

COMMUNITY TIES

For the couple behind California's newest Michelin two-star restaurant, SingleThread, it's all about relationships.

BY MICHAEL SHAPIRO



Every acclaimed restaurant aspires to achieve a moment that wows diners. At SingleThread, the Sonoma County restaurant that earned two Michelin stars last fall, less than a year after it opened, that moment happens before you take your first bite. On your table when you arrive is an edible work of art, an assemblage of more than a dozen delicacies—in shells, on little wooden planks, and on handmade ceramic plates—garlanded with greens and flowers from SingleThread’s farm, just five miles away. The tablescape is so beautiful that, like a waterfall or Japanese garden, it can take your breath away.

“These are beets, roasted in the hearth with shaved purple cauliflower from our farm,” says our server, explaining that every item is emblematic of the late autumn season (when I ate there). “This is a salad of lotus root with silken tofu made by one of our sous chefs; he’s been working on the recipe for about a year.” There are also mustard greens from the SingleThread farm, and Golden-eye snapper wrapped around braised *kombu* and sea palm. There is sesame-dressed young broccoli from the farm with a broccoli blossom. Moving on to the boards, there is Fort Bragg sea urchin, which was just coming into season in Northern California, served raw with some ahi tuna and a little bit of tamari dressing. And all this was just part of the first course.

Perhaps most remarkable: the tablescape and many of

the dishes in the 11-course procession of Japan-meets-California cuisine were custom-made for my wife and me after conversations with chef Kyle Connaughton and his crew. Up to two months ahead of a guest’s arrival at SingleThread, a staff member gets in touch to ask about allergies and preferences, and whether you’re celebrating a special occasion. There’s no menu—until you leave when you receive an elegant paper folder listing each of your courses (mine was different than my wife’s as I try to avoid milk products) and the wines or non-alcoholic beverages you enjoyed. (There’s a non-alcoholic pairing with creative juice mixes and infusions.)

“We create maximum flexibility for our guests,” Kyle says. “So if someone doesn’t like seafood or shellfish or they’re vegetarian or vegan or they have a nut allergy, we customize and tailor the experience individually.” Almost uniformly, reviewers have praised SingleThread, owned and run by Kyle and his wife Katina Connaughton, for opening with a fully realized vision. “Every aspect of the experience was buttoned down and polished,” wrote *San Francisco Chronicle* restaurant critic Michael Bauer shortly after the restaurant opened in December 2016. “I’ve never seen that before in a restaurant shooting for the stars. But then I’ve never seen a husband-and-wife team with such a focused and well-formed idea of what they wanted and how to get there.” ➔

THE THREAD THROUGH IT

(Above) Kyle and Katina Connaughton. (Opposite) Sablefish “Fukkura-san” with vegetables from SingleThread’s farm, nettle puree, and Dungeness crab broth.



**THE MAGIC
IN THE DETAILS**
(Clockwise from top left)
*SingleThread's dining
room; the SingleThread
kitchen; grilling duck
hearts; smoked wild
salmon with shio koji,
myoga, and radish.*

Yet SingleThread's primary goal isn't recognition or kudos, it's perfectly executed cuisine and hospitality, with a connection to the people who provide everything from the earthenware pots to the Japanese miso. Kyle says his and Katina's goal was to "really work everything out so that when we open it's exactly what we want it to be." After working in Japan from 2003 to 2006, the Connaughtons moved to England where, from 2006 to 2011, Kyle oversaw the experimental kitchen at The Fat Duck, the Heston Blumenthal restaurant near London. Every year he was there, the restaurant earned three Michelin stars.

Katina went to horticultural school in Sonoma County, at Santa Rosa Junior College, and was the greenhouse manager for Shone Farm in nearby Forestville. While in Japan, she worked on a strawberry farm and learned about the Japanese concept of 72 micro-seasons, known as Shichijuni kō, each five days long. Attunement to these natural rhythms enables her to harvest produce at its peak. At SingleThread Katina starts work most days at dawn. She manages the restaurant's farm near the Russian River and is typically at the eatery in the evening overseeing floral designs.

