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The Purple House is tiny, its owner talented and tireless, and its reputation huge

By **Alexandra Hall** Globe Correspondent, Updated October 15, 2019, 12:55 p.m.



Roman style pizza at The Purple House

NORTH YARMOUTH, Maine — The road to The Purple House is an eclectic and curious one. After driving past the town’s gold- and green-flecked cow pastures, a retired train car selling handmade ice cream, a gigantic Trump lawn sign, a road called Fairy Tale Lane, and an elite equestrian school, you finally spot a cabin the color of

raspberry sherbet so small, it looks like a Hobbit might live in it. Pull into its dirt driveway and, if the place is open, you notice the cars — lots of them — bearing license plates from all over the country. Or, if you happen to roll up in the early fall when the restaurant hasn't opened yet for the fall season, odds are good you'll run into Krista Kern Desjarlais, the Jacques Torres- and Guy Savoy-trained chef-owner. She's usually there by herself in the weeks before reopening, pulling up weeds in the garden, and otherwise getting the place ready.

“This is a transition time I've gotten used to every year,” says Desjarlais, who estimates she spends about 80 hours each week at the restaurant in-season. “Closing down Bresca and the Honeybee [her summertime-only, locavore snack shop in New Gloucester] and reopening The Purple House every fall — it means before I even get to cooking, I'm painting, plumbing, landscaping, pruning, doing repairs, and doing a big clean on the oven.”





Krista Kern Desjarlais ALEXANDRA HALL

That wood-fired oven is at the heart of Desjarlais’s multifarious approach to food — an intermingling of meticulous French pastry, rustic Maine farm cooking, and gutsy ingredients that to date has made her a James Beard Award semifinalist six times and a finalist once. But it’s also at the heart of another sort of transition she currently finds herself in. “Without getting too academic about what I’ve been thinking all this past summer, I’m really at a crossroads,” she says, leaning forward at the lone table in The Purple House and pushing back a blonde curl. “I’ve always cooked the things I love, but I’m rethinking the way to be in touch globally and also reflect right where you are. We here in the Great North know how much French-Canadian cuisine is a big part of

Maine, whether it's green herb sauces, sausage creton [a rustic Quebecois pork meatloaf], or pâtés and terrines. And how do I fit all of that into my background in French and Italian cooking, as both a cook and a baker?"



Bagels at the Purple House /COURTESY PHOTO

Some might argue she's already pulled off a good amount of that. After almost three collective decades of work on the line at spots like Le Cirque in New York City and Guy Savoy in Las Vegas and Paris, the Toronto native opened her own place in Portland — the much-lauded Italian bistro, Bresca. Then three years ago she shuttered the latter to open The Purple House. And in that 544-square-foot space (a former video rental shop that she converted almost entirely by herself) with only one farmhouse table seating eight, she and her staff churned out exquisite wood-fired pastries and Roman-style pizzas, a daily roast at lunchtime, artisanal ice cream, and Montreal-style bagels. Bagels that everyone from The Food Network to Bon Appetit Magazine raved about, and a steady stream of foodies followed in their wake.

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“The thing is, it was never supposed to be only about the bagels,” says Desjarlais with a chuckle. “Food writers focused on that, and then everyone else did, too. So suddenly I

got to be known more as a chef who makes bagels, and every day we've sold out by 8:30 a.m., and people freak out when they're gone."

It's a little tough to blame them. In the early mornings when the wood-fired oven's at its hottest, the staff bakes off specimens in flavors that range from chocolate chip-olive oil to rosemary sea salt, that are crispy in parts, chewy in others; with toppings like house-cured gravlax, and bialys — including one cuddled around smoked mozzarella and pork cheeks, spicy squash, and crowned with a roasted-to-perfection quail egg.





The Purple House gardens ALEXANDRA HALL (CUSTOM CREDIT)

But then, when the oven cools down every day by midmorning, they bake chocolate-hazelnut financiers and brioches with almond cream. And the fires get stoked again afterward for the lunchtime pizzas (think lamb with red onion and feta) and a daily roast, with rotating salads that are meals unto themselves. Last year, once a month, Desjarlais held one meticulously made, coursed dinner served at the restaurant's small communal table. It invariably sold out months ahead of time.

With this fall's reopening, a lot of that will change. "The bagels will still be there, but less of the main show," she says. The focus will be ambitious savory pastries that weave together her formal European patisserie mastery with Canadian traditions that she calls "grandmere-style" cooking — the likes of escargot clafoutis with espelette butter and parsley salad; Maine mussels on savory danishes with apple and garlic custard; and rabbit pie with potato and smoked shallots. "We'll do more sandwiches," she says, "and do things like stretch a longer beautiful bialy out and top it with our 'orange flannel' combo [smoked ham, smoked cheddar, hot sauce, pickled Fresno, and

maple egg].” She’ll expand her pizza repertoire, as well, and then during the first week of November, she’ll begin offering “fancy lunches.” The reservation-only, multicourse events will replace the monthly dinners of the past, and will include satellite dishes within those courses, and wine if guests like. “The idea is they’ll hearken back to what I came up in,” she says. “This is where I’ll get to once again focus on the individual, composed plate, whereas the baker in me has to focus on the whole production going on. It’s a different way to use your mind. And a way to revisit a little bit of my fine dining days.”



Seasonal fruits tarts

The process of inventing and reinventing her own kind of cooking is clearly as vital to Desjarlais as the cooking itself. “I’m in the process of a self-exploration and practice to find out what I love most about cuisine here in the Great North,” she says. “How do we explore our own culture in Maine without it being only a whoopee pie and a lobster

roll? How do you incorporate our steadfastness in our long winters, but also provide a world experience? And where does my cooking and baking fit into that?”

She pauses to pull out a light linen chef’s jacket — something she hasn’t worn in years, but plans to don this fall in a nod to the new sense of occasion she’ll bring to her kitchen. “There really is no formula,” she shrugs. “Every fall I come back to The Purple House and say, Who am I now as a cook? And right now this is what I really want to explore. It’s very personal, and it’s definitely a journey.”

The Purple House reopens Oct. 17. For the dates of her luncheons as they are announced, follow @brescahoneybee on Instagram.

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