



Jim Denevan:
Feasting
in the Fields

NOMADIC CHEF AND ACCLAIMED SAND ARTIST JIM DENEVAN TURNS THE FARM INTO A CULINARY COMMUNITY CANVAS WITH HIS ROVING EPHEMERAL RESTAURANT, OUTSTANDING IN THE FIELD.

JIM DENEVAN WITH HIS SPIRAL SAND ART
© AARON FEE



ONE OF JIM DENEVAN'S VAST WORKS OF ART
© JIM DENEVAN

In the 1960s, land artists began dialoging with nature in lieu of the blank walls of the gallery. Digging up issues of propriety, the ephemeral and the fragility of expression, they caused a quake within the art market: How could you gauge the value of a canvas that could wash away as quickly as it was created? Irrevocably linked to the land, creative expression, for as long as it lasted, was at one with its source of inspiration.

It's no surprise then that some forty years later a cook-cum-land artist would shake up the foundations of the kitchen by liberating it amongst the fields that feed it. Since 1999, Jim Denevan, a self-taught chef, sand artist and founder of the roving culinary event Outstanding in the Field, has been taking his kitchen on the road. With an 80ft table and ship-tight crew packed into his 1953 tour bus, Denevan travels coast to coast across North America for several months a year, setting up ephemeral meals for paying guests in some of the most sensational natural settings imaginable.

As impassioned about gorgeous geography as he is about organic, sustainable, locally-sourced food, he serves ample portions of the two at every one of his events, where local farmers, chefs and winemakers collaborate to build the dinner of their dreams, using ingredients indigenous to the region. Each experience is unique, from the casts of characters that animate the table and the food that's served, to the way in which light, conversation, and community merge together at that particular place and moment in time. In many ways, it's land art with an appetite—an ephemeral epicurean festivity that leaves memories in the place of marks, and curiosity in the place of conventions.



THE TEAM OF OUTSTANDING IN THE FIELD
(LEFT TO RIGHT) CALEB, KATY, NATALIE AND JIM

Jim Denevan's
definition of luxury:

“Having enough time to
slow down and take in
nature, culture and
beauty.”

If luxury were ...

An object.

That's hard for someone who is involved
in the ephemeral arts, but I'd say
something that can be held and that has
memories attached.

A moment.

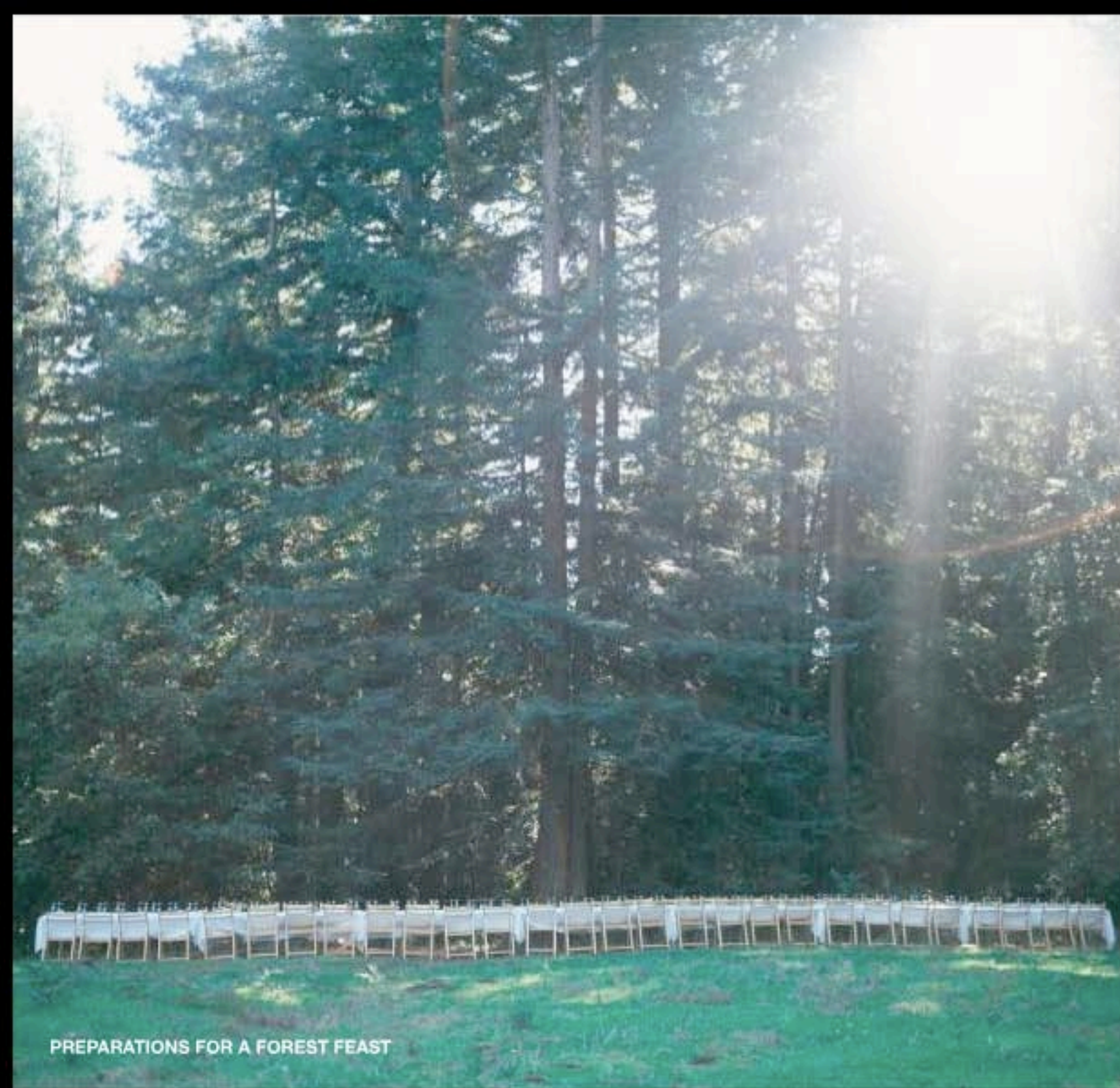
A view of the horizon with the clouds
passing slowly.