She and Kyle have found it seamless to work so closely together, the low-key chef says. "My wife and I have been together since we were 15 years old" when they met at a punk rock concert east of Los Angeles. After his sophomore year, Kyle transferred to Katina's high school to be with her. When Kyle attended culinary school two decades ago at the California School of Culinary Arts in Pasadena, they had a plan: live and work in other countries, then open a restaurant in Sonoma County.

"We could farm here, and we love the lifestyle," says Kyle,

who has close-cropped silver hair and beard with tattoos on both arms. Both he and Katina appreciate that in Sonoma and neighboring Napa County, there are "so many people here dedicated to food and wine. There are few places like this in the U.S." The couple located their restaurant in the handsome town of Healdsburg, known for its central plaza, because it has a "sense of place that comes through in the food. It's a great jumping-off point for people visiting Sonoma County," Kyle says. And it's where he and Katina wanted to live.

The restaurant occupies the site of a post office that burned down in 2009. After the fire, the Seghesio family, Sonoma County winemakers, bought the site and started building a tasting room, but during construction they sold their winery so no longer needed the space. The Connaughtons put together an investment group, acquired the property and halted construction. Then they brought in their own design team, which included San Francisco-based AvroKO, and built the restaurant of their dreams.

The structure is impressive, formidable without being foreboding. In good weather, which is most of the year, guests are invited onto the roof to enjoy a welcome drink and survey the view—if not for a ridgeline they'd be able to see SingleThread's farm. I ask about the herbs growing in tall wooden planters, and Kyle pinches off a bit of pineapple sage. "Try one of these red flowers," he says. The scent of pineapple hits my nose before I taste the piquant flower. In other planters are lemon verbena and kaffir lime leaf (often used in Thai cuisine), their citrus-y aromas unmistakable. "It's nice," Kyle says, "because chefs can just run up and get some herbs."

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: GARRETT ROWLAND (2), ERIC WOLFINGER (2)



Back on the ground floor, the portal into the dining room is a 9-foot wooden door made at Sonoma Millworks in Healdsburg, a mile and a half away. And the interior of the 55-seat dining room is an earth-tone masterpiece of understatement and hidden touches, such as the fabric screens. Each screen's pattern, a server explained, is based on the DNA sequence of a vegetable at its peak at that time. The November screen, for example, reflects the DNA pattern of kale. But there's no pretension here: I wouldn't have known about the screens if I hadn't read about them and asked a server to reveal their secrets.

All these subtle notes, from the dining room door to sourcing produce from their own farm, are part of the single thread that ties the restaurant to its communities. On the kitchen shelves are *donabe*, clay cooking pots made in Iga, Japan by master potters for eight generations, the Nagatani family, to whom the Connaughtons have become close. The Connaughtons buy miso from a family in Kyoto that they know well—their *kombu* comes from Hokkaido, where the couple once lived. Their vinegar producer is “the only one in Japan who grows its own organic rice. We go to them and they come out here so there's that connection,” Kyle says. “It's personal.”

Yet the overarching principle is the Japanese concept of *omotenashi*, the spirit of selfless hospitality, anticipating needs without being asked. “We want you to feel that you're coming into our home,” Kyle says. “It's really about the hospitality before it's about the cuisine.” That hospitality is reflected in the dedication of the chefs, the sommelier, and the servers. The Connaughtons and their team use the Japanese term *kaizen*, which means “good change.” The goal is “constant improvement, always looking

for ways to refine,” Kyle says. “Just because we've been doing something one way doesn't mean that's the way it has to be.”

The wide-open kitchen reveals theatrical precision. The cooks move efficiently and quietly to prepare dishes that, in late autumn, included Dungeness crab with heirloom pumpkins and miso, poached foie gras with Tokyo turnips, and Duclair duck with black trumpet mushrooms and pecans with brown-rice vinegar. After the first bite, my wife Jackie said, “I don't know if that's a happy duck, but it's a happy me.” The service exceeded expectations: When I told the sommelier how much I enjoyed the Nigori sake (part of the wine pairing), he slipped away and returned a moment later with a pitcher that looked like a large teapot to refill my cup.

