



# OUR MAN IN HUDSON

*Zak Pelaccio shows what work in progress looks like*

WRITTEN AND PHOTOGRAPHED BY PETER BARRETT

**Z**ak Pelaccio looks like someone you might see at a Phish concert: stocky, convivial, with a scruffy red beard and unruly curls spilling out from under a multicolored knit beanie. His appearance belies extraordinary creative talent and passion, however; when he talks, he speaks unguardedly and thoughtfully in long, eloquent sentences. And he knows whereof he speaks. Pelaccio has a 10-year history of being well ahead of the culinary curve; he was cooking farm-to-table food before that now-tired phrase entered the lexicon, doing pan-Asian mash-ups with pork belly before David Chang of Momofuku popularized it, and going deep with the complex, soulful funk of fermentation before any of those flavors became familiar outside of ethnic neighborhoods.

Pelaccio, 39, gained real renown when he opened Fatty Crab in New York City back in 2005; his unpretentious and heavily Malaysian-influenced food was an instant hit. Not long after, he

opened Fatty 'Cue in Brooklyn, and more iterations have followed in various cities around the world: an empire in the making. A few years ago, however, Pelaccio, after recognizing he required a greater level of independence, left all things Fatty behind. "There wasn't enough of me in there, ultimately," he says, noting that it took some soul-searching to resist the allure of becoming a celebrity chef. "Now I'm just another investor, with no role in running the thing." At the end of 2011, Pelaccio and his partner of seven years, Jori Jayne Emde, moved upstate to their new home, a post-and-beam barn they renovated on property in Chatham that his parents bought in 2005. The move engendered the new restaurant venture, **Fish & Game**, which is set to open this spring in Hudson.

"We both wanted to do something representative of how we've been cooking and eating and living [since moving upstate]. We're retraining ourselves to do very simple and exclusively product-driven,

nose-to-tail food and create a regional cuisine.” A laminated map of the region, about five feet square, will be hung on a wall outside the kitchen. A star in the middle marks Hudson, and there’s a circle drawn around it: the 40-mile radius from within which almost all the food will be sourced. “We’re still going to buy citrus, and other things, but whatever we can get from this area we’re going to use,” explains Pelaccio, eagerly poring over it. “Without being preachy or full of ourselves about how it should be done, we’re just doing it.”

#### Off the Menu

The past decade of working with farmers all over the region means Pelaccio already possesses extensive knowledge of the quality products available, and the team is lining up agreements with growers and producers throughout the Hudson Valley. “We’re going to be making very good home cooking,” Pelaccio says, and these weeks leading up to the opening are focused on developing methods and techniques for all the ingredients they’ll be using. Once they have the basics down, the real fun will be in maintaining consistency with the ever-changing supply. “It’s a kind of improvising, free-associating based on the available ingredients and our experiences. Every day, new things will be coming in, so we’ll incorporate them and adapt.”

There will be no printed menu and it remains to be seen what form, whether spoken or casually communicated, the menu will ultimately take. That said, diners will have the choice of a short menu or a long one. Some of the dishes served will be large enough to share, and others will be the size of little treats; each pig has only one heart, after all, so only a few tables a week might see strips of such a delicacy, quickly grilled, and served with a sweet and sour sauce reminiscent of a

dish that Pelaccio remembers fondly from Bangkok. People at different tables will likely get different cuts of the same animal: “Anybody who says they’re cooking this way but they’re doing 150 covers and everyone gets [pork] belly, they’re full of shit. It cannot happen. You might get some neck, and the next table might get shoulder. They may be prepared similarly, with the same accoutrements, or sauce, but the cut will be different.” To diners who only like lamb rack or center-cut salmon fillet, he suggests, “Get over it.”

Working in their respective homes until the restaurant kitchen is ready for them, the crew breaks down a lamb from Wil-Hi Farms in Tivoli, treating each piece differently to see which preparations stand out. Each cut or piece thereof gets a distinct seasoning and then is vacuum-bagged and cooked sous-vide in chef de cuisine Kevin Pomplun’s Hudson apartment a few short blocks from the restaurant to be. Bags of octopus cook in a humming immersion circulator set up on the counter; a rack of lamb ribs gets slathered in cooked rice spiked with coriander and chili and then is left to sit out at room temperature for a week to ferment before its final preparation.

Emde, 33, is slim, blonde and energetic, with a quick and contagious smile. “We met at Five Ninth,” Emde remembers, referring to the Meatpacking District restaurant that preceded Fatty Crab, where Pelaccio was the chef. “He hit on me,” she laughs. “It was awful.” That loving mockery is a prominent component of their long-standing relationship, and it extends to the whole group; these are people who clearly enjoy working together, and spirits remain high despite the continued delays. The seamless integration of jocular familiarity and serious collaboration makes for an enviable work environment. ►

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Jori Jayne Emde  
and Zak Pelaccio  
consider the carcass.



