



Dining alfresco in the way the French and Italians do with extended family and friends sitting around a trestle table in the garden – at least in all those finely nuanced foreign films – is a dream for most Brits. The weather is rarely conducive and it is never as easy as it looks, juggling the to and fro of food.

In America, 47-year-old Jim Denevan has taken the stress out of alfresco dining and transformed it into an extraordinary culinary experience. Leading chefs do the cooking on what looks like camping gear, organic produce is plucked or foraged from nearby, and the settings are as magical as he can conjure up: beaches, mountain tops, farms and urban community gardens. The only thing that his 150 guests have to do is bring their own plate (and even that is optional). As a result, his Outstanding in the Field dinners are now so in demand that people travel great distances to participate.

I caught up with Denevan at East End Community Organic farm (EECO) in East Hampton, Long Island, New York. Tonight's 150-seat dinner has drawn guests from as far as Boston and Japan. 'There is one woman who has been to 21 dinners,' says Denevan, whose 6ft 4in frame and signature cowboy hat make him a dead ringer for the Marlboro Man.

While setting up a 150ft dinner table, amid plots of sunflowers, marigolds, tomatoes and veg, Denevan tells me that he came up with the Outstanding concept in 1999. The idea, he says, was to serve dinner at its source and to connect eaters with food producers. 'You would be surprised how many guests and chefs have never been to a farm,' he says. 'They have only been

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to farmers' markets, so they never see where their food is grown.'

Denevan comes from a Californian family of innovators, adventurers and food-obsessed pioneers. His uncle Eddie Mirassou is part of the oldest wine-making family in the US. They first planted vineyards near San José in 1854 and just recently sold the operation to Gallo. Another uncle, Frank Dorsa, invented the Eggo Frozen waffle, which he later sold to Kellogg's. And his eldest brother (he is one of nine children), Bill Denevan, was one of the first farmers in northern California to go organic.

After a brief stint as a model, Denevan became a chef 'to leave my days free for surfing'. His Alice Waters-inspired, ingredient-driven food became a hit in Santa Cruz. But Denevan could not stop thinking about his brother's farm

where he had worked as a child, 'how hard the work was and how beautiful the setting', and wondered how he could convey something of that to his diners. So in 1997 Denevan began inviting local foragers and farmers to his restaurant to tell diners the story of their food. Two years later, he took the idea a step further and staged alfresco farm dinners and a dinner on the beach, and Outstanding was born.

Denevan is nothing if not ambitious. At the first event he tried to roast a 180lb pig in an underground earth pit. 'I'd never roasted a pig before,' he says. 'It took 13 hours and required a lot of digging to recover it, only to find it was somewhat overcooked.' He loves a challenge and his favourite meals are usually the most outlandish. Like the time he had 100 people hike up a mountain to dine at a forager's secret mushroom

patch. Or when he decided to do dinner in a sea cave. Denevan had found the cave a year before and had not checked it again, so was horrified to discover it had filled up with sand. 'We had to excavate it illegally with a Bobcat at 3am.'

Today's meal seems tame by comparison. EECO farm is a pastoral idyll, a stone's throw from the designer boutiques and steroidally overblown cottages of East Hampton. It is 42 acres divided into 100 allotments and one- to 15-acre farms. 'The whole thrust of this operation is to show that organic gardening and farming isn't just practical, it is easy,' Peter Garnham, the EECO chairman, says. 'When we started in 2001, this was conventional farmland and totally inert organically, no worms, no birds and no insects. It was dead.' Still, it is hard to imagine why anyone in the Hamptons would need an



Moveable feast

By preparing and serving fresh, organic food in picturesque locations yards from where it was produced, Jim Denevan is bringing a whole new meaning to alfresco dining. **Lucie Young** bags a sought-after spot at his lengthy travelling table. Photographs by **Tara Donne**

Left a 150ft table is set up among the allotments at the East End Community Organic farm in East Hampton, Long Island.

Right Jim Denevan, the founder of Outstanding in the Field, checks the line of the table

Bluefish escabeche with heirloom

tomatoes serves 6

'Bluefish is really under-appreciated as it's got a lot of fat,' the chef Jason Weiner says. 'It doesn't last long; you have got to use it quickly. I get them fresh and pickle them. It adds a ton of background. I flash deep-fry the whole fish for 30 seconds and make a hot solution of aromatics and pour it over hot and press it for two days. Then I flake the fish and add some croutons. You can't go wrong.'

for the fish

1 very fresh bluefish fillet (pin bones removed; use mackerel, herring or sardines if bluefish not available)

60g semolina

3 tbsp rapeseed oil

25ml extra-virgin olive oil

1 onion, thinly sliced

1 small carrot, peeled and thinly sliced

240ml white wine

240ml white wine vinegar

1 tsp coriander seeds

1 tsp chilli flakes

1 bunch of parsley

1 bunch of basil

3 bay leaves

for the salad

4 green zebra tomatoes

12 cherry tomatoes

40g assorted picked herbs (celery leaves, chives, parsley, tarragon, microgreens, fennel greens, etc)

crusty bread, sliced, grilled and torn into pieces

Season the bluefish with salt and pepper, and then dredge it in the semolina, shaking off the excess. In a medium-hot sauté pan sear the bluefish in the rapeseed oil on both sides. Transfer the bluefish to a casserole into which it will fit snugly.

