

FOOD SCENE

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A Smile From Ear to Ear

It's time to fire up the grill and shuck some corn for a simple yet delicious treat: *elotes*.

California is the second largest producer of sweet corn in the United States, and much of that bounty comes from Brentwood—where many family-owned farms have been in operation for generations. Mario Hernandez, the culinary coordinator at Frog Hollow Farm in Brentwood, provides this easy *elotes* recipe—with a unique twist—for perfect summertime snacking.

4 large ears of corn (husks still attached)
½ cup Kewpie mayonnaise
¼ cup crème fraîche
1 cup grated parmesan
4 tablespoons minced fresh cilantro
4 teaspoons ancho chile powder
Kosher salt
Freshly ground black pepper
1 lime, cut into four wedges

Working with one ear of corn at a time, peel back the husks to expose the kernels, leaving husks attached at the base. Remove the silk threads, and tie husks together with kitchen twine around the base of the cob to form a handle.

Transfer corn to a large bowl or pot of water, and let soak for 30 minutes. Build a medium-hot fire in a charcoal grill, or heat a gas grill over medium-high heat. Transfer corn to grill. Turn ears occasionally until charred and cooked through, about 20 minutes.

Combine mayonnaise and crème fraîche in a medium-size bowl. Remove corn from grill and brush with mayonnaise and crème fraîche mixture.

Place parmesan on a plate, and roll each ear of corn in cheese to coat. Sprinkle corn evenly with cilantro, chile powder, and salt and pepper to taste. Press the corn into the plate so seasonings and cheese will adhere to mayonnaise mixture. Serve with lime wedges.



RESTAURANT REDUX



Range Life's stone fruit and tomato salad with hemp tahini. Pair it with Cuda Ridge Wines' 2015 Semillon.

Home on the Range

Urban restaurateurs stake a claim in Livermore.

BY NICHOLAS BOER

*I want a range life,
If I could settle down,
If I could settle down,
Then I would settle down,
I want a range life ...
—"Range Life," by Pavement*

One afternoon in early April, as a Pineapple Express weather system edged toward Livermore, two couples—one from New York and one from San Francisco—introduced themselves to their assembled staff, sharing the circuitous route that brought and bound them to this midsize town.

Range Life is a coming-of-age story not just for its four owners—each of whom

has played a critical role in the restaurant's development—but for Livermore itself. That this once-cowpoke town is ready for such an edgy bistro is as remarkable as this posse of metropolitan restaurateurs deciding to call Livermore home.

Fifteen years ago, when Sarah Niles and Lauren Heanes were servers at Kate's Kitchen in San Francisco, they filled a notebook with ideas for opening their own restaurant. Heanes, who grew up in Livermore, eventually decamped to New York, seemingly abandoning her restaurant-partnership plans with Niles. But both women ended up falling in love with men who worked in the industry—and in 2016, when Heanes relocated to Livermore with her husband and business partner, Waine Longwell (who still

co-owns a Brooklyn eatery called Alameda), the dream was reignited.

By this point, Niles had become a sommelier. She was still living in San Francisco and was pregnant. She and her husband, Bill Niles—an accomplished chef—were "100 percent ready," she says, to leave the city and settle down. That idea of escaping urban life brought to mind the 1994 Pavement song "Range Life," which not so ironically inspired the name of their restaurant.

"It's representative of where we come from—Pavement is a band we all listened to in our teenage years—and where we're at in our lives," Sarah says of the track. "It's also a song about settling down. We wanted to be able to live where we could have a comfortable life—nothing too crazy or lofty, but able to do the work that makes us happy. And [the song] 'Range Life' fits with the history of Livermore."

STYLE AND SPIRIT

The restaurant—which opened this spring—is modest but wholly distinctive, with brick bones and a soulful history. Longwell spent the last two years transforming the structure—originally a horse carriage house and most recently an eccentric boutique—into a functional restaurant, while Heanes has endowed

the space with a sophisticated, urban aesthetic that still maintains a rustic vibe.

A subtle yet dazzling mosaic of handcrafted tiles in five variations of meadow green frames the bar's half-moon mirror, instilling Range Life's small dining room with energy—a colorful contrast to the panorama of black-and-white Mojave desert landscapes on the opposing wall. Heanes, who has a background in commercial set design, also created a miniature retail market within the restaurant that sells house-made pantry and picnic goods, and had the back patio designed around a century-old pepper tree.

