MAKING SPACE

WHERE ARTISTS GO TO EAT AND RETREAT

by Sofia Alvarez
photos by Se Young Au
If it sounds quaint and magical, it is. There is a sense of calm as soon as you step onto the property. The farm exudes a silent expectation of camaraderie and encouragement and, though it’s brimming with writers, I’ve never experienced cynicism there. I’ve both given and received advice at meals and made friendships that felt deeper than they had any right to be after four days of knowing someone. I got more creative work accomplished in one week at SPACE than I often have over months in Brooklyn or Los Angeles.

Two days after returning from the farm, still high from the experience, I met up with Emily at the Bounty restaurant in Greenpoint, Brooklyn, to talk about SPACE and how it came into existence.

**Tell me a little bit about your life prior to SPACE.**

I was an actress. I went to an arts conservatory in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. I moved to Brooklyn upon graduating in 2007 and lived in Greenpoint, where I still reside part of the time. I was doing the downtown theater thing, working at Ars Nova, the Flea Theater, Joe’s Pub, working out of town, and generally being a young twentysomething in New York: having thousands of odd jobs, cobbling together a livelihood, and feeling very unsatisfied.

**What was it about Ryder Farm that made you think, “There could be an artist’s residency here?”**

Ryder Farm has been in my extended family since 1795. I am a seventh generation Ryder; I grew up in the midwest and had never been there, but I’d heard folklore about it. On a whim—and this is the moment that is still sort of unknowable to me—I cold-called my fourth cousin once removed, Betsey Ryder, who lived there and ran the organic farming operation. I called her with no expectations and said, “Hi. My name is Emily, I’m related to you and I would love to come up and check out that farm.”

**I know you said it’s the unknowable thing, but looking back, why do you think you did that?**

I’d been to the Union Square Greenmarket (where Ryder Farm still has a stand) and I think ultimately I was curious. I thought, “Oh, I have a family farm. I should check it out.”

**So, there was a romantic idea you had of this place?**

Yes, but also I was like, “I’m an actress and I don’t have a lot to do all the time.” I thought, “Hey, I could take a trip upstate. That sounds interesting and adventurous.” I was also just curious—I’d been hearing bits and bobs about this place forever. I thought upstate New York meant 10 hours away, which in many cases it is, but Ryder Farm is in Putnam County, which is about an hour and 20 minutes by train. That was my first realization: this place is so close to Brooklyn. I had always thought Ryder Farm was an eight-acre vegetable plot, but once I locked eyes on it, I realized it was a 130-acre expanse. I should mention this was in March, so it was not looking great. It’s not a pretty time of year, but it was still substantial: woodlands, pastures, a half mile of lake frontage. Then the third realization was that there were these structures built in 1795 that hadn’t been lived in or tended to for a long time.

**It seemed to be an available space?**

Yes, but it needed a lot of TLC. A lot of people would have
opened the door, shut the door, gone back to Brooklyn, and been like, “That was interesting.” In the days and weeks and months that followed, I couldn’t stop thinking about the potential of the place, about the fact that it was so close to the city, and there was another train running in my brain—that I was in the middle of this community of artists that doesn’t have proper resources. And by resources I mean time and space. I was in [the places] where we all work on stuff: basements, cellars, you know, cruddy spaces. And everyone is running 10,000 ways and they have 10 jobs and there’s no time. So both of these things were independent-racing around in my head and they sort of collided. At that point, it wasn’t this well-groomed decision. I thought, “Oh, I should bring my friends, who happen to be artists, up here and we should make improvements to these structures. And in making improvements to the structures, maybe the family will let us work on our art.” And that was as far as we got. I pitched it to Betsy and the other four cousins, who were between the ages of 60 and 75, who I had never met. And they were open to it.

What role does food, the farm, and the family meal play in SPACE? Do you think it could exist without that aspect?
It’s funny. I think [food] plays a huge role. But that wasn’t intentional. We got up there and we needed to eat, and we looked at each other and said, “Well, who’s the best cook?” and it was agreed that Brianna Langan was the most seasoned cook. It was a vagabond group of 12 that summer. It seemed natural that we would eat together. Bri was a great cook and quickly got keen to what was being grown on the farm.