Meanwhile put the olive oil, onion and carrot in a saucepan. Cook gently until the vegetables become translucent. Add the wine, vinegar and 250ml of water, and bring the mixture to a simmer.

Sprinkle the herbs and aromatics on top of the fish. Pour the hot liquid over the fish and transfer to a refrigerator to cool. The fish will be ready in 12 hours. It can stay in the liquid for up to a week.

When ready to serve, quarter the green zebra tomatoes and arrange with the cherry tomatoes, herbs and bread on a serving platter. Season with sea salt and freshly ground black pepper. Flake the fish and scatter it on top of the salad. Drizzle with a little of the pickling liquid.

Hamish Anderson's wine choice 2007

Knappstein Ackland Vineyard Riesling,

Clare Valley, South Australia, £8.99,

Marks & Spencer (marksandspencer.com).

This dish is a serious workout for any wine. It is the abundance of acid both from the pickling broth and tomatoes that causes the problem. Knappstein's floral, lime-soaked Riesling has a rapier-like core of freshness that will perk up the most jaded of palates and pairs beautifully with the bluefish.

Top tomato and herb salad to go with the bluefish escabeche. **Right** Denevan comes from a family of food innovators. **Far right** wildflowers arranged in old milk bottles make simple table decorations



allotment, but Garnham insists they do. 'Often their garden is shaded or the soil isn't good, or the kids or dogs are tearing it up. This place has great soil, full sun and expert advice.'

The weather for today's event is beautiful, but last night Hurricane Hanna battered New York and dumped several inches of rain on the Hamptons. All day, guests have been emailing in a panic that the dinner will be cancelled. 'The weather is always fun,' Denevan says, taking a

rare moment's break to sip some water. 'We did a dinner in Alaska and some of the guests had on heavy-weather gear.'

There is never a rain check. If a storm breaks, the fall-back plan is usually a nearby barn or greenhouse, or a tent. But Denevan is a meteorology buff and he brags he can predict a storm down to the minute it will pass overhead. At a recent dinner, he set the table outside despite knowing that there would be 10-15 minutes of



Roast Long Island duck breast with corn succotash and roasted fingerlings

serves 6

6 duck breasts, about 170-230g each
680g yukon gold or new potatoes, cut in half lengthwise
2 sprigs of rosemary
25g butter
kernels from three ears of corn
1 green bell pepper, diced
1 red bell pepper, diced
1 small red onion, diced
200g broad beans, skinned and blanched in boiling water for 1 minute
1 bunch of tarragon

Season the duck with salt and pepper. Heat some oil in a wide, oven-proof pan and slowly sauté the duck on the skin side. When the duck is rare, take it out of the pan and let it rest. Preheat the oven to 200C/gas mark 6. Add the potato and rosemary to the duck fat in the pan. Put the pan in the oven. Toss every 15 minutes.

Meanwhile, heat the butter in a frying-pan. Add the corn, peppers, onion and broad beans to make the succotash. When the vegetables are beginning to melt add the tarragon and some salt and pepper. Place on a warm serving platter.

When the potatoes are caramelised and soft, put the duck breasts flesh side down on top of them. Turn the oven up to 260C/gas mark 9 and cook for another five minutes.

Transfer the duck and potatoes to the platter with the vegetables.

Wine choice 2007 Barbera d'Alba, Ascheri, Piemonte, Italy £9.79, Oddbins (oddbins.com).

The inherent sweetness of duck brings out the best in a red. Matteo Ascheri's Barbera is all you could ask for; its flavour of sweet, ripe berries is nicely balanced by some bittersweet black cherries, perfect for cutting through the rich duck.

Chilled lipstick pepper and cucumber soup with fried oysters

serves 6

10 cherry peppers or red bell peppers, seeded and diced large
4 cucumbers, peeled and cut into large dice
half a red onion, peeled and cut into large dice
1 tbsp red wine vinegar
2 tbsp extra-virgin olive oil
10g parsley leaves, loosely packed
½ tsp chopped garlic
12 oysters, shucked, liquor reserved
Tabasco to taste
rapeseed oil
150g raw polenta corn meal

Pulse the vegetables, vinegar, olive oil, parsley, garlic and oyster liquor in a food processor. Continue until you have a uniform, but still chunky consistency. Season with salt, pepper and Tabasco and chill thoroughly. For best results prepare the soup the day before.

Dredge the oysters in the polenta. Shake off the excess. Heat enough rapeseed oil in a saucepan to cover the oysters and fry them for about 30-45 seconds. Drain on paper towel and sprinkle with salt. Pour the soup into chilled glasses and garnish with the oysters.



intense rain after everyone had arrived. 'The wind blew over the glasses and some of the guests were hiding behind the bushes. The people who were not weather buffs were alarmed, but it cleared in a few minutes and then a double rainbow appeared.' The transition was so striking, and presumably the relief so great, that some of the guests started singing *Amazing Grace*.

