



# EQUINOX

**Melissa McCart**

Photos by Molly McDonald Peterson

**Todd Gray brings a taste of the Chesapeake region to the table.**



**O**n a boat off the shores of Nantucket this past summer, Equinox's chef and co-owner Todd Gray, his wife and co-owner Ellen Kassoff-Gray, and son Harrison caught nearly 20 bluefish in two hours. "We have a million new ways to cook bluefish now," says Ellen, inspired by their bounty. Bluefish has recently appeared on fine- and casual-dining menus because it's plentiful and sustainable, arriving at East Coast restaurants so fresh it tastes as if it were just pulled from the sea.

Vacation isn't the only time Gray heads to the source to gather ingredients for an evening's meal. He heads to Warren-ton several times a month, where Black Angus cows are raised for the restaurant. In spring, he rises before dawn to fish for rockfish in Virginia waters. And in fall, he's in close touch with folks from Rappahannock River Oysters, his source for local mollusks.

### Local Anchor

The Grays' commitment to local and sustainably raised ingredients anchors the menus at Equinox. Whether they're getting snow peas from Pennsylvania's Path Valley, seafood from Chincoteague, black-eyed peas from the Tidewater region, or soft-shells from the Chesapeake, regional rules. It's no wonder members of the food-focused Obama administration are among Equinox's regulars.

"When you see the whites of the eyes from the people you buy from a block from the White House," says Gray of the local vendors delivering to the restaurant, which sits at the end of Connecticut Avenue, "that's local commerce to the max." As the city's power brokers come through the front door, modest Mennonite farmers pull up in their truck to the back entrance, where Gray and his line cooks help unload whatever they bring: asparagus, tomatoes, peaches, potatoes, greens.

"We're showing off simple, straightforward flavors," says Gray. "And for that we need the best products. Whether it's extraordinary beets, great salt, or good olive oil, the flavors have to be really intense. I want customers to say, 'Those were the best beets I've ever eaten.' That's the mark of success."

### Hands-On Sourcing

When Equinox opened 10 years ago, Gray was among the first area chefs to embrace the trend of local, sustainable food. On the restaurant's decade anniversary, he continues to serve as a pioneer—this time by joining farmers and fishermen to find the best food and by having a say in how it's raised and harvested.

Gray's progressive thinking about food sourcing led to his raising Black Angus for the restaurant, after a customer offered to raise cattle exclusively for Equinox to Gray's specifications. It came together two years ago, when a regular customer came in for lunch. He had recently bought land in Virginia, along with a herd of Black Angus cattle. The rest is history in the making.

Even though heritage lines such as Piedmont and Randall Lineback are having a renaissance, Gray prefers the flavor of Black Angus. "The animal's muscle structure makes it so special. It has a totally different mouthfeel and flavor."

Gray and the farmers experimented to find which organic, natural feeding methods produced the most flavorful beef. And today, the restaurant offers grass- and grain-fed Black Angus that yields one of the district's favorite burgers. "It's an amazing burger," says Gray, who makes it with ground ribs and chuck. "It's a little leaner, but because it's a young Angus cow, it's gorgeous." The burger is served at lunchtime on house-made brioche with gorgonzola cheese and house-cured bacon.

Chef Gray has also helped spark the revival of Rappahannock River Oysters in Topping, Virginia. Based near his parents' home, oyster farmers Ryan and Travis Croxton have been harvesting Virginicas for the past couple of years. But it's Gray who was among the first in the area to carry Olde Salts, Stingrays, and Rappahannocks—oysters with varying levels of sweetness and salinity harvested around the Chesapeake. And while the "months ending in -r" rule has largely been dismissed—with oysters harvested from cold waters around the world being shipped efficiently—Gray, like the Croxtons, patiently waits for local oysters. Seasonality is sacred, even when it comes to seafood.

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### Beyond the Restaurant's Four Walls

Kassoff-Gray is especially passionate about the people behind the food they serve. After all, she was involved in food distribution for years before Equinox opened, both for Sysco Food Service, a mass-market distributor, and for D'Artagnan, a high-end New York gourmet food distributor.