A place.

For myself it's a beautiful perfect wave on
my own island in the South Pacific with
some friends.

An person.

A person that is at ease in their
environment to the degree that they know
where they are and then know where
they're going.



PREPARATIONS FOR A FOREST FEAST

Your goal from *Outstanding's* outset was to shift attention away from the chef and to make the farmer the star of the meal. Do you feel that farmers and chefs are on equal footing creatively?

Most people associate expertise with something that they're familiar with. I think people who spend a lot of time gardening would consider it to be an artistic, passionate pursuit. Farmers are creative in terms of the choices that they make. Each day they wake up and consider the conditions and make choices that produce a beautiful, fruitful crop. Chefs when they're most fulfilled are integrated with the rhythms that the farmers experience. When a chef visits a market or visits a farm, they are quite closely integrated into the farmer's work and as a result their output becomes more interesting.

You began OIFT before chefs became superstars. How has the celebrity chef craze of the last five years had an impact on the farmer's image?

I think the interest in chefs has translated into a greater interest in all things culinary and certainly farmers are part of that world. I'm excited to see articles on farmers—such as your article on Joël Thiébault in Paris—and there have been more and more of them over the last five years. When we started out, I imagined and really believed that farmers would be recognized as cultural figures and that has come about lately and for that I'm very pleased.



JIM AT LIVE EARTH FARM, CALIFORNIA

When did you first become interested in the workings of the farm?

My oldest brother, Bill Denevan, is the second longest certified organic farmer in California. He's one of the artisan farmers that the "Fruit Detective," David Karp from the New York Times (who runs around the world finding the best fruit) wrote about for his apples and pears. Since I was 13 or 14 I've been up at his farm seeing him growing organic apples. I eventually worked there picking apples and pears and doing the thinning, so I had experience being in that environment.

When you began OITF did you know which farmers you wanted to associate with?

I did know many of them from my time working as a chef at Gabriella Café. In the mid-90s we had a number of dinners that were farmer dinners, where we'd organize the entire meal around a particular farm and invite the farmer to come in and give a speech. It was really successful. In a way that was the seed that became Outstanding in the Field.

How different is it preparing a meal for a hundred on a farm as opposed to working in a restaurant kitchen?

The challenges become part of the passion of the experience. It could certainly become more difficult to prepare a meal when the tables need to be carried a mile, or the cooking equipment needs to be fashioned on site. For me, that's part of the fun and interest of it, that each night presents its own challenges. Some farms have certified kitchens right on site, and then often times the guest chef does most of the prepping in

their nearby restaurant and then the cooking outdoors. There are some chefs that have gone so far to harvest every item for the meal when the sun rises and then cooked it on the farm.

What do you find most rewarding personally from each event?

