

BLUEPOINT HOSPITALITY

By Land and By Sea

Harley Peet, Executive Chef of Bluepoint Hospitality Group

From the shores of Lake Michigan, to the hills of Hyde Park, to the waterfront of Maryland's Eastern Shore – locale is constant source of inspiration for executive chef Harley Peet of Bluepoint Hospitality Group in Easton, Maryland. An avid sport fisherman, he maintains a charter captain's license with a 100-ton ocean rating. For over fifteen years, he has lived and worked on an organic farm. For Peet, a hyper-awareness of food sourcing goes far beyond a professional interest: it's a way of life.

Peet grew up in Harbor Springs, Michigan, where he developed a profound interest in food – excelling in his Commercial Foods curriculum in high school, and earning top rankings in statewide competitions. For more than a century, his family was an integral part of the Midwestern economy, owning the largest meat packing facility in the region. Long a competitive sailor [his brother races at the America's Cup level,] Peet had one other strong passion: manning the stove. The rigorous days on the water “lost wind” to days at the Culinary Institute of America; there, he found fulfillment in the trade and received numerous awards and accolades, such as being named to the Dean's List.

When time did not allow for weekly sailing events in addition to cooking at a highly demanding level, Peet's choice was clear. “Food is what keeps me up in the middle of the night, when I can't sleep until I've written down new ideas I want to explore,” he reveals. His flights of creativity, as well as his technical brilliance, are driven by his fundamental reverence for top-quality raw materials.

Peet's love of water led him to Maryland's Eastern Shore, racing sailboats, becoming a serious fisherman [just ask him about the 59½-inch rockfish he caught at the mouth of the Chesapeake, out past Tilghman Island...], and rising to the rank of chef de cuisine at the Tilghman Island Inn. Along the way, he spent a lengthy sojourn in Spain, Portugal, and England, indulging his curiosity about international marine sourcing by visiting fisheries and coastal purveyors of mussels, octopus, and squid. He went on to refine his technique and mastery of kitchen management over the course of many years under acclaimed chef Mark Salter at The Inn at Perry Cabin, building lasting relationships with watermen who still provide him with their choicest catch.

Peet has the good fortune to live on a friend's 200-acre waterfront farm, which feeds his desire to utilize exquisitely fresh ingredients. The eggs of about a hundred chickens supply the Bluepoint Hospitality Group restaurants – from the fine-dining establishment, Bas Rouge, to the high-end salad bistro, Sunflowers & Greens – as does a dedicated two-acre garden plot that produces tender lettuces, squash, fiddlehead cabbage, and thirty-five varieties of heirloom tomatoes. In season, Peet might pick fifteen pounds of raspberries every morning.

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The chef prides himself in excellence, which is exemplified in his seafood dishes. He's elated whenever a purveyor, one of his old fishing buddies, rolls in the back door of the kitchen with a cooler of rockfish that he can serve within a few hours of its leaving the water." It happens all the time – they all have my number. Taking something that fresh and letting it sing its own merits on a plate is a real privilege," he notes.

Likewise, he takes an assertive interest in beef, having learned head-to-hoof butchery as a youngster in his family's plant. His ideals were elevated to the highest artisanal standard when he was introduced to Jack Hulseman's Otwell Farm, about ten miles down the road in Oxford, Maryland. It's not uncommon to find Peet there, keeping a close eye on each animal he and his staff select for their kitchen. He appreciates the fine organic Lim-Flex breed, a cross between Angus and Limousin that the fastidious cattleman finishes with organic hay, corn, and barley, as well as molasses. Naturally, Peet is also on close terms with the butcher in Mount Airy, Maryland, where the meat is cut to his exact specifications, with particular dishes in mind. "For example," explains the chef, "a true Austrian Goulash is made with 'chicken steaks,' which is an uncommon cut. The whole animal is purchased, so we can dictate all the details."

Whether he's growing his ingredients or sourcing them, developing dishes or executing them, Peet is an avowed purist. "I've been cooking for Mr. Prager for ten years, now," he says, explaining that the proprietor of the Bluepoint Hospitality Group first took notice of his work at The Inn at Perry Cabin, early on. His own "extreme perfectionism" is a direct reflection of his patron's exceedingly high standards.

Though perfection can be its own reward, Peet regards the tradition of a January 'sabbatical' as an especially valuable retreat for Bluepoint Hospitality Group's culinary team. In recent years, the staff has been treated to intensive tutorials with esteemed chefs brought in from New York or Europe. "The experience will vary from year to year, but one thing's for certain," explains Peet, "Mr. Prager arranges these opportunities, these professional adventures, to benefit our careers and culinary understanding, but also for our personal enrichment."

Peet reflects that, on so many levels, his job is otherwise non-existent in his industry. "Within the bounds of excellence, the extended freedom, and the support of a dedicated team, I'm so grateful."

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