The single thread extends to the next generation: the Connaughtons' two daughters work for the restaurant. Their 22-year-old helps out on the farm; the 17-year-old assembles the menus, which are placed in a folder and given to guests with a packet of seeds as they leave. “There's a lot of paper folding that happens here,” says Kyle, near a bare tree in the entry hall hung with little origami cranes. It's all in the “spirit of making things.”

Ever willing to contribute to the community, the Connaughtons sprung into action last October when fires swept through parts of wine country. The conflagration blanketed Healdsburg with smoke and caused SingleThread to close for five days. Yet Kyle, Katina, and their team didn't slow down for a moment. The dining room was vacant, but the farm crew accelerated the harvest, and the kitchen staff cranked out meals for hundreds of evacuees daily. The displaced people may not have known it, but the biscuit-and-gravy breakfasts and lasagna

FOOD IS ART

(Clockwise from top) The tablescape that starts every meal; SingleThread occupies the site of a former post office; Aji, also known as Japanese horse mackerel; fresh clams.

CLOCKWISE FROM BOTTOM RIGHT: (GARRETT ROWLAND, ERIC WOLFINGER (3))

dinners that sustained them were prepared by chefs from Northern California's most highly praised new restaurant. Even after the restaurant reopened, the SingleThread team continued to cook for hundreds of people who were living in shelters.

"After the closure, we went into volunteer mode," Kyle says. "And that's something we've decided will be ongoing. Why not? We have this huge team. We have lots of food, lots of ingredients. We have our own farm and great suppliers who are willing to work with us on stuff. Let's just continue to produce a hundred meals today or a couple of hundred every other day, whatever the need is."

Naturally, SingleThread appreciates the recognition from Michelin, only the fourth time in Michelin's global history that a restaurant earned two Michelin stars in its first year. But Kyle is more interested in how those Michelin stars might help Sonoma County rebound after the fire. "This has come at a really great time. It helps in the process of welcoming people back to Sonoma (County) because it's put us on more people's radar. It's a win for us, but it's a win for Sonoma County, too." He notes that even though the vast majority of wine country escaped the fires, some people think the entire region burned to the ground. "We are trying to use our voice to say: If you want to support wine country through everything we've gone through, one of the great ways to do that is just to come here and enjoy our restaurants, our shops, and our wineries."

In December, a few weeks after the fires, Kyle joined forces with Wine Country superstar chefs Thomas Keller, Chris Kostow, and Stephen Dufree to cater a benefit that raised money for community relief funds. Kyle says he appreciates being in an area where top



chefs care deeply about the community. That sense of community, combined with the seasonal bounty of Sonoma County, is why he and Katina are so happy to make this place their home. "It's why we came to Sonoma County," he says. "We can have everything right here." ❖

FROM THE GROUND UP
SingleThread grows much of the produce it serves at a farm five miles from the restaurant.

Michael Shapiro's story for *Inspirato* about Vancouver chefs won the 2016 Explore Canada Award of Excellence.

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Patricia Smith's picks
Destination Services Manager, Northern California

WINING & DINING

Yes, the scenery is beautiful and the pace divine, but let's get real, a trip to Sonoma County is all about food and wine. Here are some of my favorites.

Adventurous diners at chef Dustin Valette's namesake restaurant in Healdsburg should order the "Trust Me" menu. Trust me, you won't be disappointed.

The best handmade cocktails made with local ingredients are served at **Duke's Spirited Cocktails**—or just Duke's—in Healdsburg, a hip location for cocktail lovers of all ages.

Down in Sebastopol, you'll find the eclectic menu of **Ramen**

Gaijin featuring its signature pork belly ramen *and* a long wait for a reservation. Book early!

California's wine region is rife with excellent farm-to-table dining. But for an intimate, sure thing, I send people to **Café La Haya** in downtown Sonoma.

Avoid the wine tour and tasting crowds by heading over to the less-traveled Alexander Valley, home to **Blue Rock Winery**. Enjoy a relaxed tasting and even a leisurely lunch if scheduled ahead.

For a private winery tour in an unmatched setting, book a visit to **Repris**, set high in the mountains with one-of-a-kind views and hospitality.

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