In characterizing his and Heanes' differing approaches to the project, Longwell says: "She's fashion over function, and I'm function over fashion—to a fault." Pragmatism aside, Longwell is the animating force behind Range Life's bar, with its Italian aperitifs and digestifs, craft draft beers, and signature cocktails (including the icy Coyote Smash garnished with wild local herbs). *New York* magazine once wrote of his Brooklyn restaurant and bar: "The Alameda Manhattan leaves an impression that all the Manhattans you drank before should have been called Newark."

But Longwell, with his shock of red hair and mischievous Dennis the Menace grin,



From left: Waine Longwell, Lauren Heanes, and Sarah and Bill Niles escaped city life to settle down—and launch a business—in Livermore.

The eatery's crispy lamb belly with green garlic labneh and a Charlotte's Web cocktail.



Anatomy of a Restaurant

Range Life's owners dish on its key ingredients.

The Space

"The building dictated a lot. We wanted the brick to shine, but we needed to keep the feeling clean and bright—comfortable but special and new. We brought in a lot of wood. Hopefully, it's very cohesive and purposeful." —Lauren Heanes

The Cocktails

"You see a lot of other craft-cocktail folks putting on a vest and a curly mustache and being pretentious. That's not at all what we're about. There is a heavy mixology focus, but it comes from a place of love and passion." —Waine Longwell

The Wine List

"With wines by the glass, I'm always willing to pour tastes. 'What sounds good to you right now? Do you want something really tart or something a little softer?' I try to make it as easy as finding something to eat." —Sarah Niles

The Menu

"I have influences from all cultures, but the food isn't culturally specific. There are elements of Mediterranean, some French, and whatever else I'm into at the moment. I get obsessed really easily, so the menu will be changing a lot." —Bill Niles

is anything but uptown or uptight. When describing a server's responsibility to "extract, interpret, and spit out" customers' drink orders, he invokes a simple motto: "Have it your way."

"I'm Burger King back here," he says with a smile.

HEART AND SOUL

Bill Niles had been made co-chef at Tartine Manufactory—which he helped to open and to earn a James Beard Award nomination for best new restaurant in the country—when Heanes and Longwell approached him about Range Life last year. He'd been working in kitchens since the day he turned 14, first on the South Jersey boardwalk and eventually in San Francisco's famed Bar Tartine, where he met Sarah. He later became the chef de cuisine at Kronnerburger in Piedmont and was the opening executive chef at wine maven David Lynch's St. Vincent in San Francisco—where Sarah honed her skills as a manager. (Bill played a key role in earning St. Vincent its three-star review in the *San Francisco Chronicle*.)

While Bill's Range Life menu is driven by local, seasonal produce, his steak exemplifies the restaurant's commitment to character. The flavorful meat is warmed over smoky embers prior to being finished in a sizzling-hot cast-iron pan and served *steak frites*-style with leeks, crème fraîche, and buttermilk. The buttermilk is a byproduct of Bill's house-cultured butter, which accompanies slices of soft-crumbed Pullman loaves. The chef and novice baker spent weeks feeding his dough's starter and acclimatizing it to Livermore's wild yeasts before Range Life's launch.

Sarah, meanwhile, serves as the restaurant's general manager and curates its wine list.

“

I sat down on a bench for a few minutes and looked around, and I could kind of just see it. This is our dream, and this is what we've been working toward for a really, really long time.”

—SARAH NILES



Cucumbers, fresh buttermilk, and broccoli shoots paired with a Joan Collins cocktail.



Roasted spring chicken goes well with BoaVentura de Caires' 2014 Black Label Cabernet Sauvignon.



The Range Life crew brings sophisticated charm to the Tri-Valley.

Since moving to Livermore in December, she has managed the bookkeeping and point-of-service systems, put together an employee manual, and educated herself on HR compliance—all while coparenting her and Bill's two-year-old daughter, James. But one of her most imposing challenges has also been one of the simplest. "I've never been in the position of being the sole person responsible for assigning table numbers to a floor plan," says Sarah. "For some reason, that has felt momentous."

Perhaps it's because doing so made Range Life seem real—a sentiment she first experienced while alone in the restaurant one night. "I sat down on a bench for a few minutes and looked around, and I could kind of just see it," she says. "This is our dream, and this is what we've been working toward for a really, really long time."