Ragging on Emde for using pricey Gegenbauer tomato vinegar to make a *gastrique*, a sweet and sour vinegar-based sauce, the day before, Pelaccio snarks, “If you hadn’t used it all, it would be really nice on the lamb.” “There’s a little bit left,” Emde, who functions as the “co-executive chef” but doesn’t pay much mind to the title, playfully retorts. “You’re an asshole. It made the best gastrique.” “A \$60 gastrique,” puts in Pomplun. “The gastrique would be great with lamb shoulder,” Pelaccio concludes. All nod in agreement, and this segues into a discussion of the best way to pickle lamb shanks.

While the cooking is clearly enjoyable, Emde acknowledges the tedious nature of much that needs doing. “The reality shows don’t give any idea. We spend so much time on the computer, on the phone.” Indeed, general manager Scott Brenner and bar director Kat Dunn did not move from in front of their laptops all day until it was time for Dunn to work on a cocktail recipe. The drink, as yet unnamed, is based on blood-orange infused tequila, with Chartreuse, orange bitters, honey and pink peppercorn salt around half the rim. The first stab at a garnish, a slice of charred lemon hanging limply off the edge of the glass like soggy calamari, is not well received.

A long discussion ensues about how best to capture the flavor of burnt citrus, and the tradeoff between aesthetics and flavor. Pelaccio is insistent about the order of steps: “Char the zest, then steep the juice in it. If not for this, then for something else. We need to try everything, to establish a vocabulary.” Dunn says that, like the food, all of the cocktails are rigorously analyzed so the technique is flawless and consistently repeatable. “We ended up macerating the tequila

sous-vide with suprêmes (cut and segmented citrus) and zest for 90 minutes at 160 degrees, which gave the best flavor. With every step, they ask ‘How did you do it? Is there any other way to get a better result?’ We tried each one six different ways, to see.” She made another, and Pelaccio says, “This one doesn’t pop like the first one. Learning why is the most important thing.”

### Laying the Foundation

While Fish & Game is still a construction site, the following week finds the kitchen staff occupying their new space, finished first so that the team can get to work in the actual quarters as quickly as possible. The kitchen is separated from the rest of the restaurant by zippered walls of construction plastic that shield the dust (but not the cacophony of the construction, which fights with the music and the constant roar of the vent hood over the grill). The owners originally planned for a 2012 fall opening, but construction delays pushed it into spring 2013; the kitchen has been built where there was once a driveway, behind the building, and excavation revealed the need for a foundation and steel supports that were not planned for. Pelaccio and Emde are taking the delays in stride; happy as they are to be in the kitchen, payroll still has to be met. “We’re anxious, but it’s nice to be in here finally,” Emde says, patting the counter. A week later, they have to move out again; workers are spraying foam insulation, and the team has to decamp back to their home kitchens for a few days.

Running down the middle of the kitchen is a 16-foot-long island topped with a three-inch-thick rock maple butcher block. While the



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cabinets under the island are stainless steel, those facing the dining room have been coated matte black so they don't throw off any glare. Over the island, mid-century light fixtures made of perforated yellow-painted metal bought at a vintage store in Philadelphia shine down on the work surface. One corner is occupied by a large wood-fired oven built of recycled brick and an adjustable grill grate that raises and lowers with a big steel wheel on the side. There's also a combi oven, a CVAP, and a gas stove for sautéing, sauces and pasta. Both oven and grill are lit all day, and they see constant use; while the combi oven is usually set between 160 and 180 degrees for slow cooking proteins, the oven is around 700 degrees and allows for charring and quickly finishing both precooked and uncooked foods of all kinds. Besides the different meat cuts, the team did extensive sous-vide time and temperature tests for all sorts of vegetables so they can cook them ahead of time and then finish them in the oven for service, yielding a perfect balance between fire-roasted and al dente.

One of the first things they did upon arriving in the space was to unpack the rotary evaporator; a vacuum still that allows for creating intensely concentrated essences out of almost anything. In a vacuum, liquids boil well below normal temperatures (even well below 200 degrees, depending on the pressure), so flavors can be released by gentle heating. Both the distilled extracts and the remaining reductions can be used, depending on the original product. Early trials at the Fish & Game test kitchen included some of Emde's hard cider and ginger wine, and Old Overholt, a venerable American rye whiskey. The rye reduction is for marinating livers for pâté: “You can get the flavor without the alcohol, which cooks it,” Pelaccio explains. And while

the cider did not excite, the ginger reduction made Emde shout in delight. The alcohol, boiled off and condensed in another vessel, was less interesting, but seemed well suited to becoming vinegar. Next up for extraction were borage and geranium leaves, grown by Old Field Farm in Greene County, one of several farms currently growing greens and other crops in hothouses for the restaurant.

