

Andrew Feinburg

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BY DOROTHY NEAGLE

PHOTOGRAPHS BY JULIA GILLARD



The interview is almost over. Andrew Feinberg's wife, Francine Stephens, whose namesake restaurant we are cozily seated in at a diner's version of rush hour on a Tuesday night, has taken their two children, Prue, 7, and Marco, 5, to the bathroom for what seems like the eleventh time. I am trying not to embarrass myself by licking the syrup, made from late spring's first strawberries, off a plate that once held a perfect dome of cold, creamy panna cotta. Somewhere between explaining why all of the panna cotta in Italy is terrible (too much gelatin), and this one is so good (farm fresh cream), Feinberg admits that he does not relish the act of promoting himself. "If you put me on the spot," he says, smiling, "well, you might get a good answer, if you're lucky."

Feinberg is in the midst of managing the relocation of Franny's, a restaurant that has beckoned educated eaters across the river from Manhattan to Brooklyn since 2004 (and which has since more than tripled in size), opening Marco's, a new restaurant down the street which will "fill in the gaps" on the menu at Franny's, and embarking on a book tour for the Franny's cookbook, which has been three years in the making.

Luck. It is an interesting choice of words for a man whose life has been drawn with focus and intention, but ultimately colored by serendipity.

The story of Andrew and Francine is a New York foodie's fairy tale of a quiet, thoughtful young chef and a non-profit activist-turned-bartender whose eyes met one night in the light of a coal oven and, three months later, eloped to Italy. When they met at Savoy, a downtown temple of farm-to-table dining that preceded the hip following it has today, Feinberg was a chef and Stephens was afloat after the folding of a non-profit

organization that had defined her career up to that point. Her passion for the connection between food and farmer made the idea of working in a restaurant appealing, so she took a two-week bartending class on a whim, and wound up mixing drinks behind the bar at Savoy. "I didn't even know how to make a Manhattan!" admits Stephens. Her passion was the people behind the food—the ones growing it and selling it. A self-described terrible cook, she had not stopped to really taste what was on the plate until she met Feinberg.

Their marriage of taste and politics has defined their relationship and their careers, as restaurant owners and managers. Together they realized Feinberg's dream of opening an Italian restaurant that served surprisingly simple dishes carefully distilled down to essential, unforgettable components. Stephens' presence could be felt on the back of the menu, which revealed a list of farms and producers that the Franny's kitchen sourced from. But after a year of running the pizzeria on Flatbush Avenue, and doing it all by themselves, they were exhausted.

"It was the hardest thing we had ever done," Feinberg says. "When you're the chef and owner, it's not only about the cooking. It's, 'Hey, the toilet's broken!' It's everything all at once." Coupled with Stephens' insistence that now was the time to start a family, the two began to build a team of staff that would become a branch of the family tree, one that would allow them to step out of the kitchen and fully embrace their vision for how to eat and live.

When we sit down to dinner together at the new Franny's, it is warm and bustling and comfortably dim as ever. Still, it's hard not to miss the old space, where the cramped, dark kitchen made the glow of the wood-fired oven all the more compelling, and you had to squeeze past the heat of that oven to get a

breath of fresh air in the quiet, leafy outdoor seating area. The old restaurant space will get a second chance at life when Marco's opens in the fall, but in the meantime the pizza and pasta and crostini and roasted vegetables all dampened with the perfect splash of olive oil and drops of lemon juice, crunchy with sea salt and peppery with fresh herbs remain here, safe on the menu.

When the first server comes by to say hello and talk about the menu, Stephens interrupts her to consult about how often she and Feinberg get out for a date night. It turns out that Jessica, whose apron pockets are an excellent outlet for Marco's curiosity, is their occasional nighttime babysitter. She assures me that her bosses do in fact get out for the night more than once a year, "at least once a season."

Before we can order, the operations manager, Martin Gobbee, interrupts us with a warm, familiar smile to ask why he didn't run into their family on the soccer field last weekend. Soon, Feinberg, Stephens, and Gobbee are all consulting the calendars on their phones to figure out how they can get together inbetween their kids' soccer games, which are all on the same day but at completely different times.

