

FARM TO TABLE

BRINGING BACK COMMUNITY AT JULIENNE TOMATOES

BY SARAH BAUGHMAN
PHOTOGRAPHS BY CAROLE TOPALIAN

“Can I tell you about this table?” asks Julie Adams, gesturing to the darkened oak slab below us. “It used to be a lot smaller.”

We’re sitting in Julienne Tomatoes, the downtown Petoskey restaurant that Adams co-owns and runs with her husband, Tom Sheffler. And by the way, you had to ask, of course: What’s with the name? It stems from Julie ‘n’ Tom – the “atoes” was just a natural extension, especially considering the restaurant’s commitment to fresh, local produce and other ingredients. Although it’s now past closing time and customers have trickled away, the tables are usually full in this community-oriented business, so it makes sense to listen to Julie’s story about how this particular table grew.

The restaurant, which *Northern Express* readers voted as having “Best Staff,” “Best Desserts” and “Best Salads” earlier this year, is housed in a historic building that started life as the Schilling Feed Store in 1899 (the Schilling name can still be seen on the façade). Julie and Tom opened their business in July 2003, somehow completing the circle, since feeding—both body and soul, most customers would say—is what they do, too.

Julie explains that she and Tom had collected a unique assortment of small, shiny wooden tables at antique and garage sales to furnish the restaurant, but with their growing success, they eventually needed more seating. To solve the problem, they decided to add leaves to two of the tables, making them into six-seaters. “As a result, people often end up sitting and talking to somebody they didn’t know before or extending the empty seats to people waiting for a table,” says Tom. Despite initial resistance from some customers, the bigger tables are now welcomed as part of the restaurant’s unique



charm. “After three to six months, one of the men who had originally complained said, ‘I gotta tell you how much I love these community tables,’” adds Julie.

Don’t be surprised if you end up spending more time than you’d planned at any of the Julienne Tomatoes tables. Not only is the food fresh, well prepared and creatively presented – for both the breakfast and lunch menus – the place itself is also welcoming and cozy: half restaurant, half neighborhood. It’s rare to sit down and not get a visit from Tom or Julie, who take time to speak personally with their customers. “I always tell people, it’s like having company at your house. How would you treat company? You want to learn customers’ names, know what they like, remember it, welcome

them back. It just seems like common sense,” says Julie. In fact, you’ll hear Tom and Julie talking a lot about “common sense” when they describe the community atmosphere and refreshingly simple food philosophy of Julienne Tomatoes.

“The people who come here are not just customers,” Tom insists. “They’re friends, and they’re part of our family.” To become a believer, a skeptic need only take a seat in the restaurant’s “living room”—on a couch so cushy that you can easily get lost in it—and view the plaque dedicated to Grandma Laura, a relative of Julienne Tomatoes employee Kerrie. The family atmosphere at Julienne Tomatoes is so much a part of its appeal that many customers became quite attached to “Grandma.” Julie remembers one in particular who returned to Julienne Tomatoes after being out of town. “We told him she had passed away,” says Julie, “and he welled right up, couldn’t talk. He just stood there looking at the plaque, tears running down his face.” Customers often spend an hour or two—or all day—sitting in the

restaurant and reading or talking after they have eaten. When you sit down to the table or settle into the couch at Julienne Tomatoes, you've come home.

The tag line for the Julienne Tomatoes logo (featuring a tomato, of course) is "Makers of Good Food." An understatement if ever there were one. Julie sets three plates in front of me. My challenge is to distinguish the Michigan-grown produce from the industrially grown, and it's surprisingly easy when they're placed side by side. I point to the pallid tomato, the obscenely large strawberry, the strangely uniform spinach leaves, and know they weren't grown within 100 miles of Petoskey. But it's the taste that proves particularly revealing. The Michigan spinach tastes leafy and sweet instead of bitter. The Michigan tomato explodes with the soft, earthy warmth of seeds and pulp. The Michigan strawberry is a sweet, bright jewel on my tongue. It occurs to me that if I cooked only with these kinds of ingredients, everything would taste good.

It doesn't even seem necessary to ask why Julienne Tomatoes opts for local and regional foods, but Tom, who was raised on a farm in southeastern Michigan, answers the unspoken question spontaneously: "I grew up with an appreciation for fresh produce. There's nothing better than a tomato off the vine. A farm fresh egg and a regular egg? I can tell the difference in a second." Tom vividly remembers trips with his grandfather to sell produce at Detroit's Eastern Market, the largest, longest-running historic farmers' market in Michigan.

Tom and Julie extend the family tradition by shopping for ingredients at the Petoskey Farmers' Market. They also rely on deliveries from Cherry Capital Foods, the local produce distribution company for northwestern Michigan. In all, the restaurant sources its ingredients from more than 20 Michigan companies and over 15



PUMPKIN SOUP

Serves 4–6

1 pound roasted pumpkin flesh
½ large onion, diced
4 ribs celery, diced
vegetable or chicken stock
cinnamon to taste
nutmeg to taste

To roast pumpkin: Preheat oven to 350°. Cut raw pumpkins in half. Place on parchment-lined cookie sheet and roast in oven until tender. Scoop out seeds and discard. Scoop out flesh and peel away skin. Reserve flesh and discard skin.

