



Executive Chef Michael Paley is a newcomer to the Cincinnati restaurant world, opening Metropole in the new 21C Museum Hotel downtown. To emphasize old-world traditions, he advocated for an open wood-fired hearth to grill and slow-roast in a style rarely seen in fine-dining. **Following pages:** A majority of Metropole's kitchen is open and in full view. Even the walk-in cooler is outfitted with acrylic windows – everything is on display. A majority of menu items have ingredients that are grilled, roasted, or seared in the hearth, including the kale salad.

## THE NEW GUY

LESS THAN A MONTH AFTER OPENING THE MUCH-ANTICIPATED METROPOLE, NEW-TO-TOWN EXECUTIVE CHEF MICHAEL PALEY SAT DOWN TO TALK LOCAL FOOD AND OLD-WORLD TRADITIONS.

BY BRYN MOOTH  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY JULIE KRAMER

Round the corner from Sixth Street onto Walnut downtown, and you're treated to the distinctive aroma of something delicious being cooked over an open flame. At the same time, you hear the faint breathing sound emanating from a huge brass chandelier hanging over the sidewalk. The inviting smell is courtesy of chef Michael Paley's kitchen at Metropole; the sight and sound are courtesy of Austrian artist Werner Reiterer.

In total, this unexpected sensory experience represents the old-new mashup that is Metropole, one of the city's most anticipated new restaurants. Housed in the 21c Museum Hotel in the renovated building that is its namesake and steps away from the Contemporary Arts Center, Metropole celebrates old-world food traditions and a modern emphasis on local ingredients.

The dichotomy begins with the 100-year-old space itself, designed by Deborah Berke & Partners Architects: The hotel, which incorporates rotating collections of modern art, greets visitors with an all-white, minimalist lobby decor (where there's no traditional desk for checking in,

but a low table staffed by attendants holding iPads). The restaurant, by contrast, is warm and inviting, with natural materials (oiled wood, leather, polished copper), an unobstructed floorplan, and massive arched windows.

The seeming incompatibility is by design. "As a hotel brand, 21c brings a cache," Paley says. "You know the diner who's into the food has certain expectations. With Metropole, we tried to do the exact opposite of the art hotel. People don't expect that contrast."

Metropole's open kitchen adds to the experience; service counters throughout the space top out at waist level to provide patrons an unrestricted view of the action. Paley likes the synergy and connectedness between the dining room and kitchen. Then there's the massive brick hearth with fire ablazing at the back of the room: "You see the fire, hear it cracking, you hear the sounds of the kitchen," he says.

The fireplace is the heart of both the environment and the menu. It, too, represents a blend of old and new: a throwback technique that echoes home cooking circa

1850 and a culinary style that's part of the city's current food scene (think: wood-fired breads and pizzas).

### ALL FIRED UP

Paley's interest in open-flame cooking isn't new, but it's in full expression at Metropole. He became interested in the method thanks to the wood-fired oven at Garage Bar, the Louisville hot spot he still owns. "I really like the challenge of bringing this ancient cooking method into a modern restaurant kitchen," he says.

In late morning one weekday in December, six whole chickens were suspended by strings from two wrought-iron cranes mounted above a friendly blaze; over three hours they would rotate slowly, depositing their juices into a hotel pan below filled with aromatic vegetables, which would be turned into sauce for serving. Paley offered a tour of the fireplace, pointing out the hand-forged iron fire cage and swinging cranes, crafted by Kentucky blacksmith Craig Kaviar. To one side, a heavy iron plancha, kind of a footed griddle, sat awaiting a sweep of embers underneath to

heat it. On the other side of the cage, chefs can assemble a grill that's also fired by the hot embers. The brick fireplace "can be arranged as needed, like an arena gets configured for concerts or basketball games," Paley says.

"We can run a menu off something that doesn't need gas or electricity," Paley continues. He does, or nearly so: whole onions, charred and caramelized in the hot ashes, top a seasonal salad of fresh garbanzo beans and creamy burrata cheese; oysters are hearth-baked; slices of rich foie gras take a turn on the plancha, as does a savory poached pear half served on a salad of roasted beets.

#### A NETWORK OF FARMS

As he did as chef at Proof on Main, Metropole's sister restaurant in the first 21c Museum Hotel in Louisville, Paley sources great ingredients — many of them local — and then gets out of the way. His favorite thing on the menu during the first opening weeks? The salad of fresh garbanzos, burrata, ash-baked onions, wild arugula, and oranges. "That dish is really representative of what the food at Metropole is going to be," Paley says. "It's not super-composed: there's a nice piece of burrata, fresh garbanzos that are simply cooked, some onions that we threw in the hearth so they get sweet and smoky that we just break apart. And the orange with all of that — it makes for a light, fresh salad where you can taste every ingredient to the max."

