



Nudel Around

BJORN SOMLO'S CULINARY RIFF ON THE SEASONS // BY AMY COTLER

» CHEF-OWNER Bjorn Somlo's 27-seat Lenox restaurant, Nudel, leaps from an M.E.K. Fisher tale. It's one of those intimate, small-town haunts where you can taste the chef's presence in each bite, where the watercress on your plate was just cut from a clear stream.

Spring comes slowly to the Berkshires, and Somlo waits for the harvest in the form of a phone call or farmer's knock on the door. His commitment to "ethical, fun, über-local" ingredients combined with his creative, sometimes quirky use of those ingredients sets the culinary tone at Nudel.

Somlo says the distinctive character of Nudel has

been shaped by its intimate size and its clientele, who transformed it from a simple pasta joint by asking for more. "Typically, restaurant food has to look a certain way," says Somlo, "and you can play with the protein, starch, and vegetable, like Mr. Potato Head, mixing and matching it." Instead, his clients want food "sourced well and prepared honestly but not in totally traditional manner, which has given me enormous freedom."

As a result, Somlo has taken the lead, showing customers how to look at the food on their plates differently. They enjoy how his fresh ingredients play with each

other, sometimes unexpectedly, as in his asparagus and popcorn soup. Die-hard foodies and farm-to-table freaks are impressed with Somlo's flavor combos and his walk-the-talk commitment to quality ingredients.

The seasonally inspired menu is ingredients-based, each dish riffing on what's best, often using one or more components sourced locally from neighboring farms, mostly Overmeade in Lenox, Woven Roots in Lee, and the Berry Patch over the border in Stephentown, New York. When the food is not local, the menu is refreshingly honest, funny really, hawking "not-so-local pineapple" and

"peas from our freezer" during the dormant season.

Somlo grew up in the area. Like many chefs, he fell in love with food early, working in regional restaurants from the age of 16. Soon he took his culinary walk-about, traveling, tasting, and learning about food in Europe, New Orleans, and New York City before returning home to open Nudel.

Since then, Nudel has become a destination for food lovers. While modern, international influences are obvious from his menu, the primary inspiration is drawn from whatever is seasonal. The commitment to using what's on hand often breeds

creativity. These days that may mean local asparagus in numerous guises, including two kinds of soup—one served with ramps and kale croutons, another Mexicali style with black beans, crushed tortillas, pumpkin seeds, and Manchego cheese. Later, when local turnips are in, they may be served raw, deep-fried like an egg-roll, or even with local Swiss chard and that not-so-local pineapple.

The menu is an entertaining study, a view to Somlo's creative process when he's presented with top-notch ingredients. If you're not a serious menu reader, don't think too much and simply order what appeals. Then pull up a chair to the counter fronting the open kitchen and watch Somlo, in his signature whites and cap, at work and play. Chat if it's not too busy, or just savor your meal, ordering small plates, a full dinner, or both.

Watch the flow of the seasons through his menus. In the spring, think pea shoots, young salad greens, ramps, radishes, and asparagus. Come summer, roasted diver scallops may be served with cauliflower, Israeli couscous, and oven-dried cherry tomatoes. When the weather gets chillier, those scallops are accompanied with heartier pork belly and white beans. And of course, true to the restaurant's name, "nudels," mostly pasta, are always included, sometimes along with gnocchi or spaetzle, again, changing with each season.

In a city-centric award system, it's impressive that Somlo has received accolades galore, including multiple nominations from *Food & Wine* and the James Beard Foundation. Word spread almost as soon as Nudel opened in 2009. No reservations are taken, so come at off-times or expect a wait, especially on busy nights, weekends, summer, or peak dinner hours.

"Look out your door," says Somlo, "You can eat food less interesting, but that's a less interesting life."