The day before, the group took apart a pig from Pigasso Farm in Copake, and they're treating each primal cut differently, exploring possibilities as they did with the lamb. One leg is cured for prosciutto: packed into salt in a plastic tub for refrigeration. The belly is cured for bacon, some ribs get rubbed and scored and put on the grill, low at first, fat down, then higher up, fat facing up so they baste slowly in the drippings. They stay on there all day. A small chop is quickly cooked in some rendered fat in the wood oven, and the result is as eloquent an argument for pastured meat as anyone could wish for. The nose-to-tail ethos is visible all over the kitchen: pots of pork fat rendering, the pig skin simmering in water before being dehydrated and then deep fried. Bones, raw or roasted, make stock.

### Finishing Touches

Pelaccio's relationship to food is instinctive and sensual. His book, published last year, is titled *Eat With Your Hands* (Ecco), and with good reason. Besides eating with them, he uses them constantly to cook: pushing lamb into a pan to brown the surface, turning ribs on the grill, snatching morsels from the pot of beans and ribs. He also hands food to people regularly to taste, always with a warm generous smile. The clearest illustration of his inimitable touch came with a



lamb shoulder. Rubbed lightly with salt and pepper, he browned it well in a large iron Staub Dutch oven, poured off the fat and threw in an onion, unpeeled and halved, a bisected head of garlic, carrot, celery and a few whole red chilies. Lidded, this went in the oven for hours—"at least four," he offers—and sat for a while next to the stove while various processes were discussed, decided and implemented. At one point he reached over and lowered the heat and afterward remarked, "That's the sort of thing you can't teach. I don't know why I did it just then, but I knew it needed it." Meltingly tender, deeply flavored and ostensibly easy, it was the center of the "family meal," a.k.a. dinner for his staff, that evening.

The following week, a different shoulder treatment—cooked sous vide and then finished in the wood oven, slick and tender and intensely fragrant with herbs—gets dunked in a fondue that chef Pomplun whipped up: heavy cream, grated sheep cheese and a glug of sherry. The rich, tangy sauce doubled down on the comfort food texture while offering a sharp, nutty counterpoint that amplified the meat flavors to extraordinary effect. The fermented lamb ribs, now a week old, come out of the combi oven, where they have steamed for hours, and get finished on the grill. A few go in the oven to see if it makes a difference. They're seriously funky, almost cheesy, but not quite complete.

Pelaccio whisks a bit of lemon juice and oil into the steaming juices, dunks in a rib, and the meat is suddenly in sharp, delectable focus: finished.

"I would probably just serve a few of these on a plate with the vinaigrette and some herbs." A deceptively simple dish, since by the time the ribs reach the diner they will have undergone fermentation and two or three cooking methods. The plates for Fish & Game, which have not arrived yet, are being thrown by a friend in Amagansett, in food-flattering white and off-white. "They have energy to them; they're very cool," says Pelaccio, and he expects that the plating will tend toward simplicity. The flatware also hasn't been delivered yet, so everyone eats with their hands.

The dynamic here seems jovial and mirthful, more like a band rehearsing for a gig than anything else; Pelaccio is the clear leader, but everyone's input is expected, even encouraged.

"In the past, I would collaborate, but mostly I had ideas and people executed them. Now I sort of hang back; I want them to stretch their legs and find their own voices. Jori and I have been cooking together for years, and a lot of what I was doing came from her." Emde is a prodigious preserver; jars of vivid vegetable pickles line shelves over the counter, vinegar ferments in carboys on the floor, and homemade Cynar ages in oak barrels under a table. The couple tends a large garden in Chatham where they grow food for themselves and the restaurant, and they plan to expand it. Fermentation in all its forms will be an ongoing process, and the various preserved foods will find their way into many dishes.

Reflecting on their decision to try a new, highly personal approach to cooking, a hybrid of high-end refinement and down-home accessibility, Pelaccio returns to the reason he opted out of the franchise model. "Good cooking takes time, it takes love and attention. A lot of the restaurant business is not like that. But you are in a service industry, and your job is to make people happy."

Emde comes over; she wants to make a vitello tonnato-type thing but with lamb belly and anchovy, using her homemade Worcestershire sauce. Everyone weighs in with possible permutations, ideas fly. Pelaccio pauses. "Fuck it—let's just cook Asian food." Emde responds: "You'd make everybody happy." Pelaccio smiles. "Yeah, except the people in this room." ❧

#### FISH & GAME

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Opens in April

Jori Jayne Emde gingerly pouring stock