The Grays are passionate about supporting farmers and fishermen. They've also brought in area high school and college students to stage in the kitchen, and they are prominent supporters of animal rights. The Grays are educators and fundraisers, too, creating and hosting the annual Sugar and Champagne event that benefits the Washington Humane Society each January.

Their most recent efforts include working with the Obama administration to spearhead efforts to help develop healthier school lunch programs and to connect chefs with schools to develop menus. (The Obamas celebrated soon-to-be first lady's

## Ravioli of Kabocha Squash and Gold Potatoes with Parmesan Cream Sauce

Start-to-finish time: 1½ hours

Serves 8

### For the ravioli

- 1 Kabocha squash
- 3 Yukon gold potatoes
- 3 tablespoons ricotta cheese
- 3 tablespoons Parmesan cheese
- Salt and pepper to taste
- 48 pasta rounds (2½-inch diameter) or wonton wrappers
- 2 eggs
- 2 tablespoons water

Preheat oven to 400 F.

Split squash in half and season with salt and pepper. Roast, flesh-side down, on sheet tray in oven until tender and skin is blistered (approximately 45 minutes).

While the squash is roasting, place potatoes in boiling, salted water and boil until tender (approximately 30 minutes). Drain, peel, and mash with a fork. Set aside.

Remove squash from oven and scoop out the roasted flesh. Mix with potatoes, add cheeses, and adjust seasoning as needed. Cool the filling before preparing the ravioli.

To make the ravioli, place pasta rounds on a lightly floured surface.

Mix eggs and water for an egg wash. Brush pasta with egg wash on one side, spoon a small amount of squash filling in the center, and fold over the bottom edge to the top edge, pressing well to seal any openings. Place sealed ravioli on lightly floured tray. Keep covered in refrigerator until ready to use.

### For the sauce

- 2 cups white wine
- 3 shallots, sliced
- 2 garlic cloves, sliced
- 1 thyme sprig, leaves stripped from stem
- 2 cups heavy cream
- 1 cup Parmesan cheese, finely grated
- 1 black truffle, minced
- Salt and pepper to taste

Place wine, shallots, garlic, and thyme in a small sauce pot and reduce over high heat until nearly dry. Add cream and reduce by one third. Remove from heat and strain. Put into a clean pot and stir in Parmesan and black truffle. Season with salt and pepper. Keep sauce warm.

### To finish

Bring a pot of salted water to a boil. Drop pasta into water and cook for 3 minutes. Drain quickly, and toss into warm sauce. Spoon pasta into dishes. Serve immediately.



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Co-owner Todd Gray and Ellen Kossoff-Gray are celebrating the 10th anniversary of Equinox, which has been committed to using local ingredients since it first opened in May 1999.

birthday with a dinner at Equinox back in January, just before the inauguration.)

Gray is also the culinary director for Salamander Hospitality, owned by Sheila Johnson, a co-founder of Black Entertainment Television and a Virginia-based philanthropist. Gray will be the culinary director of the Salamander Resort in Middleburg when it opens in 2012.

### Deeply Rooted

Inspired by Alice Waters's movement to prioritize locally grown, fresh ingredients, the Grays were committed locavores long before the movement went mainstream. "Farm to table? Yeah, we live it," says Gray.

So it makes sense that Equinox isn't just a restaurant at the intersection of Connecticut Avenue and 17th and K Streets. After 10 years as one of the city's iconic restaurants, its presence is felt as a cornerstone of D.C.'s food culture. The Grays' support for sustainability and the farm-to-table movement already has deep roots.

Melissa McCart is a freelance writer based in Washington, D.C.

### Equinox

818 Connecticut Ave. NW, Washington, DC  
(202) 331-8118

[www.equinoxrestaurant.com](http://www.equinoxrestaurant.com)

Lunch: Mon.–Fri., 11:30 a.m. to 2:00 p.m.

Dinner: Mon.–Thurs., 5:30 p.m. to 10:00 p.m.

Fri.–Sat., 5:30 p.m. to 10:30 p.m.

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