

LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

When I was planning my first trip to Paris several years ago, I worried about what to pack. Not because I was worried about blending in with the city's famously fashionable citizens; nope, I was concerned about what to wear to dinner. A trusted friend gave me a tip: Just look put together, from pressed shirts to polished shoes, and you'll pass muster with the city's maître d's. I worried even more: I didn't intend to go to Paris' legendary stuffy bastions of overbearing formality, but I was planning to eat well. Would I need to get a whole new dressy wardrobe for dining out in the City of Lights? I'm accustomed to dining out in casual attire, whether in New York or in St. Louis. Paris, I reasoned, wasn't all that different than any other culinary capital these days, was it?

My friend's advice turned out to be invaluable, the best Paris tip I received, in fact – and my fear of wearing jeans in a Paris restaurant was unfounded. (Although, to be clear, by casual, I don't mean sloppy; jeans may be fine, but no one's advocating sports jerseys and sweat pants.)

So is this another indication that fine dining is over? It's a question that's been circling the food world for a while now, debated in kitchens from Brooklyn to Benton Park and L.A. to London, fueled by larger economic concerns and the ongoing trend of elite chefs opening burger joints and brasseries. The answer is still open for debate, but what that Paris experience emphasized to me – and what John Griffiths, the new executive chef at Truffles, so perfectly sums up in this month's Chef Talk (page 18) – is that the definition of fine dining is changing. It's less about dress code, stiff formality and overwrought dishes and more about quality ingredients and a mastery of the culinary craft.

And you don't need to travel to Paris to see this evolution firsthand. To choose just one example from many, at Farmhaus, easily one of the best restaurants in the city, diners sit at paper-topped tables and use dishtowels as napkins while eating the sophisticated, high-end comfort food turned out by chef and owner Kevin Willmann, whose style of cooking earned him a spot as a 2011 James Beard Award semifinalist (one of four from St. Louis) last month.

As Griffiths said, "People can judge for themselves if it's fine dining." In my judgment, dinner at Farmhaus is indeed fine dining – and you'd look ridiculous wearing a coat and tie while eating it.

Cheers,



Katie O'Connor



Farmhaus is just one of many St. Louis restaurants embracing the blend of high-end food and casual atmosphere; read more about this and other trends you'll encounter in St. Louis this spring, including the continued expansion of the mixology movement that results in drinks like Taste's Rosie the Riveter (pictured here), on page 38.