Fostering a greater knowledge and meaning of place is the most important aspect for me as well as providing an environment for the chef and farmer to build their relationship.

What criteria do you use when choosing farms for your event?

There are a few things. We look for a farm that's organic and sustainable as it's not particularly interesting to have dinner among pesticides. We also look for farms that grow a diverse range of things and ones that also have existing relationships with chefs in the region. Of course if the farm is scenic and beautiful, that's definitely something to consider.

Do you have people scout locations for you?

People send us suggestions, I hear from chefs who recommend farmers, farmers who recommend other farms, etc, but I'm very interested in geography and the weather and things like that and can sense a site's potential. Some farms are hot and uncomfortable during certain times of the year and rainy at other times, I think of the window of time when the climate is most suitable.





BLUE HERON FARM, FINGER LAKES, NEW YORK

Which chefs and winemakers have you worked with frequently?

We've worked several times with David Hawksworth. For one of the events in Vancouver he went out and caught the salmon himself off the Queen Charlotte Islands. I think he's one of the best chefs in North America. We've worked two or three times with Paul Draper and a couple of times with Dan Barber and Michael Anthony. I like returning to certain sites with specific chefs and winemakers.

For you, is the social aspect to the meal as important as the actual food?

Yes definitely. When we're all seated at one table it's inevitable that deeply felt stories will be shared. People are somewhat reserved and shy when they arrive, they're not used to dining at a table for 100, but soon after they start chatting and serving one another. I think it's good for people to go outside of their comfort zone, they could be sitting next to the event's winemaker or Sergey Brin of Google, for example, who came to one of our dinners.

What makes food such an important social binder?

I think it's hard to quantify these things but I think that's one of the most important aspects of the dinner. People are hungry to share a common experience and when we recognize that food comes from a place, and we can go to that place and enjoy a meal together, it's a pretty profound thing. People really respond to that community aspect, it makes them savor their food in a different way.

What do you think draws people to the OITF concept?

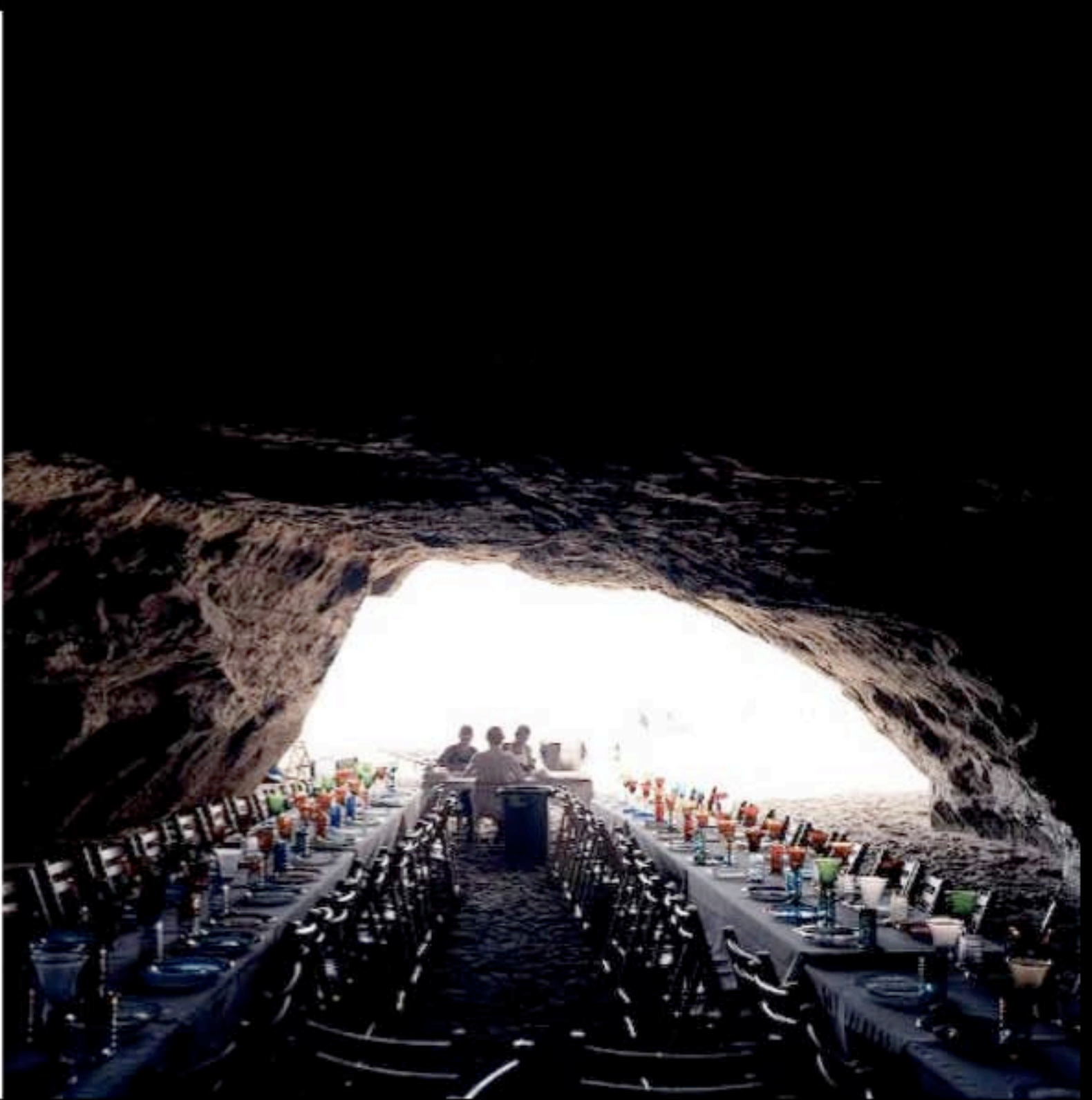
I think there is a desire for a richness in culture. It's a reaction to the rise of industrialized agriculture when suburbs were spreading across the land and squeezing out the orchards and farms. I think the pendulum has swung the other way. People would like to reacquaint themselves with some of the traditions that were commonly enjoyed in the past.