Amid a variety of similar interruptions, Feinberg talks at length about his chefs, Johnathan Adler and Danny Amend, whose time at Franny's is gauged by the birth dates of Prue and Marco. Feinberg discovered quickly the value of good employees. "If you don't let people be creative and do their own thing... They're gone. You lose them." His sense of pride and partnership with these men is reminiscent of a father and son relationship: he talks about how he relies on them, how they've grown, how happy he is to provide a new restaurant space for Amend's talents, while Adler remains in charge of the dishes at Franny's that throngs of Brooklynites can't live without.

Feinberg claims that he could have waited until he was 40 to have kids, but that he happily "gave in" to Stephens' sense of timing. It turned out that starting their own family "gave new life" to the restaurant, allowing

Feinberg to get a taste of not working nights as a chef. Not surprisingly, he loves the new freedom and flexibility, even if it means he works six days a week and hasn't really had a day off in the past six months. Those two hours at the end of the night, between dinner and turning the lights out, when he can feed his children dinner and simply be with them, has made the transition from chef to multi-restaurant manager worth it.

It doesn't hurt that his current schedule also allows him to helm the kitchen (and the grill) at their house in the quiet Windsor Terrace neighborhood of Brooklyn, where it's his job to put dinner on the table every night. Stephens and the kids spend all their time at their "very long" dining table so they can be near him while he's working. Feinberg's goal on weeknights is to get food on the table quickly—he cooks a lot of pastas, a lot of eggs in different ways (frittatas, sunny side up, scrambled). Prue and Marco love grains like farro and quinoa, and simple meals are made of salad, bread and cheese. Feinberg admits, "I'm very narrow when I cook at home."

It's Italian food, above all other options and varieties, that captures his heart and inspires him, and he will pursue a dish with tireless patience. I get the impression that he may never truly rest after a meal, each one is an experiment, an opportunity, a possibility. His curiosity and attention to detail are boundless. Every good—or even great—meal feeds his imagination for what will happen next time he tries it.

When he's not limited by a schedule, Feinberg dives into bigger cooking projects that consume longer periods of time, like fresh pasta making. Often these at-home cooking projects will inspire and inform the menu decisions at the restaurant and at their food shop, the Brooklyn Larder, whose prepared foods counter and cheese selection provide many a fast, nourishing meal to those Brooklyn parents who aren't lucky enough to have Feinberg behind their stove. He recently hauled out all of his cookbooks to sit down with Amend and design the menu for Marco's, but that's as close as he gets to the restaurant kitchen, outside of eating there with the fam-



ily at least two or three times a week.

Much as it makes an average person's mouth water to imagine having crates of farm fresh produce, a wood burning oven, and a professional chef at your disposal on a daily basis, eating is work for Feinberg and Stephens—being in the restaurant, talking to customers and employees, tasting things, spending time together. Stephens points out, “a lot of our special time together happens in restaurants. Our kids know that.”

Prue and Marco are relaxed and at home at the Franny's table. They are distracted by their parents' phones, which is a necessity when the dinner table is also the office for Feinberg and Stephens, but most often the kids are engaged with all the people they know at the restaurant, or running around the consistently family-friendly new space—something they are not allowed to do at other restaurants. “Sometimes they think they own every restaurant.” But eating out elsewhere is a special pleasure for Feinberg that is more fun for all of them because there is no real work involved, no chance for a last-minute meeting over appetizers or an interview that lingers over dessert. The kids absorb the passion and interest that their parents experience over a meal—for them, eating out is everyday. Traveling abroad is a different story, one that Feinberg and Stephens have perfected by learning the hard way. Every year they go back to Italy on vacation, Stephens always puts in a request for something new and different, but Feinberg's singular focus on Italian food wins out. He is comical about it, but also quite serious, “I'm going to get on a plane to Europe and not go to Italy?”

On their first trip with Prue and Marco, they rented a car and drove all over the country, restaurant to restaurant, just as they did before the kids came along. Now they set up a base camp at a hotel. They research in advance to make sure it has a good restaurant in-house and venture out for day trips no further than an hour in any direction. Long, sumptuous lunches (“Europeans eat dinner too late for kids”), followed by relaxing evenings close to their beds, is their recipe for success abroad with two children.

As the evening wears on, I notice the little exchanges between parents and children that define the comfort of Feinberg's family—Prue leaning into her dad until he finally asks, “Would you move?” Marco quietly harassing his mom until she announces, “We need crayons!”

