

The Maine Chance

By Susan Chumsky

In MAINE, SUMMER IS GLORIOUS, BUT RESIDENTS pay dearly for it. The price is called winter--in this case, a long, harsh stretch that culminates in a muddy, muddy March. Which is fine with Melissa Kelly, a Yankee by temperament (a Long Islander by birth) who has internalized the local hardscrabble work ethic with a vengeance. A renowned chef with a restaurant in coastal Rockland, Kelly believes that success isn't sweet if it's handed to you on a silver platter.

Kelly is the sort of person who would hate winning the lottery. She did win the lottery a few years ago, in a manner of speaking, and she found the pennies-from-heaven life lacking. From 1995 to '99, she was the chef at the Old Chatham Shepherding Company Inn, a world-class restaurant in upstate New York with the best ingredients, setting, equipment, and talent money could buy. People would drive four hours to eat there. "Someone said to me recently, 'I don't know how you could have left Old Chatham--it was such a fantasy.'" Kelly says. "It was owned by multimillionaires, and everything we wanted we got. You want a garden? Tomorrow you'll have a garden. It was on a 500-acre sheep-dairy farm, and we made cheese. We had a beautiful old greenhouse, landscape architects from Cornell--it was all so top-of-the-line.

"And to me," she says purposefully, "there was no soul in that place." Kelly is sitting (an uncharacteristic posture - she works 100 hours a week) in one of her restaurant's five dining rooms, near a wall of framed sepia family photographs. "Well, it was a fantasy, in the way that fantasies seem surreal. This," she concludes, gesturing around her, "is a dream."

The photos, depicting the Italian side of her family (the food obsessed side), are displayed far more prominently than the 1999 James Beard Foundation Award for Best Chef in the Northeast, which sits on a windowsill beside a stairway. One of the pictures is of a 9-year-old boy--Kelly's late grandfather, a butcher, who left her with a love of cooking and a first-rate name for her future restaurant: Primo. "The whole restaurant is an homage to Primo," Kelly says. "He passed away when I was in culinary school, so he never really saw the dream. But mostly because of him, I was



garden, we went fishing, and we made wine and vinegar.



Primo Restaurant is inventive Italian -- Italianate, you could call it. The menu always has quite a few straight Italian dishes (hand-cut linguini with Genovese pesto, for instance), but sometimes the food is Italian only in spirit, combining fresh, local ingredients and presenting them simply, so their essential flavors sing out. Kelly's seared Maine halibut with corn and lobster risotto, a signature dish, mixes the best of her adopted home (halibut, lobster, corn) and her ancestral one (arborio rice, Parmigiano-Reggiano). While her schedule is severe and her cooking has a certain refinement and haute rigor, the meals at Primo are unmistakably gracious, endearing, and rich in pleasure. Kelly is aiming to attract foodies from Boston and New York who will follow her anywhere, as well as locals who bring their kids in for a pizza--

although the foodie types will have trouble resisting Kelly's uncluttered, delicately crusted pizza, topped with ingredients like fresh mozzarella and prosciutto di Parma. "I personally don't always want to have a 'dining experience' when I go out," she says. "Sometimes I just want something simple but of high quality."

KELLY AND PRICE KUSHNER, HER FIANCEE, partner, and pastry chef, spent months scraping, refinishing, hammering, and lifting to get the 1890 Victorian into shape in time to open Primo in the Spring of 2000 (though she missed another self-imposed deadline - to open her own restaurant by the time she was 30). The place is pretty, homey, and, unlike Old Chatham, imperfect. The idea was to build a place with soul, and to build a life that allowed her and Kushner to go antiquing, take off the month of March, grab a canoe and paddle to a nearby oyster farm or behold a mess of mussels as far as the eye can see. In practice, there isn't much antiquing or canoeing. There is, however, a lot of prepping (from 10 a.m. till 4 p.m.), a break from the kitchen to type up the day's menu and have a staff



interruptions, and a jolt of iced cappuccino right before 5:30, when, she says, "service begins and we're off and running till 9:30." She calls it quits at around 1 a.m., then crams in whatever sleep she can before her 7 a.m. yoga practice.



Kelly, who is 36, attended the Culinary Institute of America in Hyde Park, New York, in the mid-eighties several years before a young person seeking fame and fortune would look at the life of a chef and think, I want that--and before that might have included a profile in W magazine. While a handful of chefs were making a name for themselves, basically if you became a chef it was to get your hands on food. Fortunately for Kelly, as chefs have become more mercenary, diners have become more appreciative. Even a few years ago, when she worked in the kitchens of Larry Forgione (An American Place) and Alice Waters (Chez Panisse), a sophisticated restaurant so far from a major

city wouldn't have been viable.

Now that people's taste buds have caught up with Kelly's cuisine, Maine is the perfect spot for Primo. For one thing, both Kelly and Kushner spent summers there as children, and few things leave a more powerful afterglow than childhood summers--particularly when beaches and lobster with melted butter are involved. For another, Maine, despite its extreme Yankee-ness, turns out to be highly compatible with Kelly's Italian sensibility. "In Italy we stayed on the coast in Liguria, and the little fishing villages are



ere think, she says. "Here, pretty much any morning, you see o go diving for scallops or urchins. So many people are s." The Italian ideal--popularized in this country by Alice cooking grafts seamlessly onto Maine. Like Waters, Kelly has by purveyors, and like her Italian forebears, she has taken to four acres, and she has been cultivating an herb garden, a and, in the basement, a root cellar. "I wanted to reach the point compost it, get to know the farmers and fishermen," she says. people who are very conscious about the environment. A lot of "

"I don't want Primo to be a stuffy restaurant," Kelly says. Here, the makings of a great dinner include locally picked blueberries, lovely table trimmings, and fresh bread.

hometown--is one thing. Trying the same thing in New England requires a certain relentlessness, suitable only for someone who finds challenge more simpatico than ease. "I think the seasonality here is more exciting for a chef, because your food's always changing," she says. "We get really drastic seasons. The winter is so long, we can't be strictly local--we'd have five things on the menu. So during the cold months, we concentrate on regional fish and meat rather than produce."

Much more than most rural areas, coastal Maine has an active cultural life, with a lot of artists, writers, and galleries, and an excellent museum right in downtown Rockland. But there's one thing about the country that Kelly is finding nearly unendurable, tough as she is. "I miss ethnic food like crazy," she says. "There are a few meager attempts, but it's not comparable." She mentions a nearby Thai place but can't repress a grimace. "Sometimes," she says, "I'm just dying for a little sushi."