

The White House

A new restaurant in New Harmony invites guests to savor seasonal cuisine

BY MAUREEN HAYDEN



CHEESE LOVER:

The gourmet grilled cheese sandwich at The White House New Harmony combines brie and white cheddar with sun-dried tomatoes and baby spinach, served with a side of the gorgonzola-topped spinach and pear salad. Owner Lora DeFries (below) opened the restaurant last fall.

ments to dine on five-course meals. One day in Delhi, she even found herself posting a laudatory online review of food writer Natalie MacLean's irreverent bestseller, "Red, White, and Drunk All Over: A Wine-Soaked Journey from Grape to Glass," having bought it as a primer to teach herself all about wine.

She returned to her parents' home in New Harmony, Ind., last summer with thoughts of continuing her post-graduate work in international studies but nagged by the knowledge of what she really wanted to do. As Haddix recalls,

"She came back and called me and said: 'About that dream we had ...'"

Last fall, the dream came to fruition for DeFries and Haddix, both 24, when they opened The White House New Harmony, a small, mid-priced restaurant that specializes in fresh, seasonal cuisine. It's located in what was once the workshop of the barrel maker for the Harmonists – one of two 19th-century Utopian communities founded in

LORA DEFRIES SPENT A YEAR living and studying in Delhi, India, as a Rotary Ambassadorial Scholar with plans to pursue a career in international diplomacy. While there, the University of Southern Indiana graduate found herself fascinated by the cuisine – just as she had in previous travels to China, Egypt, Malta, Turkey, Bulgaria and Spain. In Delhi, she shopped the food markets, delighted by the abundance of fresh fruit and vegetables and tantalized by the splendid spices. She found herself slipping into English-language bookstores to buy books on food and wine, striking up conversations with other "foodies" who'd confess their obsession.

She signed up for Skype – a service that allows users to make calls directly from their computers – to chat with her best friend, Eli Haddix, back in Evansville about their experiments in cooking in college, when they'd invite friends to their apart-



New Harmony. (It's the former home of The Cooper House, now located at 900 Tutor Lane in Evansville and known as the Cooper House Kitchen & Catering Co.)

They set out to fill a niche between two popular New Harmony restaurants: the Yellow Tavern, where diners have to be at least 21, and the much pricier Red Geranium (whose chef has given them his blessing to serve Lemon Shaker Pie, a Red Geranium favorite.) On their business cards, DeFries is listed as the owner and Haddix as the manager, but they are clearly partners when it comes to food preparation and they're often assisted by friends, neighbors, and family members, including her parents, Dr. Roy and Nancy DeFries, who can often be found welcoming guests and serving meals.

"I've lived in New Harmony since I was 10," says Lora DeFries. "I knew that if we were going to open the kind of restaurant we wanted to, New Harmony would be the place to do it."

Inspired by her trips abroad, where she found food was often bought fresh from local markets, DeFries and Haddix have set out to fill the menu with as much locally and regionally grown food as they can. Their fall menu, for example, included a blackberry cobbler with a cornmeal crust, made from blackberries grown by Posey County farmer Malcolm Overton; a smoked turkey breast that came from the Uebelhack Turkey Farm in Mount Vernon (one of the last free-range poultry farms in Indiana); and duck from Maple Leaf Farms in Milford, Ind. They're also cultivating relationships with local producers who frequent the New Harmony Farmers Market, and have been in conversation with the high-school-age members of the Posey County chapter of the Future Farmers of America about growing produce in one of the area's greenhouses.

While neither Haddix nor DeFries have formal culinary training, both have experience working in restaurants – she as a pastry chef at Madeleine's in Evansville and he as a manager of the Pasta Grill. "We wanted to take the best of what we learned and apply to our own business," Haddix says.

They're still learning how to do that, both say, experimenting with rotating limited menu items, including seared duck breast with balsamic glaze – expertly prepared by Haddix – and baked salmon with lemon dill aioli, an entrée that left my daughter, Emily, and I vowing to return again. The menu items change not just seasonally but sometimes weekly, which prompts Haddix and DeFries to often engage in at-the-table conversations with their guests. After serving Emily and I two of their salads – one a mix of pear, walnut, and Gorgonzola cheese; the other a mix of apple slices and cheddar cheese over mixed greens – DeFries asked if the latter was too peppery. It wasn't for our tastes. Nor was the sweet potato casserole – modified from a recipe from her mother – too sweet since there wasn't a marshmallow in sight. We also loved the spiced-just-right ginger and orange carrots. Another item that was "spot on" – British slang that DeFries employs for "just right" – was the creamy tomato bisque with dill. "My mother used to make this for us when we'd go sledding," DeFries says. "It's still one of my favorite recipes of hers."



BERRY GOOD: The blackberry cobbler with cinnamon-cornmeal crust is a favorite dessert at The White House.

The White House opened last fall without an alcohol license, but they expect to have one by late January that will allow them to serve beer and wine by the glass. Soon after, they'll be hosting wine-tasting events, and hope to be organizing cooking classes and music nights. They've already launched a successful Sunday brunch buffet (\$12 for adults, \$6.50 for children ages 5 to 12) that attracts both visitors and townspeople eager to see another New Harmony venue succeed. ●

WHAT TO KNOW

Location: 610 Church St.,
New Harmony

Phone: (812) 682-3455

Hours: Open 11 a.m. to 8 p.m.,
Monday through Saturday except
on Wednesdays when it's closed.
Open 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. on Sundays
for brunch.

Cuisine: Fresh seasonal American

Adult Beverages: Wine and beer
license expected by mid-January.

Service: Warm and personable.

Prices: Lunch entrees range from
\$6.75 to \$9.50; dinner entrees
from \$10 to \$25.

Reservations: Yes, but usually
only needed on weekends.

Payment: Major credit cards
accepted. Also, checks from area
banks.

Handicap access: Yes

RECOMMENDATIONS:

Starter: Tomato bisque soup
with dill.

Side: Ginger and orange carrots
or seasonal risotto

Entrée: Seared duck breast

Dessert: Cranberry and
pear crisp