When asked if Livermore diners would appreciate all the love and preparation that went into Range Life, Longwell says: "Our people are everywhere, man. I see them all the time. This is for them. It's like *Field of Dreams*: If we build it, they will come." 2160 Railroad Ave., Livermore, (925) 583-5370, rangelifelivermore.com.



Seasonal Sipper

Waine Longwell shares his recipe for one of Range Life's craft cocktails.

CHARLOTTE'S WEB

1½ ounces Bozal Ensemble Mezcal
 ½ ounce Taylor's Velvet Falernum
 ¾ ounce fresh-squeezed pink grapefruit juice
 ½ ounce fresh-squeezed lime juice
 1 egg white
 Ice
 1 dehydrated pink grapefruit wheel (optional)
 Black/dried lime (optional)

Place mezcal, Falernum, grapefruit juice, lime juice, and egg white in a shaker. Shake without ice to froth up the drink. Add ice, and shake again. Strain the mixture into a chilled cocktail glass, and garnish with the dehydrated grapefruit wheel. (To dehydrate the pink grapefruit, cross cut the fruit into wheels and place in a 140°F oven for five hours.) Use a microplane to shave some black lime on top to taste.

"[The black lime] adds some salt and citrus punch to the drink, so be as liberal with it as you want, but observe our number one house rule: Make it look cool." —Waine Longwell

Note: Black limes are available at the Range Life market.



A dusting of black lime shavings top the Charlotte's Web.



Sidle up to the bar for a tasty tippie made by Longwell.

CALI GODLEY

CALI GODLEY

SWEET TREATS

Ice, Ice, Baby

Stay cool this summer with these fun takes on a favorite frozen dessert.

BY LEEANNE JONES

A scoop of ice cream in a cone is nothing to complain about. But these East Bay treat shops are taking it to the next level, offering build-your-own ice pops, delicate shaved snow, and honey-soaked parfaits.



"Popwiches" from Concord's Popbar.



Taiyaki at Uji Time Dessert.



Vampire Penguin's shaved snow.

POPBAR

The Popsicle of your childhood is all grown up. Coming to The Veranda this summer, Popbar will serve gelato and sorbet on a stick. Choose from flavors such as dulce de leche, kiwi, and the seasonal pumpkin pie. Get yours dipped or half dipped in "poppings" like coconut shavings or crushed caramel corn, or order it as a "popwich" nestled between two chocolate cookies. *Concord, pop-bar.com.*

UJI TIME DESSERT

Named for a city on the outskirts of Kyoto, Japan, that's known for its production of green tea, Uji Time offers Japanese American–fusion treats. The must-order is the Instagrammable *taiyaki*, a fish-shaped cake cone filled with red bean paste or Nutella and your selection of soft-serve ice cream: black sesame, matcha, tofu, or a seasonal special, which could be strawberry rosewater or coconut ash. *Berkeley (and a Pleasanton location opening soon), ujitime.weebly.com.*

PRESSED JUICERY

Can dessert ever truly be healthy? Pressed Juicery—best known for its juice cleanses—is giving it a go with its Freeze line of frozen delights. This dairy-free, no-sugar-added ice-cream alternative—made with real fruit (mainly dates), vegetables, and nuts—comes in vanilla, chocolate, strawberry, and matcha flavors. Top it with berries, granola, or almond butter. It's cool, refreshing, and only 210 calories or less. *Danville and Walnut Creek, pressedjuicery.com.*

VAMPIRE PENGUIN

Shaved snow is a Taiwanese specialty that lives somewhere between shaved ice and ice cream: Frozen blocks of fruit juice concentrate and nondairy cream are peeled into fluffy, aerated ice-cream ribbons. Choose your own flavor combinations, or opt for one of Vampire Penguin's fancy specials: Strawberry cheesecake, for example, is a decadent pile of strawberry and vanilla shaved snow with crushed graham crackers, strawberries, white chocolate sauce, and condensed milk. *Brentwood, vampirepenguin.com.*

O'HONEY

True to its name, this organic soft-serve spot offers three types of honey as a topping: wildflower, tropical blossom, and white clover. It's a perfect pairing in the Honey Lover, a special concoction that layers the sweet stuff parfait style with milk or matcha ice cream and Rice Krispies cereal. You can get edgier, too, with cotton candy, caramel popcorn, and toasted marshmallow toppers—or a Technicolor Uji matcha float. *Dublin, facebook.com/ohoneysweets.*