearts, colostrum (or bovine breast milk) custard, and fried corn caterpillars. As Knowlton puts it, “Nonesuch is not ambitious for OKC; it’s ambitious, period.” But for all of its eccentric ingredients, the Nonesuch menu also features traditional ingredients that the Plains Indians have been cooking with for centuries. The dishes I tasted included ingredients like mushrooms, black beans, potatoes, eggs, chicken, butternut squash, peppers, garlic, bison, watercress, sweet potatoes, nasturtiums, and figs, all of which have been a part of traditional

WHAT'S ON THE MENU?

Mushroom Broth

Crunchy Daikon with Grasshopper Mayo,
Heirloom Black Bean Fritter, and Sourdough
Waffle with Allium Paste

Potato, Hackleback Caviar and Slow-Cooked
Egg Yolk Sauce

Oyster Mushroom Custard topped with Goji
Berries

Chicken Liver Mousse and Ricotta Tarts

Butternut Squash Sorbet with Yogurt

Focaccia with Soft Scrambled Eggs,
Jalapeño Peppers, and Black Garlic

Grilled Bison with a Watercress Sauce

Warm Herbal Tea alongside Sweet Potato
Sorghum Cake

Nasturtium Ice Cream, Squash Caramel, and
a Fig Biscotti

Jasmine Ice Cream, Apple Curd, and Milk
Crumble

Native American recipes for years.

The next few courses included a small, carefully-cooked potato topped with hackleback caviar and an egg yolk sauce, a savory oyster-mushroom custard that had all the texture of a desert and yet all the sustenance of an entrée, two miniature tarts — one chicken liver mousse and one ricotta — in flaky crusts, a tangy butternut squash sorbet, and a slice of focaccia topped with spicy peppers and served alongside a creamy scrambled egg sauce. The eighth course, another outstanding favorite of mine, was a hearty piece of grilled bison steak accompanied by a garden-fresh watercress sauce. Bison, or buffalo, is another one of those distinctly Midwestern foods that has been a part of Oklahoma's cuisine since the culinary practices of the Plains Indians, many of whom relied upon the buffalo as their main source of not only food, but clothing and shelter as well.

The last three courses, the dessert courses, moved away from the intensity of flavor that characterized the savory portion of the meal and were instead marked by a subdued and simple sweetness. These courses included a thick sweet potato molasses cake served alongside a warm herbal and honeyed tea, a biscotti cracker topped with a caramel made from squash and a scoop of nasturtium ice cream, and a jasmine ice cream covered in apple curd and milk crumble, and garnished with little squares of gelatin. With these dessert courses as well as with the savory courses, I had the feeling that I was tasting every vegetable, fruit, root, flower, seed, and animal that made up the state of Oklahoma. It was certainly my first time tasting some

of the ingredients on the menu, such as goji berries and nasturtium flowers. I think Greg Elwell, the former *Oklahoma Gazette* food critic, best describes this sensation of 'tasting Oklahoma' in the following quote about Nonesuch's herbal tea, which was featured in the *Bon Appétit* article: "Not only was it utterly delicious, but I remember thinking that I was drinking an entire year of Oklahoma. Every season. Every storm. Every drought. That still blows my mind."

IN SUM: HONORING NATIVE ROOTS

In the end, it is Nonesuch's devotion to cooking exclusively with what grows or roams within the state boundaries of Oklahoma that makes it a standout, and that earned it the coveted title of 'America's Best New Restaurant'. The challenge of reviewing a restaurant like Nonesuch is this: the menu I tasted will not look the same as the menu next month, or the month after that, or the month after that. Because the chefs have devoted themselves to cooking hyper-locally and hyper-seasonally, change is the only constant at Nonesuch. But as the chefs themselves have said before, there is nothing new or groundbreaking about this way of cooking. In fact, for most of human history, cooking with

locally-sourced ingredients was the only way to cook. By returning to this tradition, the Nonesuch chefs are reminding us what Oklahoma 'tasted like' before the creation of supermarkets and overnight shipping. As Knowlton writes, "This connection to place is part of what makes Nonesuch so special." It is the life passion of chefs Stringer, Wang, and Wolfe to use the simple ingredients of the Great Plains region for the creation of flavorful recipes, and to share their creations with others who are just as passionate about the seasons, animals, and wildlife unique to Oklahoma. In my opinion, nothing could be more representative of the spirit of our state than the unexpected goodness which I encountered in this restaurant. While the Native American roots of Oklahoma's food culture may not always get the recognition they deserve, they are quietly and humbly living on within the walls of this building.

Food is so much more than just calories and sustenance. Food is a reflection of the people who cook it, the landscapes within which these people move, and the years of recipes and cooking methods that have been passed down from one generation to the next. In Oklahoma, food is a reflection of the Great Plains Indians more than any other ethnic or cultural group. In recent decades, there has been a movement to restore Native American cuisine across the country and to create distinctly Native American restaurants in the way that Mexican and Thai restaurants exist. One proponent of this movement is chef Paul Wachter, who actually left his appointment at a five-star French restaurant to return to the culinary traditions of his ancestors, the

Apaches and the Navajos. Wachter calls Native American cuisine "the forgotten cuisine," and rightly so. But while there is no doubt that Wachter's goal to reinstate Native American cuisine in the restaurant scene is admirable and necessary, I would argue that the various food cultures which American Indian tribes across the country have left us with are already present, surrounding us at all times. In fact, as Kimball and Anderson state, "The most widely used and important foods known today are of American Indian origin. We see them in our supermarkets, we enjoy them every day, and often we even prepare them as the Indians did. Most of our classic American dishes are, in truth, American Indian." In other words, Native American food culture is not only inextricable from Midwestern cuisine, but also from the food culture of America as a whole. And while the new movement of chefs honoring their Native roots with the creation of Indigenous restaurants is one step towards deepening our appreciation of the American Indians, it is important, too, that we open our eyes and celebrate the elements of the various Native American food cultures that have been in front of us all along, appearing on menus like that of Nonesuch. In order to see the rich culture which the Native Americans have endowed this country with, we have only to open our eyes and look.

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— Will Rogers, foreword to *The Art of American
Indian Cooking*

NOVEMBER 2018

NONESUCH MENU

IN PHOTOGRAPHS



SOURCES

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