Was that a conversation you had to have with your family? About using the food from the farm?
Not really. We paid them a wholesale rate for the food that we used. And there was this table [in the farmhouse] where it was obvious we would sit to eat. It was all practical. There wasn’t a lot of fanfare or thought around it. When we built the next level of SPACE where every week a new group of artists were in residence, we realized that feeding everyone was essential. The cheapest and easiest way to feed everyone was with communal meals straight from the farm. All meals served at SPACE are communal for resident artists, interns, and staff—everyone is invited to the table. By eating three meals a day together, [you develop] real relationships. Something magical happens when people sit down to eat together. Dinners can sometimes last for three hours or more. When we survey residents about their time and what was most valuable, the communal meals always are highlighted. Residents often find them as productive as the work itself.

How do you find the chefs you invite to come cook at SPACE?
Through referral, previous residents, previous interns. For example, Brendan Spieth, who cooks for us a lot, came up as a resident first, but he also works at restaurants in the city. I’ve never had to interview for a chef; they all seem to find their way to SPACE. It takes a particular kind of cook to want to do it. They have to be comfortable cooking for 20 people a meal, and we don’t have a commercial kitchen. Our cooks tend to be a mix of restaurant chefs and really passionate home cooks.

Are there certain recipes repeated over and over?
Bri made a guide highlighting what is harvested when and also a menu that visiting cooks can follow, but do not have to. There are certain recipes that seem to pop up again and again, but the tone of the menu changes significantly depending on who is cooking. For example, Brendan is a rogue, crack-up musician—his cooking is informed by his Texas roots and the man loves to pickle. Whereas someone like Jenn Jamula is all about nature’s bounty. Rachel Rusch is a hybrid of the two, infusing her meals with her own family recipes while incorporating what is being harvested at the farm.

The plates are also really special, all so different and often referenced at dinner. Where did those come from?
Everything is from the farm. The table is from the farm, the chairs are from the farm. And when we renovated the barn we found boxes and boxes of plates. I am getting married at Ryder Farm this month. We are having 250 people and there are 250 plates at the farm.

What are some meals at SPACE that stand out in your memory—either because of the food or conversation?
The company really makes the meal. I remember this one dinner with [playwrights] Mat Smart, Mark Schultz, Max Posner, Anna Kerrigan, and Dan LeFevre that just lasted for hours. Something about the group of people, plus the food, plus the place...
I also love the “Working Farm Roving Dinner.” At the end of each season, we host an event featuring a seven-course meal, at seven different locations around the farm, showcasing seven excerpts of plays from our in-house writers’ group.

In terms of food, there is a kale stem pesto pasta most of the cooks make that reminds me of the first summer with the 12 of us, the group of founders. That is a really nostalgic meal for me because it reminds me of being 25 and starting SPACE.
KALE STEM PESTO

Makes about a pint of pesto

This is a great way to use leftover kale stems you’d otherwise compost or discard.

FOR THE PESTO:
- kale stems from 1 bunch of kale
  (leaves and base removed, cleaned, and cut into 1-inch chunks)
- ¼ cup parsley (chopped)
- 20 basil leaves (chopped)
- 2 cloves of garlic (peeled and smashed)
- 1 tablespoon apple cider vinegar
- juice of one lemon
- 1 cup olive oil
- ½ cup Parmesan cheese
- ½ teaspoon kosher salt
- ½ teaspoon pepper

FOR SERVING:
- pasta of your choice
- arugula
- cherry tomatoes
- mozzarella

Combine the kale stems, parsley, basil, garlic, vinegar, lemon juice, and olive oil in a food processor and buzz. Some bunches of kale have more stems than others, so don’t be afraid to add more olive oil if you need it. Once you’ve reached a great pesto texture, turn off the food processor and transfer the sauce to a bowl. Mix in the Parmesan, salt, and pepper. Toss with cooked pasta, a bit of arugula, halved cherry tomatoes, and some mozzarella.