Like his wife, Feinberg is exceptionally polished in appearance, and they both exude a quality of youthfulness—clean, glowing skin, hair neatly pulled back or cropped short. Yet they are incredibly serious about what they do, and Feinberg chooses every word with care and intention, like he's listing ingredients in a treasured recipe. When I ask about the menu at Marco's, he brings up an example of a classic Italian dish, T-bone Florentine. Essentially it's “steak on a plate.” But, Feinberg says, “It's the perfect piece of steak. You don't need anything else. It's good enough.” He doesn't know if New Yorkers will be satisfied with that, but his ethos at the new restaurant will be consistent: simplicity and perfection.

KO #3

AUTUMN 2013

Pole Beans & Potatoes with Olives, Anchovies, & Egg

from Franny's Simple Seasonal Italian

by Andrew Feinberg, Francine Stephens, and Melissa Clark

In Southern Italy, you'd probably find a similar dish served in restaurants as an antipasto. But it also makes an excellent lunch or even a light dinner at the end of a hot summer day, rounded out with some crusty bread. ¶ No matter when you eat it, it's a lovely way to enjoy fresh, crisp green beans. Andrew adds mild soft potatoes and creamy hard-cooked eggs as a textural contrast, and the olives and anchovies provide delicious salty-savory notes./ Even better, you can prepare the potatoes ahead of time. Fish the potatoes out of the pot with a slotted spoon and reserve all the cooking water. After peeling and slicing the potatoes, instead of dressing them, simply place them in a container and pour over enough cooking water to cover. They'll store beautifully in your refrigerator overnight. Serves 4

8 oz fingerling potatoes
2 t red wine vinegar
1 t kosher salt
1/2 t freshly cracked black pepper, plus more to taste
6 T extra-virgin olive oil, plus more for drizzling

4 oz green beans, trimmed
2 T thinly sliced red onion
2 T plus 2 t Nocellara olives, pitted and roughly chopped
2 1/2 t salt-packed capers, soaked, rinsed, and drained*
1 1/2 t chopped oregano

2 T chopped flat-leaf parsley
4 hard-boiled eggs, peeled and sliced
Flaky sea salt, such as Maldon
4 anchovy fillets**

Add the potatoes to a large pot of boiling heavily salted water and cook until tender, 20 to 25 minutes. Drain.

When the potatoes are cool enough to handle, but still warm, peel them with a paring knife. Slice crosswise into 1/2-inch-thick rounds. Spread the potatoes on a large platter and sprinkle with 1 teaspoon of the vinegar, 1/2 teaspoon of the salt, and the pepper. Drizzle with 1/4 cup of the olive oil. Cover the potatoes and let them stand for at least 1 hour, and up to 6 hours, at room temperature, or refrigerate for as long as overnight.

Bring a large pot of salted water to a boil. Prepare a large bowl of salted ice water. Add the beans to the boiling water and cook for 2 minutes. Drain and transfer to the ice water to cool, then drain.

Slice the beans in half crosswise. Transfer to a bowl and toss with the red onion, olives, capers, oregano, and the remaining 1 teaspoon vinegar and 2 tablespoons olive oil. Season with the remaining 1/2 teaspoon salt and pepper to taste.

Sprinkle the potatoes with the parsley and scatter the slices of egg over them. Season the egg with a pinch each of salt and pepper. Drizzle with olive oil. Spoon the bean mixture over the potatoes, top with the anchovies, and drizzle with olive oil.

Andrew's Note: Don't overcook the egg for this recipe. You want an egg yolk that still has a slight degree of softness, and plenty of golden yellow color. Overcooked egg yolks can be chalky.

*We use capers from Pantelleria, which I think are the best available. They come packed in salt, so you need to rinse and then soak them before using. ¶ Put them in a bowl, cover them with a lot of cold water, and let them soak for 3 to 5 hours, changing the water two or three times. In the end, they should taste seasoned but not overly salty. Once they are soaked, spread the capers on a clean cloth and let them dry out for a few hours. Then store them in a tightly covered container in the fridge for a week or two.

**Bottarga is pressed salted fish roe. Look for mullet roe (muggine) rather than tuna (tonno) roe. Mullet roe is milder, tasting more subtly of the sea, without the slight bitterness of tuna bottarga. If you notice a thin waxy layer on top of the bottarga, use a paring knife to peel it off (it might get caught in your teeth if you leave it on).

Excerpted from Franny's Simple Seasonal Italian by Andrew Feinberg, Francine Stephens, and Melissa Clark (Artisan Books). Copyright © 2013. Photographs by John von Pamer.”