To make soup: In large soup/sauce pot, sauté onions and celery until translucent. Add roasted pumpkin flesh and stock. Bring to a boil. Reduce heat and simmer until vegetables are tender. Puree in blender or food processor or with stick blender until smooth. Season to taste with cinnamon, nutmeg, salt and pepper.

Variations: Try adding fresh ginger for a unique taste. Add garlic and tarragon for a more savory flavor. Omit cinnamon and nutmeg. Add other squashes for different flavor. Add heavy cream to richen and thicken.

Northern Michigan farms. "Not only do I think it's common sense to support your community, but the difference in taste—you can't compare it," says Julie, who laughs as she remembers a customer who kept raving about one of their breakfasts. "It was just eggs and toast," she says, "but it's real butter, it's eggs that were laid two days ago, and it's toast from Crooked Tree Breadworks, which uses organic grains."

Other breakfast options include hot-off-the-griddle French toast made with Breadworks' cherry pecan loaf, dipped in egg batter and sprinkled with powdered sugar, with a side of bacon, ham or sausage. Lunch might be a bowl of soup made with market-fresh vegetables, a "Julie"ne chef's salad, or a spinach wrap filled with scallion cream cheese, spinach, tomato, cucumber, mushroom and purple onion.

Julienne Tomatoes proudly participates in the "Taste the Local Difference" campaign spearheaded by the Traverse City-based Michigan Land Use Institute. Signs for the campaign adorn the menu boards and counters, indicating which locally grown specialties are featured daily. Today, Traverse City cherries and spinach from Suttons Bay stand at the top of the list.

Other than the Taste the Local Difference placards, you won't find much advertising at this restaurant. "We don't really believe in advertising," says Tom. "Our advertising is all of this," he says, gesturing to the wall full of framed thank-you notes and certificates of appreciation from community organizations thankful for Julienne Tomatoes' support. "If a group comes in asking for a donation, we usually say yes," he explains. "We feel that our donations are a good way to advertise that we support those groups. It also makes you feel good—it's the right thing to do. We do as much as we can."



It seems so simple—a small-town restaurant buying ingredients from local farmers, fostering relationships with customers, and giving back to other community businesses. Maybe it's just common sense, as Julie insists. But in today's world, where food too often becomes a cheap commodity and downtown shops crumble under big-box pressures, this kind of sense—and these kinds of treats for the senses—are often hard to come by. Luckily, you can find them in abundance at Julienne Tomatoes.

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RUSTY'S ROASTED ROOT VEGETABLE MASHED POTATOES

Serves 4–6

4 potatoes, skin on or off
1 small rutabaga, medium dice
1 parsnip, medium dice
1 turnip, medium dice
½ teaspoon dried thyme
½ teaspoon dried oregano
2 tablespoons olive oil
1 tablespoon Michigan maple syrup
4 ounces whole butter
4 ounces whole milk or half-and-half
salt and pepper to taste

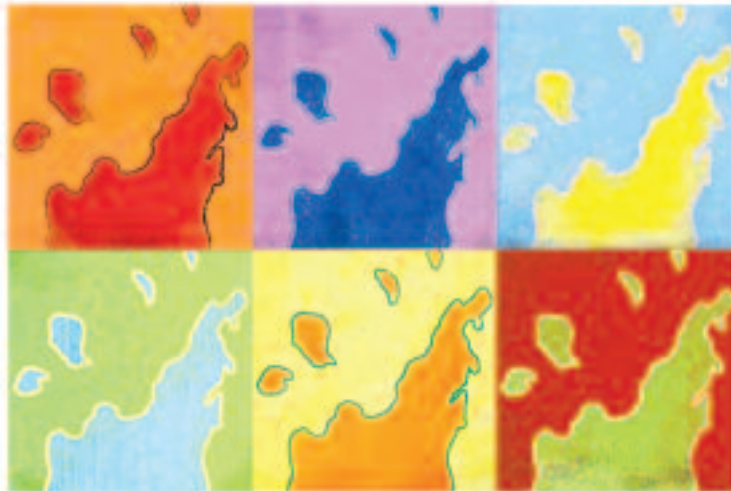
Preheat oven to 425°

Boil potatoes until tender. Drain and set aside. Toss rutabaga, parsnip and turnip in herbs and olive oil. Arrange in a single layer on parchment-lined cookie sheet. Roast until tender and golden brown. Put in a bowl and mash/puree.

Combine reserved potatoes with pureed vegetable mix and whip together in food processor or with hand blender until smooth. Stir in syrup, butter and milk. Season to taste with salt and pepper.

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