Paley talks with ease about his food — he's focused and passionate about the building blocks of every dish. A 35-year-old New Jersey native who attended the Florida Culinary School, he worked alongside notable chefs and restaurateurs including Daniel Boulud, Drew Nieporent, Carey Savona, and Kevin Garcia, before taking the helm at Proof in 2005. Paley calls a stint he did at Lucca, a well-regarded restaurant at the swank Boca Raton Resort & Club where he cooked under Savona and Garcia, "the job that sparked the chef I am today."

"My first day there was a different environment," he recalls. "There was a kind of front-of-the-house/back-of-the-house teamwork approach, a real family environment. Proof and Metropole model Lucca, in the way I act, the way I manage our staff.

"When I was a cook, I wanted to know the job of the guy above me, know it better than he did," he says. Not out of competition, but out of curiosity. "It keeps you from

getting bored. I think it's a good thing for a chef to be that way, always thinking about the menu, making subtle changes every day."

At Metropole, Paley has hired a creative, dedicated kitchen staff. Coming to a new town and building a restaurant team seems a daunting task, but Paley tapped into the city's culinary scene, hiring alumni of both Midwest Culinary Institute and chef Jean-Robert deCavel's kitchen. "There are so many good cooks in town," Paley says. "Jean-Robert has this network of cooks who used to work for him and then moved on. A lot of our staff have been chefs or sous chefs at other small restaurants."

Paley recruited Jackson Rouse (formerly of SmoQ) and Jared Bennett (a veteran of Orchid's and Daveed's) as sous chefs, and he tasked them with helping him connect with local growers and suppliers. Metropole is the first restaurant in Cincinnati to serve Blue Oven Bread, thanks to Paley's meeting with Mark Frommeyer last summer; wood for the fireplace comes from Frommeyer's farm. Pork comes from Dean Family Farm and Shelton Heritage Farm; vegetables, honey, and grains from Carriage House Farm; produce from Greensleeves (Paley says he read about owner Gretchen Vaughn in *Edible Ohio Valley*). The breakfast menu includes bagels from Marx Bagels in Blue Ash.

At Proof, Paley had easy access to all the local produce and Kentucky-raised bison he could use, thanks to an unusual partnership with Woodland Farm in Goshen, Kentucky. That property is owned by 21c founders Laura Lee Brown and Steve Wilson, and is Proof's significant source of raw materials. In Cincinnati, Paley says, he's taking time during the winter months to build relationships with a large group of Ohio Valley providers (Woodland Farm is too far away to be a viable source for produce). "I want to collaborate with cooks and with farmers—I want their expertise," he says. "I'd rather have 20 different farmers, one of which grows asparagus for me for three weeks in the spring."

#### A STEP BACK IN TIME

It's not just a matter of working with local ingredients; Paley has tapped into the Queen City's distinctive culinary heritage for inspiration. "I wanted to do food that was somewhat rooted in tradition for Cincinnati," he says.

Whereas Proof's charcuterie menu is Italian-inspired, Metropole offers old-world, German-style sausages and pâtés (pickled

tongue, Gothaer, Teewurst) made from recipes that are generations old, but haven't been on any local restaurant menu in decades. He imported an antique flywheel meat slicer, which stands at the cold-prep station and is visible from the bar. Metropole's breakfast service includes house-made goetta, natch, and a European-style muesli cereal.

In less capable hands, both the menu and the surroundings could have veered too far into old-fashioned kitsch. For example, Paley had a hand in choosing dining-room details like the napkins, which resemble flour-sack towels but with a sophisticated pattern and color scheme. (Mason jars full of daisies on the tables would have sent the whole aesthetic into the realm of country-cute.) Paley says he was careful to incorporate reverent — not clichéd — homages to local food. "Would I make mettwurst and brats? I could, but that's why people go to Findlay Market."

Too, Metropole reflects Paley's deft touch with quality ingredients. Rather than whipping up a fancy vinaigrette, Paley teaches his cooks to lightly dress each salad with excellent olive oil and vinegar (Badia Coltibuono from Tuscany, which Paley chose after extensive research) by hand, drop by drop, right at pickup. "I put a lot of trust in my pantry cooks to taste the vinegar that they're putting in. I tell them, 'Think 3-to-1 [oil to vinegar].' You can do that with your hands," he says.

When you're cooking without fuss, you can't hide your sins and screw-ups under dressings and sauces. Paley says this simplicity is part of the creative challenge that keeps him interested in cooking. "What keeps me up at night is that this stuff is way too simple," he says. "You don't want fall on your face doing something super simple.

"There's a lot of pre-work that goes into it," he continues. "OK, I've sourced this really great vinegar, I've been through three different farmers for lettuce, we've got these awesome radishes that are sliced perfectly thin and even. But in the end, after all that prior work — that the diner doesn't know about — you have a salad with three components. And you really want to make sure you're doing that right." ■

*Bryn Mooth is a Cincinnati-based independent writer who looks forward to abundant opportunities for collaboration and creativity in the coming year. Find her recipe blog at [Writes4Food.com](http://Writes4Food.com).*

