

GETTING SALTY

# Tom Fosnot of Lincoln's new Real gets real

He's worked at some of the city's top kitchens; now he's at home in the country.

By [Kara Baskin](#) Globe Correspondent, Updated December 31, 2019, 12:01 p.m.



Tom Fosnot has worked in some of the city's top kitchens. RICHARD MANDELKORN

Tom Fosnot, 46, has held some of the most prestigious culinary positions in the city: He began his career at Clio, then became executive sous chef at Cambridge's much-missed Rialto and executive chef at the South End's beloved Rocca, also long gone. Later, his

career took him on an agrarian path: For many years, he was executive chef at the Gibbet Hill Grill, cooking steaks and chops overlooking Groton's rolling hills and roaming cows. In May, he opened Real in Lincoln with wife Ruth-Anne Adams, also a chef, whom he met while working at Rialto. (For many years, she was the chef at Harvard Square's Casablanca, another gem lost to time and changing neighborhoods.)

Their Scandinavian-influenced restaurant serves dishes perhaps hitherto unseen in quiet Lincoln: Nordic seafood charcuterie boards with salmon aquavit and smoked fish; open-faced Danish sandwiches; and roast chicken with root vegetables from nearby Drumlin Farm.

### **What's the first restaurant that you ever visited in Boston?**

I moved to Boston in 1998. I grew up outside of New York. Ruth hired me while she was the executive sous chef at Rialto. And then we started dating, but we never actually worked together. She took me to lunch at Radius. I still remember: I had black trumpet mushrooms, with I think it was Smithfield ham. My entree was pork with a pea puree and a Muenster sauce, and I thought it was really good. But mostly the service was just incredible, too. It was my first. I'd worked at Clio but never went out to eat. So it was my first time going to a really nice restaurant.

### **What's one thing you'd like to fix about the restaurant industry here?**

I was an environmental studies major in college, and having spent a lot of time working in restaurants, the dirty secret is how much waste that restaurants produce. Plastic wrap, deli containers, so much stuff. It gets delivered in cardboard. The glove situations get out of hand. I really try to emphasize using tongs. Ruth and I really wanted to open something smaller and something that was a reflection of the Nordic ethos of trying to produce less waste. ... We're not perfect; it's hard. I just wish that the restaurant business could be less wasteful.

### **What other restaurants do you visit?**

We have three kids, and we really like to go to places where we either know the people or somewhere we can support. We'll go to places in Sudbury just to support the local community. But [for] places in Boston, we usually go to Myers + Chang because we've known Joanne [Chang] for a long time. She used to work at Rialto. Or to Pammy's, because I used to work with Chris Willis at Rialto. The other place that we used to go to all the time, then it closed, is Kirkland Tap & Trotter. That was so sad to me, because they had the best fried chicken. I used to work with Tony [Maws] at Clio, and it was great for the kids.

### **What's your earliest food memory that made you think: I want to work in restaurants?**

My first restaurant job working in a kitchen was on Nantucket, when I was in college. I lived in a house with eight other people, and they told me that being a dishwasher was the best job imaginable.

So I got a job as a dishwasher at Easy Street lobster house. I was working the lunch shift, and it was a rainy day. It must have been during the middle of the week, so it was really slow. I was so bored that I started scrubbing underneath the dishwasher because it was so disgusting. And the owner came up to me, I'll never forget it, and he said, 'Wow, you're really impressive. I don't think I've had an employee like you before. I'm going to give you a 75-cent raise.' And I thought, 'Wow, just by the littlest amount possible, you can really succeed.' One of my first memories of working in restaurants is thinking that doing some extra cleaning was a good way to get ahead!

### **What's the worst restaurant experience you've ever had?**

Ruth and I were at a brunch place. I think it's still in business, so if you don't mind, I'm not going to say names. But we were sitting there, and the guest next to us dropped their coffee mug. It was a cheap mug, and it broke. The owner came out and just started yelling at the guest that they were going to have to pay. It got really uncomfortable, and I

don't think we ever went back. I just was like, 'Is this really happening?' And then, of course, we both agreed that this is why we don't go out to eat anymore.