How would you like to see OITF evolve over time?

We're going to expand the project throughout the world and go into regions of New Zealand, Africa, Chile, Spain, France. Also, we'll be doing dinners in places that are not directly on the farm but maybe on a dock off the coast of Canada for example, or on mountaintops and other beautiful environments. The continuing theme will be that the ingredients come from the surrounding region and that we present the artists at the table, such as the farmers, bee keepers, wine makers as well as the chefs. We're also coming out with a cookbook in June 2008 as part of our goal to try to reach out and communicate with more and more people.

If you could have an Outstanding in the Field event anywhere in the world, where would it be?

I think just heading out and seeing what might be out there is really exciting, sometimes it's fun not to know. I like to just head out to Spain or France or Greece or North Africa and just take the same table and put it in unusual, interesting environments and find whatever good ingredients are nearby.





DINERS GATHER AT LIVE EARTH FARM, CALIFORNIA

With so much going on with Outstanding in the Field, when do you have time for your sand art?

Generally it's done in the winter, but I do juggle them both all year round. In February I'm planning to do a sand art piece in a major league baseball stadium, The AT&T Park in San Francisco. I'm trying to coordinate a show with a well known museum at the same time. The artwork is really taking off. I've got a show at **P.S.1** in New York now of photos of my work taken by Ari Marcopolis which is leading to all sorts of interesting things. In a couple of weeks I'm planning to do the world's largest free-hand drawing. I generally do them all by myself but for that particular work, I'm going to do the composition and then have people fill in every area between each circle to make them really pop out. That will enable me to do something several miles across in six hours before the tide comes in.

Which artists have been the most influential to your work?

It's sort of a hybrid between Richard Serra, who is interested in people's response to space, and also someone like Fred Sandback, the minimalist who suggests volume through thread. There's that minimalist aesthetic of the gentleness of the thread and the monumentality of a Richard Serra. The work that I do is very slight in the landscape but also immense. It's very present and immaterial at the same time. To walk into a work it combines two things that don't seem compatible. I like that aspect to it.

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SEA COVE DINING IN CALIFORNIA

How is the farm similar to an artistic canvas?

I love the table as a compositional element in the environment. It takes it back to the artwork. The table looks beautiful and interesting when enclosed in a certain spot, but it’s a magnet for so many other meanings. I’m really interested in taking that table anywhere on earth, and even privately people could hire us to do just that. It wouldn’t just be about taking the table to the mountaintop for a family dinner, which was a request received recently from a private client, but also learning about the cultural aspects of the region and bringing all of that information to the table. ■

FUTURE FARM FEASTS WITH OUTSTANDING IN THE FIELD:

Kentucky, September 16
Hollywood, September 23
Sonoma County, September 30
Santa Cruz, October 13

Meals costs around \$200 per person. For more information visit, www.outstandinginthefield.com

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