
BACK OF THE HOUSE

ON SMITH STREET, A STAR

BY NENA JOHNSON

BOERUM HILL—Saul Bolton will tell you that being a chef in Manhattan, Paris, Brooklyn—it’s all the same: you’re in your own isolated little world: a harried room of stainless steel buried in the back or basement of the building. But keep talking to Saul, or rather, keep *him* talking, and you’ll find that he, and his namesake restaurant on Smith Street, are indeed products of their place.

Take the walls. Admittedly, they were not the first things I noticed at *Saul*. It was dark, and notes of my meal, already wafting through the dining room, held my rapt attention as I took my seat. (Some day, I’ll return to give the walls—lovingly built and beeswax-buffed by a neighborhood master craftsman who traded his art for meals—their fair due.

No, my first impressions of *Saul* were of Brooklyn itself. The maitre d’ handed me and my party menus, each of which bore a photograph of a different borough landmark: the Brooklyn Bridge on one, the Williamsburg Bank clock tower on another, and our table’s favorite, an exit sign on the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway. Like the rest of the business, the menus are a community affair. Most of the pictures are taken by Saul’s wife, Lisa, with some contributed by one of *Saul*’s regulars, a Mr. Warner. The menus, covers, bindings, and everything in between, are handmade by Lisa’s cousin, artisan bookmaker Katie Ferruci.

Every inch of the space seems warmed by individual attention, and that attention transcends the food just as surely. Course after seasonal course was beautifully presented at a perfect and leisurely pace. Standouts that night were a trio of lamb that proverbially melted the moment it was trapped in my mouth, and a prosciutto chip that’s still being talked about weeks later. Dessert seemed mandatory upon its arrival—and suddenly felt utterly necessary as well.

On why he set up shop in Brooklyn, Saul is honest: “We looked in Manhattan for over a year before coming out to Brooklyn,” he recalls. “Really, we were drawn out here by money. Lower rents, not needing a lot of partners. This was the last place we thought to look.” Today the restaurant’s reputation doesn’t stop at the Kings County line. Saul is one of two restaurants in Brooklyn to receive a coveted Michelin star.

Saul, his wife Lisa, and their two sons lived in Boerum Hill for over 10 years, and have just moved to Flatbush. “Love it in the summer, it’s an amazing place, Caribbean to the max. Love the music, the smells, the



curry, the beautiful people.” He also uses the L-word when speaking of the Brooklyn Cyclones. “I love that ballpark, love Coney Island. Seeing Hasids catch foul balls in their hats, it’s great.”

I ask what he thinks of “restaurant row” or the much-lauded Brooklyn boom of the last few years, and Saul is quick to point out that which was already there. “We saw the demographic of brownstone Brooklyn. People who worked in Manhattan and had been living here for 20 years. It was more sophisticated than Manhattan, really. Then

Photographs: Tae Won Yu

people were told that Brooklyn was 'cool' and everyone started going out. But those core people were there from the start. They didn't need to be told, they already knew."

Saul's cuisine showcases locally grown ingredients. He sources directly from farmers, through a marketing cooperative called *Farm-to-Chef Express*, and at Brooklyn's farmers markets. When I ask about the growing emphasis on locally sourced and organic ingredients, Saul spills some secrets from his pedigreed past, "The media is playing it up now. It's been misused since I've been in New York. The old Bouley was billed as 'organic French-country.' I used to check in all those deliveries and it was probably 5 percent organic! More people are trying harder now to be more real about it, though. I wonder sometimes how honest the companies are."

Though he doesn't require everything in his kitchen to bear a seal of

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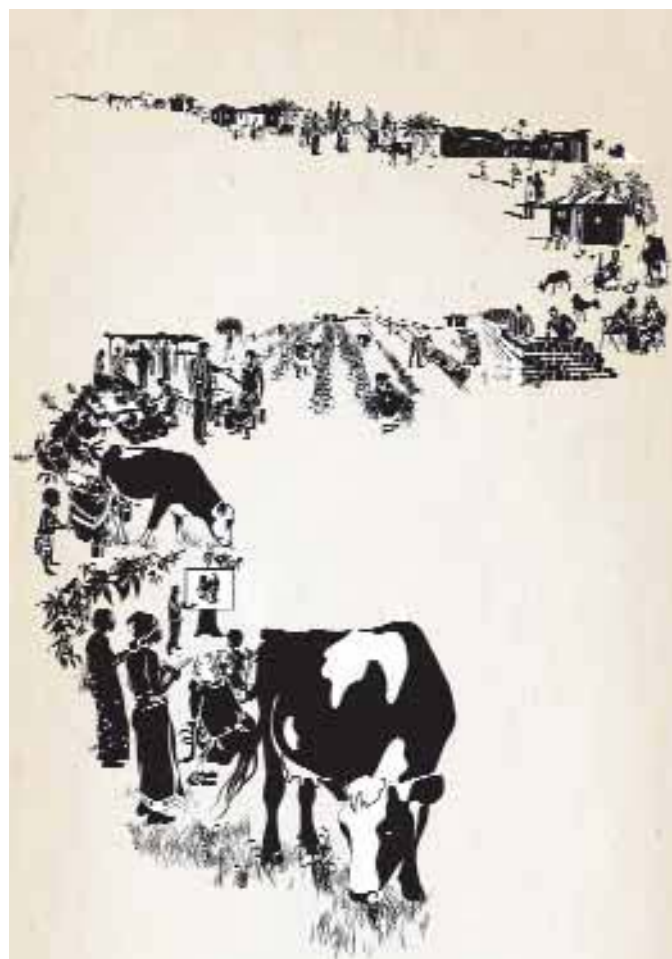
organic certification, to him, farming methods are paramount. "It's not who you are, it's how you're raised. It's the same with pigs and carrots as it is with kids."

Saul doesn't describe himself as an activist in the burgeoning buy local movement, but he speaks from the heart about the people who grow his ingredients. "I love Lydia at Vermont Fancy Meats. I've known her for 18 years. Love, love, love Karen at Three-Corner Field Farm."

The adoration is mutual. Karen Weinberg of Three-Corner Field Farm sells grass-fed lamb and sheep's cheese to the city's top chefs, but she loves, loves, loves this customer back. "Saul's one of the important ones for us farmers. He's very sensitive to working with us. He gives kudos, he's flexible with delivery schedules, upfront with payment. He's the perfect customer. If I have a problem he says, 'let's see what we can do.' He's one of the few chefs who truly puts his money where his mouth is."

Karen recalls learning that *Saul* had received a Michelin star. "I grabbed the phone and called the restaurant. The host said Saul was busy so I said, 'Tell him Karen the lamb lady says congratulations!' Suddenly Saul was on the phone saying, 'I wanted to thank you.' Here was this huge moment in his life and that was his reaction. I don't know many chefs who would turn around and give credit to someone else."

Saul has made an impression on his Brooklyn neighbors, too. Just two doors down from *Saul* is the Boltons' café, *Boerum Hill Food Co.* "It's a neighborhood meeting place. After 9/11, it became a real left-leaning Democrats' haven," says Saul. "We're so much a part of the neighborhood. For much of my life I moved around, now I've lived in Brooklyn longer than anywhere else. I've been walking past and saying 'hi' to the same people for 10 years. There's a connection there." □



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