### **How has the restaurant scene changed since you first arrived in Boston?**

Ruth and I really wanted to have a smaller, community-based restaurant. It felt like, for a long time, [there was] a long stable of people: Gordon Hamersley had been there for forever. East Coast Grill had been there forever with Chris Schlesinger. Jody Adams had been around for a long time. There still are a lot of great people who've been doing this for a long time, but it feels like less and less.

I think for us that's the thing that's changed the most, and that's why we really wanted to open a place like Real, which was a little bit smaller and a little bit more middle-of-the-road. We used to love going to places like Chez Henri. We lived in North Cambridge, but we would go there all the time because it was really interesting food. I just think there's aren't as many places like that, I guess.

### **Name three adjectives for Boston diners.**

Inquisitive, in a good way. People ask where things are from, and I think it's great that people have started to learn. If you're serving asparagus in January, they may ask where it's from. I think that they're also really smart. I think people make a mistake when they don't expect that their guests are smart enough to know what they're trying to accomplish. And then, finally, people are super-appreciative of your being in the community. There's no other restaurant in Lincoln. You know, there were a couple of spaces that had been here before, and the community really wanted a restaurant that they could all come to.

### **What's the most overdone food trend right now?**

The plant-based meat trend. I eat meat, but I'm supportive of people eating vegetarian or vegan. Environmentally, it's much lower impact, but I'm not sure that plant-based meat

is really in keeping with that spirit. I just wonder about the infrastructure that goes into producing it.

### **What type of restaurant is Boston missing right now?**

That's a tough question. You know, like I said, there aren't as many places that are focused much on the community. I think that it needs more food that's accessible, more neighborhood places that aren't a chain, that aren't part of a larger restaurant empire. Ruth and I go to Brooklyn a lot, and we're always amazed at the large number of independent restaurants, and I wish that Boston had a little bit more of that.

### **What are you reading?**

My mom was a librarian, so I always have a ton of books. I go to the public library, and I just check out tons of them, all the time. I own "The Nordic Cookbook" by Magnus Nilsson, and I'm plowing through that, which is a great cookbook. I've never been to Denmark or Sweden, but I've learned a lot reading it, and it's an amazing book. I'm [also] reading "Burn the Ice" by Kevin Alexander. It's about the American food revolution from 2008 to now, how food has changed.

### **How's your commute?**

My commute is great, because we live 20 minutes [away].

### **What's the one food you never want to eat again?**

I had a cook when I was working at Gibbet Hill who went to Iceland. He snuck back preserved shark. ... I was afraid to even eat it, but we all tried it, and I didn't think it was very good. It was like eating three-day-old scone, because of the ammonia in it. I appreciate the history behind it, but I would not eat it again.

### **What Boston restaurant do you miss the most?**

Chez Henri. I think that's a great place. And Ruth and I also really miss Rialto. We both worked there for a long time, and it really [holds] a special place for us, and they really cared about the community. They really did. We were always doing benefits, and they were so ecstatic about giving back. ... Rialto was a great place to work, and they really contributed to Cambridge and the Greater Boston community.

### **Who was your most memorable customer?**

Ruth and I both agreed even without talking to each other that it was Kristen Palma and [former Suffolk prosecutor] Paul Poth. When Ruth was a chef de cuisine at Red Clay, which used to be the Atrium Mall, they came in [for a cooking class], and they had so much fun. And then they started coming to Rialto, and then when Ruth and I started dating, I met them.

They came to Rocca when both Ruth and I opened it. They came all the way out to Gibbet Hill when I was working out there. Paul passed away about five years ago, but Kristen, we're still great friends. That's one of the great things about restaurants. You know, one thing that attracted me was the people ... not just the people you work with, but the people who come in to eat and whom you meet. You can meet people who come into your restaurant, and then they can be your friends for life. It's one of the great things about the business, for sure.

### **If you had to eat your last meal in Boston, what would it be?**

It would have to be somewhere I could take all of our kids! Maybe Blue Ribbon BBQ, which isn't technically in Boston. Ruth might say Hi-Rise [Bread Company]'s avocado and turkey sandwich; that's still one of my favorite things out of Boston.

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