By 4pm, all the guests have arrived. But the chef Jason Weiner, who runs two of the most

popular Hamptons restaurants, Almond and Almoncello, and who is on the verge of opening Almond in New York, is still trying to get one of the primitive gas stoves to light and calling out frantically for more serrated knives.

Quickly frying up the polenta-covered oysters to drop into the ready-made cucumber-based gazpacho shooters, Weiner explains why he loves being a chef in the Hamptons. 'People know the Hamptons as P Diddy and Paris Hilton, but



before that it was about hard-working people raising animals and working the land.' Despite the recent property rush that has stippled the place with weekend homes, he insists there are still many great farms. 'And the fishing is the best. I have guys come to my back door with striped bass and scallops that are so fresh they still have rigor mortis.'

It is Outstanding procedure that before dinner the guests tour the farm. I tag along with Garnham and the apiarist Mary Woltz, whose beehives are located at the heart of EECO. Her raw, unfiltered and unheated Bees' Needs honey is on the menu as part of tonight's dessert. In 15 minutes, I discover I have been living under a stone imagining that honey was one of nature's last remaining uncontaminated, unprocessed products. According to Woltz, commercial bees are treated with the same disdain as feedlot cows, pumped full of antibiotics and fungals and fed monocultures that are neither nutritious nor healthy. 'It's like eating only lettuce or cucumber. It is not a balanced diet,' she says. Worst of all, profit-hungry commercial apiaries remove all the honey from their hives (instead of taking only the surplus) and replace it with high-fructose corn syrup, which infiltrates the next season's honey.

At 6pm, dinner is served family style, with platters for eight dotted along the table. There is momentary panic when it transpires that one guest in each group will have to fillet a fish using a serving spoon. When my dinner companion, Eugenia Bone (a cook and author of *At Mesa's Edge*, a culinary adventure story about going back to nature in Colorado), steps up to the task, there is a cheer from our section of the table.

As dish follows charming dish, it transpires that the real stars of the evening are the people and the setting. Six hours have passed in what seems like a gilded moment. What could be more natural than eating nature's bounty in nature? Then there is the rousing conversation between the super-opinionated New York foodies and the passionate farmers who have contributed to the evening's dinner. Perhaps this is what Alice Waters meant when she said about Outstanding, 'It is the restaurant I always imagined.'

Opposite me are David Falkowski and his wife, Ashley Tomkiel, of Open Minded Organics. Their shiitake mushrooms were part of one of the dishes, but one bite of the mushroom vinaigrette has Falkowski shaking his dreadlocks. 'They used balsamic on the mushrooms. I'd never do that. It overtakes the taste,' Falkowski, like many of tonight's farmers, is evangelical about his produce. 'Never eat portobellos or button mushrooms,' he says. 'They taste like dirt because they are grown on dirt.' He is adamant about the superiority of his chanterelles and shiitakes, which get their complex flavour from being grown on rye, oat, wheat and straw.

By 10.30pm it is almost impossible to see across the table. When the dessert arrives, it is a farmer's idea of indulgence, a simple plate full of fresh peaches, drizzled with honey, yogurt and a handful of almonds. The flavours are so intense, it is instantly my favourite dish.

When I finally track down Denevan, who has not sat down all evening, he tips his hat with relief at another success. 'I thought I would go

Above 150 diners tuck into the local, organically produced food. Guests often travel huge distances to attend an Outstanding in the Field dinner



cross-country for only a couple of years,' he says. 'But now I have been across America five times.' This year alone he organised 37 Outstanding dinners (more than twice the number of the previous year). But Denevan is not hanging up his hat yet; there will always be another must-try location. In 2009 he is dreaming of staging events in England, Spain and Italy and of putting a table on Spiral Jetty, Robert Smithson's 1,500ft-long rock sculpture on Great Salt Lake,

Utah. Denevan is also a successful land artist himself and has been exhibited at MoMA's cutting-edge gallery PS1 in Queens. His giant geometric sand artworks (created with a stick or a rake on California's vast beaches) are like his Outstanding dinners, an exercise in evanescence. They exist for only one brief moment and are all the more intensely felt for that.

For more information on *Outstanding in the Field*, visit outstandinginthefield.com



Peaches with goat's yogurt, honey and almonds serves 6

12 ripe peaches, stoned and sliced into eighths
120ml goat's yogurt
120ml honey
170g toasted slivered almonds
mint sprigs

Arrange the peaches on a platter. Drizzle the honey and yogurt on the peaches. Garnish with the almonds and mint.

Wine choice 2006 Yalumba hand-picked Botrytis Viognier, Wrattenbully, South Australia £11 for a half bottle (australianwinesonline.co.uk). Do not dig out your sweetest bottle for these peaches. A wine with lots of fruit, youth and some sweetness is what you are after. One of Viognier's hallmarks is aromas of peach and apricot, so Yalumba's honeyed version is perfect.