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Kentucky dining isn't what it used to be, and praise be for that — unless you are particularly devoted to chain restaurants. I don't know if you could say that Kentucky cooking has undergone a renaissance exactly, because it's not like we were ever Tuscany. But guess what — now the state is becoming its own little Tuscany, with a Southern twang.

Okay, so that's probably overstating it. But things have evolved to where Ouita Michel, chef-proprietor of the Holly Hill Inn in Midway, and Michael Paley, executive chef of Proof on Main, one of Louisville's hottest new restaurants, can indulge in a similar fantasy. Chef Ouita runs her restaurant as if she's in the Provençal countryside, while chef Paley operates like he's feeding natives in central Italy.

No, they haven't been hitting the bourbon: They're both taking advantage of a nascent and notable Slow Food movement. "One gift we have is that our urban areas and our agricultural producers are still easily accessible to each other," says Michel, who with her husband opened the Holly Hill Inn in 2001. Located in an 1845 farmhouse set amidst the rolling hills of horse country, Holly Hill is the rare restaurant where food and setting are equally beautiful. Michel's menus flutter along with the seasons, drawing on a bounty of local lamb, squab, heritage turkeys, rabbit, partridge, freshwater striped bass, and fresh field greens. For Derby season, spring lamb and asparagus are the order of the day.

"The state agricultural department has done an amazing job of promoting small artisan producers, and just in the past three or four years, there's been a huge surge of interest looking toward a small-farm economy," says Michel. I've known Michel for a few years, and I have to point out that she was one of the first chefs in the state to reach out to local purveyors for her materials. With these products she spins fresh versions of old favorites, such as Duncan Farm Rabbit Fricassee and Roast Breast of Bluegrass Squab (rubbed with cocoa and ancho chile).

Paley, on the other hand is a foreigner (he came from Florida) who was astonished by the variety of small, artisan producers available to him. At Proof on Main, named one of Esquire's 2006 Best New Restaurants, Paley's cooking is touted as American food with Tuscan influences. The "Relish" section of the menu is basically antipasto with Southern twists: baked rutabaga with pancetta, pumpkin purée with walnuts. His "Bluegrass Butter" is actually bison marrow, fruit jam, and toasted artisan bread rubbed with garlic.

Bison? It's one of the alternative meats Kentucky is becoming known for (check out www.kybisonco.com for more info). Paley regards it as a regional signature beef in the way that ancient Chianina cow stands for Tuscany, just as he equates polenta to grits from Midway's Weisenberger Mill (www.weisenberger.com), though he prefers the latter's texture. And instead of prosciutto, Kentucky has always had country ham, except that now it also has Kentucky prosciutto from Newsom Farms (www.newsomscountryham.com).

"I'd say Louisville has become one of the top cities for direct farm-to-plate dining," Paley says. "Being a chef here is heaven." Ouita Michel concurs, adding one thing to her wish list: "I can't wait until somebody does Kentucky foie gras."

— Martin Booe

Restaurant Details:

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Proof on Main
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