

# Fresh picked

If you're in the mood to travel, a unique culinary event offers dining down on the farm... literally. **By Stephanie Citron**

TACKED TO A TREE ALONG A DIRT ROAD IN Lobachsville, Pa., 35 miles or so north of Lancaster, was a cardboard sign with the words "Farm Dinner" scrawled on to it. A few bumps and twists later, I spotted a long, white, linen-clad table standing at the center of a cleared, grassy walkway.

This was Eckerton Hill Farm, where in just a few hours I and 130 fellow food lovers would dine smack dab in the middle of fields of heirloom tomatoes and peppers, corn and herbs. All the ingredients would be local and organic, cooked just a few feet away at a makeshift outdoor kitchen by David Pasternack, the highly acclaimed chef of the New York City restaurant, Esca.

This was one of the 58 dinners offered each year by Outstanding in the Field, a roving culinary adventure that travels throughout North America during harvest season, offering people the chance to wine and dine in close proximity both to the origins of their food and the farmers and food artisans who cultivate it. A celebrated chef cooks the bounty, making it worthy of a five-star event (and a \$200 fee per person).

A few minutes later, I was sipping local Pinnacle Ridge sparkling chardonnay and nibbling a fresh pepper stuffed with goat feta and trout when Outstanding in the Field's founder, Jim Denevan, offered a welcome to the crowd. A towering fellow in jeans, muddy flip-flops and a tattered straw hat, Denevan is a one-time chef, and among the early evangelists of the farm-to-table movement in California in the early 1990s. "This is about honoring the farmer," Denevan told us. "To know about the ingredients and their history is the most exciting thing to me as a chef."

After that, farmer Tim Stark led us into the fields, explaining that he'd begun growing heirloom tomatoes on his roof garden in Brooklyn and selling at the farmers market in Union Square. When demand in-

creased and space didn't, he returned to his native Pennsylvania and reclaimed his family's farm. He met Denevan at an Outstanding in the Field dinner and offered to host an event. Stark was able to lure Chef Pasternack to the boondocks since he supplies Esca and more than a dozen other top-rated New York City restaurants with produce.

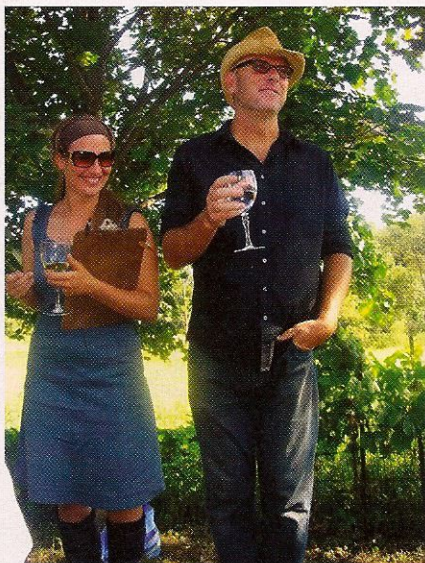
Just before dusk, I took a seat at the candlelit table between Stark's wife, Jill, and Carl Nygard of nearby Briarwood Croft Farm. The Nygards' sheep and goat farm provided our main dish of grilled lamb with goat's milk yogurt and feta. Over platters of multi-colored tomatoes, capers and minced anchovies, Nygard's wife, Dorian, revealed the secret to their farm's flavorful, healthful lamb: alfalfa hay feed. A little later, a full moon rose on the horizon as we began dessert: polenta pound cake topped with fresh peaches, blackberries and black grapes.

Before I left, I asked Denevan what he thought people take away from an evening at Outstanding in the Field. He said such experiences were helping to change Americans' negative perceptions of farmers as downtrodden, back-woods boors.

"In the early '90s, if a forager came into the restaurant hawking his wares during dinner service, chefs would throw them out, thinking customers didn't want to see the produce with the dirt on it," he said. "Now people understand the value of being served food fresh from the source."

I drove off under a crystal clear, nighttime sky, convinced Denevan had it right. Through just one dinner, people can get a taste of how a community can unify and sustain itself beautifully, deliciously and unforgettably. □

*Outstanding in the Field comes to the mid-Atlantic region each September. Make reservations online. Organizers suggest joining the mailing list, as events often sell out months in advance. [outstandinginthefield.com](http://outstandinginthefield.com)*



**Above, Outstanding in the Field founder Jim Denevan raises a glass alongside Katy Oursler, special events director. Right, dinner is set for 130 at a table in the fields of Eckerton Hill Farm.**

